

2018

BRAVURA
The literary journal of Palomar College

FICTION

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THE BOY WHO WAS LOVED BY THE WIND

KATHY MATTHES

There once was a boy who was loved by the Wind. It was a bittersweet love, for the boy could not see the wind, and he could not love what he could not see. Although he could see the effects of the Wind on the world around him, and he loved those effects, he did not love the Wind herself. She tried in vain to show him that she was real, but he did not yet have the eyes to see her, the ears to hear her, or the heart to love her. Nevertheless, the Wind was the boy's constant companion and faithful friend.

Each season she would invent games to play with him. In the autumn, she would nudge the leaves from the trees and carefully shape them into multicolored patterns to inspire his imagination. When they caught his attention, she would whip the leaves into a whirlwind dance all around him and send him scurrying over hill and dale laughing with delight. She would often follow the boy to and from school and nip him here and there in a friendly game of tag. During his afternoon chores, she would bring to him all of the scents and sounds of autumn. When he was raking up leaves, she was very still and only blew stray leaves back into the pile. Sometimes she even played hide and seek by puffing up her cheeks and blowing great gusts of wind and then suddenly holding her breath. In the still, calm silence between gusts, he could almost hear her whisper "I love you, boy," and then he would almost believe in the Wind herself . . . almost.

In the winter, the Wind would bring all the best snowflakes to the boy's yard so he could build a handsome snowman. When he played in the yard she would often entertain him for hours by whipping snowflakes into frenzied dances or molding snow drifts into animal shapes. When the clouds threatened to snow she would put her windy arms around them so they could not until he made it safely to and from school. When storms kept the boy inside for too many days the Wind would howl and mourn all around the house, banging the shutters and rattling the windows, as if to say, "come out and play, boy," or "please, let me in!" Sometimes, when he heard her anguished, sobbing wails, he would throw open the window to see who was weeping. Then the Wind would rush to the boy and throw her windy arms around him. He could feel the love in her embrace and, for a moment, he would almost believe in the Wind herself . . . almost.

When all the snow melted and springtime arrived the boy would spend hours and hours flying his kite. The Wind would whisk it up and away, tipping

it this way and that, fluttering the tail like a sail, letting it swoop and soar, now high and then low. Always careful to keep the kite away from the trees. When he grew tired, he would sit in the cool shade of the oak tree and sing songs or read aloud from his storybooks. The Wind delighted in these times. She would sit very still in the bough of the tree and listen intently. Sometimes, when the boy climbed the tree and sat on the highest bough, he could hear the Wind whisper her heart's secrets in the rustling leaves. At times he could almost hear her say, "I love you, boy," and then he would almost believe in the Wind herself . . . almost.

As the lazy days of summer unfolded, the boy loved to walk in the meadows or climb to his favorite hilltop and lay on the grass gazing at the clouds. The Wind took great delight in puffing them up into storybook shapes so the boy could dream heroic dreams. Often he would play his tin whistle and dance a jig on the hilltop. The Wind would join in the dance by gathering up all the sweet, wild fragrances of summer and sprinkling them all around the boy, like notes in a melody, or all at once like a symphony of scents. Sometimes, when the boy stood on the hilltop with his face to the Wind, she would gently soothe his troubled brow and place a kiss upon his cheek. He could almost feel her touch say, "I love you, boy." Then, he would almost believe in the Wind herself . . . almost.

As the seasons came and went, the boy grew into a handsome youth with a heart for adventure, so he went off to sea. The Wind did what she could to prosper the boy's work. She patiently taught him the ways of the Wind upon the sail and made his journeys quick and safe. With her help he soon became captain of a magnificent ship. The work was hard and the play was rough; it was not long before the boy learned how to drink, steal and fight like the best of them. He soon forgot about his childhood days, the effects of the Wind and her gentle ways, but the Wind did not forget the boy. Whenever she would try to remind him of her love, he would thrust away her breezy caresses with ill-tempered curses.

As each day passed, the Wind grew more and more furious at the boy's rejection. By day, she blew hard against his sails to slow his progress. At night, the boy would hear the Wind moaning through the sails and feel her anger as she pounded the waves against the boat. In those dreadful hours, he would steel his heart against her pain. He was a man and had no need for childish

memories. But still these night terrors robbed him of his sleep.

Finally, the Wind saw how he had changed. He no longer believed that it was she who had taught him how to sail a mighty ship and prospered the work of his hands. It was she who held back the furious storms and guided his ship to port through the fog. He had taken her gifts and made them his own, and now he thought that he was a great and powerful sea captain. She had hoped that the sea would make him grow strong and wise, but instead the boy had become cruel and hard, thinking only of himself and often hurting other people. The Wind grew very, very angry and could no longer bear his selfishness and foolish pride. She had always shown her love in gentle ways, but now his calloused heart must be broken.

One night, while the boy lay asleep on his ship, the Wind raised a violent storm. She blew with all her might until she broke the masts and tore the sails from the ship. She gathered the clouds into black and threatening shapes, and wrung them tightly until they wept a torrent of tears. She churned the waves into a frenzy and made them dance all around the ship. The boy stood on -the deck, clinging to the broken mast, as wave after crashing wave battered the ship and threatened to swallow him alive. He cried out to the Wind and begged her for mercy, but she seemed deaf to his pleas. In the end, she was merciful to him, for although she crushed the ship into drift wood, she spared the boy's life. He returned home sick in body and heart. He became bitter and angry because he thought he had lost everything—the ship, his fame and his fortune. He did not see that the Wind caused this tragedy for a good purpose, so he cursed the Wind for ruining his life. He swore that he would never forgive her for as long as he lived.

Day by day, the boy sunk deeper into despair and the Wind knew that he would die from sorrow and loneliness if she did not restore their floundering relationship. She knew that all the pleasures of the world could not give him as much joy as the time spent with her, so she tried to lure him outside to play. On one particular wintry day, she howled and moaned all around the house, banging the shutters and rattling the windows with all her might. She spoke of her love with powerful, gusty breaths, but the boy covered his ears with his hands to drown out the sound of her voice. This only made the Wind more passionate and pleading. She raged through the trees with a deafening roar until the boy finally shouted, "I hate you! I hate you and all you do! Go away and don't ever come back!"

Suddenly, the Wind held her breath, and there was a cold, still silence. The boy slowly took his hands from his ears and listened. The Wind did not make a sound. The boy felt a great emptiness inside and called out to her, but she did not answer. He ran to the window and threw open the shutters to let her in, but she was not there to throw her windy arms around him. She did not soothe his troubled brow or gently kiss his cheek. She was gone . . . and he was alone.

All at once he was filled with fear and loneliness. He could not bear the silence of her absence. He hurried outside and called her name. He raced to the

hilltop, but she was not there. He ran over hill and dale, through the forest, and across the meadows, but she could not be found. He searched all day and when the sun had set he searched deep into the night, until he could search no more. At the foot of his favorite hill the boy fell to the ground weary and broken-hearted. A great drowsiness came upon him, and he fell into a deep sleep.

He was awakened by a loud, rushing noise as a mighty whirlwind came upon him and nearly lifted him off the ground. But as quickly as it had come, it was gone. He stood up, bewildered, and climbed to the top of the hill. There, in the bright moonlight, stood the Wind in human form. She was gloriously beautiful, radiant like the sun shining in its full strength. Her white garment fluttered like a gentle breeze, but her blazing red hair flowed turbulently all about her like a harnessed storm.

At first, the boy was overwhelmed with the keenest joy, for he finally knew, without a doubt, that the Wind was real. But when he looked into her eyes, he felt the deepest dread and a great desire to hide himself from her piercing gaze. Although her eyes flashed with both a terrible wrath and a tender love, it was the love that seared his heart with guilt and condemned him for all of his misdeeds. His shame weighed so heavily upon him that he sunk to the ground and buried his face. Hot tears of sorrow and remorse fell to the earth beneath him. His grief was unbearable and, just when he thought he would die from the torment of his soul, he felt a cool breeze blow all around him. It blew away his guilt. It blew away the pain and dried his tears. It blew all of the selfishness from his heart. When his shame was gone, he felt forgiven. He jumped to his feet, ready to throw his grateful arms around the Wind, but she was no longer there. All that remained of her was a gentle breeze that soothed his brow and kissed his cheek. He stood with his face to -the Wind and heard her whisper, "I love you, boy."

This time, he did not hesitate.

"I love you, too," said the boy. And he believed in the Wind herself . . . always.

GREY FLOWERS

BRAYDEN ERICKSON

i sit on the corner of Pine and Jones
sip coffee
from a white paper cup
with a plastic lid
and i watch them.

man in black
woman in grey
another man in a black suit,
another woman in a grey suit;
in their hands
screens with white cords
stuffed into ears,
these devices that
shut off and seclude them in their own world

i light a cigarette,
sip coffee,
adjust my butt on the ledge.

i watch them as they sedate themselves
in this city of grey faces
and handheld coffins.
it is a nightmare of human dilution
into pallid faces and artificial expressions.

this city is now grey;
from beatific visions to hollow suits.
the humans that crawl
along the streets are grey.
and i sit,
sipping coffee,
turning grey.

THE CENTRAL HOME

STEPHEN PAGE

The Central Home has lights!
It was once the Malingerer's home,
Dark and lawned with lemon-tree stumps.

Once it was only called House 21,
But now the hardest worker lives
There, the tamer of horses,
The counter of cows, the planter of trees.

All that is good radiates
From there. Even in the blindness
Of noon. Look! The light has cracked the chimney
And burned the floors!

Misionero, do your recorridos,
The count lessening has no excuse.
Do not allow your lot to pass
To overripe clover, do not fall
Into a crack, do not allow
The Central Home to become again
House 21. Let it center the ranch,
Let it be an example.

I have given you electricity,
And fixed your doors.
Misionero, keep it your home.

TERESA: MY MASK OF DAY

STEPHEN PAGE

My mask of day rises with me out of bed
like a wrapped sheet: clinging, covering, she hides
the scars of night; she is soft, sensuous, caresses
my muscular build, my face, my hair;

She unwraps and pirouettes before me, holds out her arms,
clasps my hand, ballrooms, tangos:
She jumps up and down upon the dry earth,
raising dust to form a rain cloud.

She does not resee my nightmares,
or remember them for me upon waking.
She does not see the half-bottle of scotch
I sipped into my veins the night before.

She grinds coffee and pours spring water through
the grounds, serves me in a porcelain cup.
She scrambles eggs and sets the plate
before me. She does not ask

Where I was the afternoon before,
or who I was with. She sits in the chair
next to mine, places her hand upon
my forearm, and says nothing.

THE END

CALEB ACKLEY

He grasped at the air
He didn't want to be empty
For all the joy he'd been promised-he ended,
Fully lacking in plenty

FUROR POETICUS CATHY HUANG

"I'm sorry, Miss Riva is currently preoccupied. Can I take a message?"

Pinning his phone between his shoulder and ear, Emile scrambles through hefty stacks of paper. The address, the address, the address... The voice on the other end turns to white noise. Until one sound jolts him to attention.

"Hello?"

"Ah— yes," Emile switches the phone to his other shoulder. "Terribly sorry. Would you mind repeating that message?"

He hears a thinly veiled sigh.

"Tell Vitalia that I simply will not go without seeing her soon!" she exclaims, her voice sharp in the phone. "What daughter goes entire months without speaking to her mother?"

"I'm terribly sorry on her behalf, ma'am—"

"On her behalf! She can't even apologize to me herself!"

"—I'll be sure to let her know you called."

Another huffed sigh. Emile studies the contents of a paper, searching for the address of that day's meeting.

"What an ungrateful child," says Mrs. Riva. "Our phones, they communicate like magic. It takes one finger— only one! — to text or call, and still she refuses. She's grown up spoiled with all this technology and never thinks to use it."

"I'll pass on your message as soon as I can," Emile assures her, and suddenly the papers slip from his hands, falling in a white flurry onto the kitchen floor. A mumbled swear escapes him and as he drops to his knees, he hears Mrs. Riva's offense.

"Excuse me?"

His phone gives off a two-toned beep, signaling an incoming call, and gives him all the reason to hang up. He once more apologizes to Mrs. Riva and assures her once more he will be informing Vitalia on the importance of family communication.

"If she doesn't, I'm boarding a plane to California next week—"

Quickly Emile switches the call and holds it up to his ear as he searches for the paper once again. What was the name of the building? He wonders as he recites off the phone greeting.

The voice on the other end is disappointingly familiar.

"This is Irma on behalf of the Solavir Fashion Company, calling from the

meeting in the Edward Mercer Building."

That! That's what it's called!

"Oh— yes, yes, hello," Emile says, jumping to his feet. He takes a moment to find his words, and stammers out the rest.

"We are just getting ready to head over there right now."

"I would sure hope that's the case, Mr. Halridge," says Irma. Beyond her, he can hear chattering sounds and loud synth pop music playing. "Vitalia's been rather inconsiderate lately, hasn't she? We haven't seen her for the past two meetings."

"Terribly sorry."

"It's now or never, Mr. Halridge," Irma says. "If she doesn't show today, her work is all but useless to us."

"We understand," says Emile, dropping the stack of papers onto the kitchen table. He leans onto the surface and drags his fingers through his hair. "Miss Riva has her work prepared, and we will be there as soon as we can."

"Fashionably late, I presume?" Irma asks.

Emile chuckles, the sound taut and nervous.

"Fashionably late," he says, then hangs up. The phone is shoved into his back pocket before he collects the papers in his hand. Vitalia's glass kitchen table may as well served as an office desk for him; his file dividers and loose papers scatter everywhere, circling around a flower vase centered in the middle— though its flora has long since wilted into drooping remnants of petals.

"Vitalia!" he calls throughout the house. He knows she can hear him. She simply will not listen. "Vitalia, we have to go!"

He knows where to find her, always. When she moved into her grand Hollywood home, the basement was to be the least frequented room, and now it's become more of her bedroom, kitchen, and bathroom with each passing day. Plastic binder in hand, Emile stomps over to the basement door.

Outside the closed door, a pile of crumpled papers sit abandoned. Emile kicks them aside, then pushes the door open and makes his way downstairs into the basement. The lights aren't on, but it's never dark.

He's being too loud as he clambers through the halls, and he knows Vitalia and her tree hate it. But Emile doesn't quite care right now, and lets his feet stomp against the concrete floor. The rumbling and vibrations of the furnaces can't compete with the incessant hum hitting his ears. That sound alone already

begins to drive him more mad than he already feels.

Vitalia is curled up on the loveseat she had brought down, facing away from him. She holds a pencil between her fingertips and a sketchbook in her lap, though she isn't using either, and merely stares ahead. Everything and everyone in this basement is illuminated in a pale green light, radiating from the central point of the basement—the tree.

He tries not to look at it. Not out of fear, but because he simply can't stand it. Instead, Emile looks at her.

"Vitalia, we have to go," he says.

Her pencil spins between her fingers, like clockwork gears in a machine. She never reacts positively when she is interrupted, especially when he's being so direct about it.

"Go where?" she asks.

"To work," Emile says. "To your job."

Vitalia doesn't look at him yet, but the tree does.

Its branches twist in his direction, and the green light fades away into darkness, leaving only the dim lamp for visibility. The tree doesn't like him much—and it is only called a tree from the way it starts from twisted dark roots, digging through the basement floor, and extends up into a soft trunk. But nothing else is of this earth; its wood is soft, almost flesh-like, and crusty shell-like ornaments dangle from thin brown sticks. It moves as though living, with branches shifting in the air, trunk rising and falling as though breathing.

The low hum turns into a hiss, like water sizzling on a hot pan. Still, Emile is not deterred.

Only now does Vitalia look back at him. Though the tree's green light has faded, the luminescence still flickers in her eyes, if only for a moment.

"The meeting?" Vitalia asks. Emile nods, and to this, she sighs. On slow-moving legs, she rises from her seat, teetering as though unused to her own weight; he almost feels the need to run and help her up. With gently curled fingers, Vitalia reaches for the tree, but does not touch it. Perhaps she's still too afraid, or perhaps she knows better.

"What color is this to you?" she asks him. Emile stares at her, head lowered, before begrudgingly turning his gaze upon the tree.

It changes from day to day, hour to hour, moment to moment, and never to simple hues. There is no red or green, only impressions and amalgamations. Emile considers the trunk and its leaves, and for a moment, cannot see any color; his eyes cannot recognize what they perceive. Then, it comes together—a burnt shade, looking like scarlet bruises; a dazzling yellow muddled in the wooden grooves; a glimmer of cyan rippling throughout it, like the shadow of a fish moving through water. Only its leaves stay unmoving, in their dried up beige, as though already dead.

Emile looks back at her, and in the most monotone voice he can muster: "A lot of them."

Vitalia laughs—it's a good sound to hear, a sign she hasn't completely lost

her mind. She leans forward a bit, a hand covering her mouth as though the action hit her like a blow.

"I think it'd look lovely on a dress," she says. "To cinch the waist... come look at this, Emile." She places her sketchbook in the crook of her elbow, and when he approaches, he can see the pages have completely filled up with drawings.

Vitalia Riva has never been interested in the mundane. That is what distinguished her from the other designers—she was not just innovative, but imaginative. They call her work dark fantasy, but the two of them have always considered it to be an unholy realism. Her designs indicate as much. Nothing is symmetrical or angular; all shapes are organic and imperfect. The clothes she designs look less like attire, and more like living beings in their own right.

She points to one: a gown drawn in graphite, with a corset around the waist, drawn with a swirling vortex of a design mirroring the pattern on the tree's trunk. Its fabric twists at the end in tendril-like shapes. Emile glances up from the page, to the tree before them, and finds the patterns nearly identical.

"What do you think?" Vitalia asks, tilting her head at him.

"It's nice," he says. Then she walks away from him, and back towards the tree.

She looks like a thrall, in the way she offers the sketchbook to the tree, showing it her designs. Vitalia points to the gown, looking up into the leaves as she does so.

In fluid motions, the tree curls one of its roots upwards, like an octopus's tentacle, and a low hum rumbles from its leaves. Emile flinches at the sound; Vitalia does not. Its root curls backwards against its trunk, and only then does Emile realize how sharp it is, when the tree scrapes the bark off its own trunk. A piece of its flesh comes off in an iridescent slab, falling to the basement floor.

In its wound, Emile sees something extraordinary: a glimmer of something new, as shifting and incomprehensible as the color of its trunk. Another world, it seems. Like a heartbeat, the tree's insides pulse.

Then, quickly and fluidly, the surrounding wood melts over the hole and reforms itself. Color returns; the swirling vortex continues on.

Vitalia kneels down and picks up the slab of wood between her hands. She tests its weight, holding it up to the tree's light. With a smile, she looks back at the tree.

"Thank you," she says to it, then looks to Emile. "We're late, aren't we?"

He nods, and Vitalia shrugs, unbothered. She returns her attention to the slab of wood; its colors have stopped moving throughout the wood, and now exist frozen in a its twisting shape.

"The company keeps asking me about material," she says. "They say I have wonderful ideas but no means of execution."

What a haunting smile she wears. Vitalia looks at the world with such ambition; even in the incomprehensible, she finds a use.

Emile sighs. He can't stop her, and so he merely walks over and holds the

door open.

“Let’s go.”

They leave together in haste, Emile moreso. Vitalia makes no effort to dress herself up, merely packing the tree bark into his briefcase, throwing on a pair of sunglasses, and wrapping a pink shawl around her shoulders. The sunlight seems to bother her. Vitalia all but scampers to the car, with a scowl on her face the entire time she’s exposed to the air.

As they drive together into the Hollywood streets, Emile finds himself glancing in her direction. It’s been weeks now since he’s seen her outside the house, and in the daylight, he can see just how she’s changed. The structure of her face seems harsher now, as though her cheeks have caved and her bones cast shadows upon her skin. Her hair has always been meant for California sunlight, bright and blonde— now it seems devoid of all color. She leans her cheek against her hand, looking out onto the sidewalk streets. He suspects, however, that she’s hardly seeing anything.

A chorus of shrill honks jolts him out of thought, and Emile drives off through the intersection. The car they drive leaves no question about its owner, in a shiny gold that looks tacky, even here. Pop music plays loudly from her bluetooth speakers.

“You need to call your mother,” Emile tells her.

“My mother?” Vitalia asks. “She’s been calling?”

“Yes,” Emile says through gritted teeth. “She’s been calling.”

He doesn’t try to talk anymore, as he drives off to the Edward Mercer Building. It’s just a piece of the industrial cluster, one building standing together with dozens of its kind to create the urban landscape of Hollywood. Emile drives around for much too long, searching for a parking spot that he’s certain doesn’t exist, and by the time he pulls in, a headache has already cut its way into his head.

Vitalia grabs the briefcase before Emile can. He can feel the presence of the tree within the black zipped bag— but perhaps he’s just going mad, too.

She knows the Edward Mercer Building well, leading him through endless hallways that seem to repeat over and over again. People smile at her, and though it’s hard, she seems to smile back, too. It shouldn’t surprise Emile as much as it does; before the tree, this was her world. Perhaps it still matters to her, even if it’s only an afterthought.

As expected, they’ve interrupted the meeting. But Vitalia doesn’t seem to care, unafraid of the disruption she causes as she saunters into the room. Emile slinks in after her, keeping to the walls and corners and making no eye contact with the people who sit around the table. They make no secret of their surprise and delight, some even rising from their seats to greet her.

“Oh, Vitalia— we haven’t seen you in weeks!” says a purple-haired woman in a glitzy business suit.

Vitalia plops herself into the empty seat they’ve kept for her. Her sunglasses remain over her eyes.

“What were we talking about?” she asks. The woman’s expression falters slightly, before hesitantly moving on with the meeting. Their chatter becomes one of business and fashion trends, words that he can easily tune out. Emile ends up browsing his phone to check emails and the news; his attention is only piqued after hearing a collective gasp from the meeting room. When he glances up, Vitalia has something in her hands. A feeling of dread comes over him, only sooner than the putrid stench that demands the room’s collective disgust.

“Vitalia, what are you doing?” asks an older woman.

“Eating,” she says.

“Eating what?”

In her hands, Vitalia holds a fruit-like morsel, with the same dead-looking beige as the tree’s leaves. She peels it easily, like a banana, and reveals bright red flesh, leaking with juice. She bites into it like an apple, to a chorus of disgust from her colleagues.

“What is that?” one of them asks. Vitalia wipes the corner of her lips.

“Exotic.”

The response is one of nervous chuckling, before the topic is dropped and the meeting continues on. Emile rubs his temples. He’s better off ignoring it. There’s nothing he can do, anyway.

He continues his idle browsing. When the room again goes silent, he looks up to see the wooden slab displayed in the center of the table. In the fluorescent office lights, it has never looked so mundane. The range of its colors seem unrealized; he can even recognize the shades upon first glance— red, brown, purple. It looks like a piece of shiny driftwood, when it’s detached from its host. But what seems unimpressive to him now, the others find extraordinary. A profound silence falls upon the meeting room as they look upon the wooden slab. Vitalia’s sunglasses block her eyes, but her head cants towards each and every face, as though gauging their reactions. It’s the most attention she’s offered anyone in weeks.

“Did you make this?” asks a bald man with diamond earrings.

“I did.”

“Out of what?” the purple-haired woman says.

“Wood.”

“And you want to use this for the dress?” asks another.

“Absolutely,” Vitalia says. “It’s a material that goes unused in modern fashion. And look at it. Try and tell me it isn’t magnificent.”

They don’t.

After the meeting, and on the way to the car, Emile and Vitalia find themselves rushing away. Cameras flash in their direction, as fickle annoyances, but Emile’s even more bothered by the people behind their metal devices. Vitalia’s oddities are well-known in the tabloids, and when the subject isn’t about her, it’s about them.

Even Vitalia looks bothered. Behind her sunglasses, her eyes glare at the crowds.

Mrs. Riva calls again that night.

“Have you told her to contact me?” her voice demands on the other end of the phone. Emile stands in front of the stove, stirring a bowl of noodles with one hand and replying to an email with the other. His phone on speaker sits on the countertop.

“I have,” he says, his annoyance more apparent than he’d hoped.

“Then why hasn’t she called?” Mrs. Riva asks. “Go tell her now.”

Emile sighs. After the meeting, Vitalia disappeared into the basement and hasn’t come out since.

“She’s busy,” he says— and what an anthem that’s become these days.

He continues to assure and persuade Mrs. Riva that soon, soon, she will get a call from her daughter. By the time she’s worn herself out from talking, dinner is ready.

“If she doesn’t call you by this weekend, I will fly you in myself. I swear,” Emile tells her. “Perhaps you can talk some sense into her.” Mrs. Riva seems to accept that, for she finally hangs up.

The udon noodles are ladled into a large ceramic bowl, paired with a fork, and brought to the basement. There, Vitalia sits in the velvet loveseat with her sketchbook upon her legs and a pencil to her lips.

“Call your mother,” he tells her, setting the noodle bowl down on an end table.

“Emile.”

She gestures with her pen, directing his attention to the tree.

Begrudgingly, he looks.

“Oh.”

He’s never seen the tree go white before.

Like alabaster or marble, the tree trunk has brightened and desaturated into pure white, with no shades of anything more. Its crusted ornaments seem paler than ever.

It doesn’t move. It doesn’t look at him or hiss. Emile notices how quiet the room has become.

“Is it alive, still?” Emile asks.

“Yes,” says Vitalia, and he can’t tell if that answer makes him happy or not.

“How do you know?”

“Look.”

Beneath the tree’s bark, he can still see that flicker of cyan, or purple, swimming under the surface— but it’s languid and stuttery. Vitalia’s never looked more distressed; her thin brows knit together in worry, and her sketchbook lays blank.

“Do you think it needs more space?” she asks, looking up at the basement ceiling. “We can demolish the living room floor. I don’t need it, and the tree needs to grow.”

“It doesn’t need to grow more.”

“Sustenance, then? I don’t know what it’s supposed to eat, Emile.”

“It doesn’t,” he says, and pushes the noodle bowl towards her. “But you do.”

“I already ate,” Vitalia says. He crinkles his nose.

“Come on, Vita,” he chides. “Get out of the basement, eat some dinner, get some work done.”

“You can go now. Leave me alone.”

“Vita.”

“Don’t you have work to do?”

“You’re being a piece of work.”

Vitalia frowns, leaning back into her seat indignantly. She looks down at the bowl of noodles.

Before he can stop her, she seizes the bowl of noodles and flings it at the ground. With a loud shatter, ceramic pieces fly all over the ground, muddled with noodles and pieces of beef. Emile groans.

“Come on, what are you—”

He isn’t prepared for the roar that he hears.

Deafening, it is, and able to make Emile stumble off-balance. At once, he looks to the tree— and the sight is more horrific than the sound could ever be.

“See, Emile?” Vitalia says. “See, it’s hungry!”

The dead-looking leaves had split open. Flesh peels apart from one another, wrinkling at the sides.

Like eyelids.

Hundreds of veiny eyes stare ahead at Emile, but only for a moment.

Quickly, collectively, they move down to the shattered bowl of noodles. The tree’s roots rip out from the ground and descend upon the remnants, curling around every piece. A maw opens in its trunk, where the ceramic, noodles, and meat is shoved into without distinction. From within the tree comes a sound like something being shattered, again and again.

Emile feels terror seize through his bones, paralyzing his movements. He can only watch as the tree comes alive, more alive than it had ever been, more savage and monstrous than he can perceive.

“It’s not a tree,” Vitalia says. “It’s something else. Have you seen those bugs that look like twigs? Or caterpillars that look like leaves? They hide in plants and blend in with their environment, to fool predators.”

The thing settles again, moving its roots back into place and spreading out its branches. He sees now— the roots are not roots, but limbs. Those branches don’t have leaves; they have eyes.

“Can you imagine it, Emile? If this is a camouflage, imagine what its forest must look like.”

He can’t. He won’t.

“Think of its predators,” Vitalia says. Is that awe in her voice?

The tree hasn’t gotten its color back. But beyond the white flesh, he can see a flicker of something moving beneath its bark, more fluidly this time. More alive.

“Everything I give to it isn’t enough,” she laments. “Meat. Art. Ideas. It’s

frustrating. I need to know what it needs.”

A terrible headache flares in Emile’s skull. He pinches the bridge of his nose and groans.

“You need to get back to work,” he says. “Answer your emails. Call your mother. Go on lunch meetings.”

She scoffs at him.

“What did I hire you for?” she asks.

“Not this.”

“Then go,” Vitalia says with a dismissive wave of her hand. “Go back upstairs. Leave me alone.”

Emile is more than happy to, even if anger punctuates every footstep he takes on the staircase. He needs sleep, he needs a vacation, he needs something else. But as always, he finds himself in the guest bedroom, working. Perhaps he’s typing too furiously. Perhaps when the phone rings, he answers with too harsh of a voice.

From his window, there is nothing but a dark sky and city lights. It makes the flash of a camera, somewhere in the backyard, that much more noticeable.

Emile glares out the window, his fingers tightening around his pen. His phone buzzes on the table, vibrating around in circles.

I’m sorry, Miss Riva is currently preoccupied. Can I take a message? I’m sorry, Miss Riva is currently preoccupied. Can I take a message? I’m sorry, Miss Riva is currently preoccupied. Can I take a message?

It’s only nine o’clock, but Emile feels exhausted. He stares out the window, into the dark sky and the city lights beneath it. His ear is hurting from all the time it’s spent pressed against a phone.

“—an interview,” says the journalist on the other end of the phone. “For a new fashion magazine. We’d love to have Miss Riva’s voice in our—”

“When?” Emile asks.

A silence ensues, and Emile is about to hang up the phone when he continues.

“Er— whenever Miss Riva’s schedule allows it,” he says. Emile looks at the clock.

“What about now?”

More silence.

“Now?” the journalist asks.

“That’s what I said,” Emile replies, leaning back onto his desk. “She has time now. It’s the only time she has for the next two weeks.”

“Oh,” he says. “Well, perhaps, I could make the trip myself..”

“She has two hours to spare,” Emile says. “If you want the interview, come now. Do you need the address?”

“Well, I— okay, then!”

The exchange of information occurs over the span of half a minute. Emile doesn’t even remember the name, and doesn’t care to. He merely hangs up the phone, and with at least an hour to wait, he chooses to lay down across the

couch.

As Emile kicks his feet up and closes his eyes, he still finds himself unable to relax. His shoulders tense, his brow knits together, and despite the quiet, he can still hear the buzz of a phone and the hum of a tree.

That tree finds its way to worm into his thoughts. He thinks of the wooden slab that Vitalia had left for the company. They’d intended to use it for fashion, but he can’t help but wonder about the consequences.

It’s too soon when the doorbell chimes. Emile opens his eyes, and with a heavy sigh, picks himself off the couch. When he opens the front door, he finds a scraggly-looking journalist, with reddish hair as bright as his flustered face. His black jeans and shirt hang loosely upon him.

“Hello, Mr. Halridge,” says the journalist with a taut smile. “I— thank you, for letting me visit on such short notice.”

“Time is of the essence,” Emile replies, with a flippant wave of his hand. He invites the journalist inside and locks the door behind them. “Did you prepare questions?”

He asks the question only to get the journalist talking. He doesn’t care, in fact, and only pretends to listen as he walks him through Vitalia’s home.

“Has she been... alright, lately?” asks the journalist. Emile shrugs.

“Just caught up in work.”

If the journalist realized that Emile was leading him to the basement, he didn’t try to run.

“Vitalia’s made her studio here,” Emile says, as they walk down the stairs. “This is where she’s most inspired.”

Only then does Emile see the quizzical expression in the journalist’s eyes. But it’s much too late now; they’ve both walked into the tree’s domain. Pale light washes upon their faces as they approach.

The tree is still ghostly white, with crooked branches and a soft fleshy trunk. But now it can hiss when Emile approaches with the journalist. Vitalia sits up in her loveseat, and regards the stranger with a glare in her eyes.

“What are you doing?” she asks.

“My God...” whispers the journalist. “What... is this?”

Emile looks at the tree. Its eyes are closed, but surely, surely, it knows.

He’s angrier than he thought he was, when he shoves the journalist in the direction of the tree. With a yelp, the man stumbles, and Emile kicks him closer.

The tree is quick, limbs tearing up from the ground and snatching the journalist’s abdomen as soon as he is close enough. It seizes him, roots digging so deep and so sharply that no blood is spilled. Then, it does not look like a tree. As its trunk splits horizontally, into a maw, it has never looked so carnal. Emile sees the shifting void of darkness within it, and its light, pulsing like a heartbeat. The back of its throat seems to be a new universe, and one that the photographer is thrust into, head-first, screams muffled from within the tree bark.

When it chomps down, the screams stop. His flailing legs go limp, and the tree pushes the remainder of the journalist’s body deeper into its jaws. As the

body disappears, color returns to the tree's trunk, in shades of turquoise and orange, pulsing and blinking from within, like light shadows going off inside its bark.

Emile throws his hands up in the air.

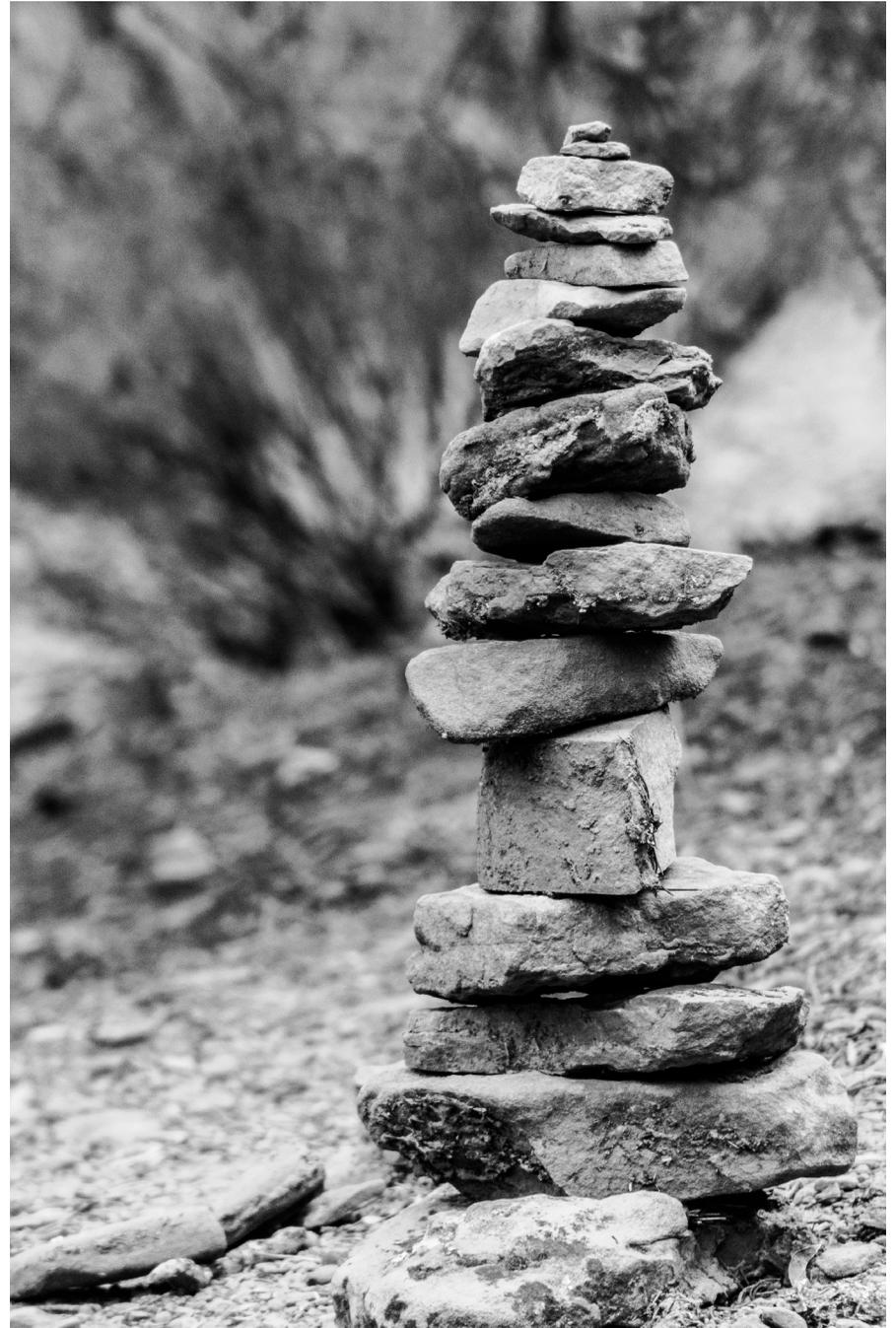
“There!” he exclaims. “There! See, that’s all it takes, Vitalia!”

She looks ahead, with widened, bewildered eyes. Vitalia isn’t afraid; she has never been afraid in all the time that they’ve cultivated this beast. But there is something that makes her hesitant, as she hovers her pencil over the sketchbook, but doesn’t — and can’t— capture anything.

The journalist is long gone, and when Emile looks back at the tree, it considers him. Eagerly. Waiting for more, wanting for more.

The exhilaration leaves him like a deep breath. Emile’s headache pinches at him again, and he rubs his temples.

“Call your mother,” he growls, before storming out of the basement.



CAIRN
DAVID PEABODY



DRAINPIPE
RYAN MARLOWE

REFLECTIONS

EMELY ABON

Her eyes were the color of burning sycamore
Too hot and intense
Captivating and alluring
Tempting one to touch, only to be burned.

Her heart was painted on her sleeve
Though very few could interpret.
Like oceans, her emotions surged through her,
Violent and uncontrollable.

The words flowed from her lips
Velvet honey seeping over rubies
Making heads turn
Like a shattering mirror.

•

To my ears her voice sounded rough
Like the scuffling of shoes
Against wet asphalt.

I reach out to touch her hand
To feel the warmth others feel.
But she feels cold and smooth
Under my fingertips.

PROMETHEUS SPEAKS

LEO FERNANDEZ

Feast on my rage for my blood runs thick!
My red wet wrists will reach for your throat
Winged devil whose hunger runs sick
You, bearer of my brother's coat.

O thou bastard villainous bird!
For how long will your shadow hang?
Before you descend without word
On mute wings like death's harangue.

Now, you mortals and I feel the hell
Of the shadow that hangs over our hearts
And the feeling you could not touch to tell
Will rip into us and tear our souls apart.

And despite the light of thought and language
You fall into the depths of shade
Where Time and Death are the springs of languish
Until the moment, the end, where all will fade.

Even now, you fall into the rhythm of your tongues
And your profane words have become fire
To exhale your will with your lungs
And turn the earth into a funeral pyre.

And was I the author of your ashen fate?
For the light I stole drove you insane;
For that I feel only remorse and hate.
So come black wings, deliver thine pain.



SHE TASTES LIKE STRAWBERRIES

CASSANDRA LYNN EADE

I am aware of the clichés---all the innocence and sensuality that pop radio musicians love to write songs about. She is strawberry lip gloss and laughing gas and completely unaware that girls like her aren't supposed to go for people like me. I try not to think about it. She giggles and buries her face in my chest, a mess of golden curls, no concept of personal space or the passing of time. She has no idea. That's why I love her. That's why I dread her.

I don't like strawberries. They remind me of the kid I used to be. Twelve years old, so twitchy and anxious I had to be put under anesthesia just so the MRI machine could get a clear image of my inner mistakes. So scrawny, I was sixteen before the doctors could forgo the rubber mask and give me the needle. This was before I met her.

She kisses me and my stomach turns. Suddenly I'm twelve again, lying on a hospital bed with too many blankets in the anesthetic lab. A petite nurse wearing paw print scrubs speaks over the whirring of the machine, "Sorry, buddy. We just have strawberry today."

The yellow lights above me beg my eyes to close, but in my peripheral vision I see the nurse rubbing a tube of fruit lip balm into the mask. (It's supposed to conceal the chemical stench of the anesthetic alone, but it never does.)

"Your neck okay?"

"I'm fine."

"Okay then. Here we go."

The smell reaches my nose long before the mask does. An artificial, old Carmex kind of smell, like the pink paste they clean your teeth with at the dentist. A sickly sweet something that dulls your senses and pulls you under, sticking in your chest long after you wake up.

"Deep breaths."

My mom squeezes my hand, and I pretend to myself that I don't need her reassurance anymore. I hold my breath defiantly for as long as I can, but five seconds in I feel like I'm underwater. Mom's ring of red hair starts to fade into the ceiling. Ten, and the ringing in my ears rises to the volume of tinnitus after a long late-night concert. The atmosphere closes in on me, suffocating. The drug takes over. Then, before I know it, the MRI is already done. I slowly wake up in a different bed, in a different part of the hospital, and I pray for popsicles that don't taste like strawberries.

My girlfriend loves strawberries. I even got her a box of the chocolate covered ones last Valentine's Day, our first together. ("Want one?" she asked. "I'm good," I said.)

But I haven't told her, and I don't know how.

She doesn't know about the sickly twelve year old who sat, and watched, and waited while their classmates competed in the weekly flag football tournament. The high school senior who had to silently slip away during Disney Grad Night to take a fourth round of pain pills while the others rode the roller coaster for the third time. The weakness in my legs and the cloudiness in my head, and how it's not just when she kisses me, it's every morning when I get out of bed and every night when I wait for the migraines to stop and the sleep to come. The annual MRIs, the neurologists, the surgery talks, my mom's file cabinet full of studies and clinical trials, or the chances of this scarcely-visible curve in my spine paralyzing me from the neck down.

But she is fruit lip gloss, and she is light---not the artificial lamplights above a hospital bed, but the sunshine streaming through an eight-AM classroom window, making those early mornings just a little more bearable. She is golden curls and laughter. She is ever-present, a blonde halo that traverses time and shines through my memories. And knowing nothing about me, the old me, the real me... she picked me first.

So I hold her close, breathe in the scent of her shampoo. (Rainwater and violets. I could learn to love violets.) She smiles into me, oblivious, innocent. I try not to think about the strawberries.

MARKET STREET
BRAYDEN ERICKSON



SUNDAY TIMES
ELIZABETH DE LA GARZA

SARAI FREDDY CLEVELAND

“Good morning, Sarah.”

The man – the director of human resources for Metrozone-7 Sector 33-B – stared at her from across the desk. Every inch of him oozed Hypercorp sleaze. His hair shone with the plastic gleam exclusive to electrostasis strands, and an old man skull poked through his smooth skin in a way that made him look less young and more like the victim of some internal parasite. The dull underglow of his computer monitor only drew the sallowness of his face into sharper relief.

“Sarai,” she said. “My name is Sarai.”

She shifted beneath his gaze, kept her hands clenched between her knees.

The man glanced back at his monitor, narrowed his eyes for a second, and turned back to her.

“Of course. Sarai. My apologies,” he said smoothly. He cleared his throat, “We here at Channing Robotics Corporation care about our employees. We care about you. We worry about you. We have the most comprehensive health care plan of the Seven Hypercorps.”

Low bar to clear, Sarai thought, but she bit her tongue.

“It’s come to our attention that you’ve been having some trouble with your hands,” the director said, and he smiled, a flash of too straight, too perfect teeth.

And it was true. Sarai’s hands had recently started trembling. The early onset arthritis that beset so many factory workers.

“Your health is of utmost importance to us,” the director said, “but it would be irresponsible to mention your health without mentioning the potential loss in productivity your condition may cause.”

“Are you...” Sarai shifted again, trying to find a position that made her feel less like a specimen beneath the director’s glare, “What are you saying? Am I fired?”

“Of course not,” the director said. Another too straight, too perfect smile. “Our proposal – best for your health, and for the company – is to give you advanced cybernetic replacements.”

A thrill of fear ran down Sarai’s spine.

“Replacements?” she said. “You... you want to take my hands?”

The hands she had once run through her daughter’s hair. The hands which she used to press against her husband’s chest, that used to make him murmur happily because they were always warm.

“We wish to help alleviate your condition,” the director said, infinitely,

infuriatingly patient. “We propose the CRC-ND-3s.”

He swiveled his monitor towards her. A model of robotic hands – circuitry and cables encased in translucent plastic – rotated slowly on the monitor, with long columns of specifications in a font too small to read. None of the synth-skin or biotic nerve-links of the more expensive models.

“Why not just send me to a surgeon?” Sarai said, “Aren’t there operations that can...”

“Would that I could,” the director smiled. “But that specific procedure is proprietary to Han-Jeon Biotech.”

Sarai could only stare at him.

“It wouldn’t do for Channing Robotics to pay 5,000MU to a competitor, even for one of our valued employees. Han-Jeon has its solutions, we have ours.”

He gestured towards the hands rotating on the monitor.

“And if I refuse?” Sarai said.

“It would be counterproductive to everyone involved,” the director said. “And even so, I must remind you that the covenant you have entered with us stipulates that the company may offer whatever solutions necessary to maintain productivity.”

Sarai stood, slowly.

“I’m leaving,” she said.

“We’ve run the numbers,” the director said. “This is the best option for everyone.”

“I’m leaving,” Sarai repeated.

She turned away, and before she knew it, her hand was feeling the cold of the doorknob, slipping from the sweat on her palm when she tried to turn it.

“Ms. Bellefonte,” the director said, and for the first time his voice lost the gentle curb of rationality. “If you walk out that door, you have broken our covenant, and may I remind you that we will prosecute you to the full extent of the law.”

Sarai opened the door.

“Security!”

Sarai ran.

For the past decade – maybe more, maybe less – she had spent thirteen hours of every day confined here. Two six hour shifts on the line, an hour’s lunch in between. Thirteen hours of every day within the boundaries of these walls. The assembly line floor a boundary within a boundary. She had never spent much time in the administrative wing. So now, she ran, not quite knowing where she was.

A recessed doorway ahead. She pressed herself into it, and tried to keep her breaths more steady. She listened for the heavy boots of the security team that must have been sent to pursue her. The footfalls were there – quiet, distant, but no less heavy, and when she tried to figure out the direction of their approach, it only sounded like they had her surrounded. She closed her eyes, breathed.

The footfalls crescendoed and faded, and she breathed a sigh of relief. Her

hands trembled, from the fear or arthritis, she couldn’t tell. She clenched her fists to try to stop them from shaking, and emerged from the doorway. She picked a direction and walked as swiftly and silently as she could towards what she hoped was the exit.

With every turn, and every hallway empty of security forces to drag her into the CRC’s private prison, her hope grew. The director had overestimated how much Sarai needed the factory job – and underestimated how resourceful she could be.

She’d first taken the factory job for stability, for the promises it might have afforded, back when there had been others to worry about. A husband working his way out of a data piracy job, an infant daughter that needed food and clothing and an educational fund.

And then her husband had died in the crossfire of a conflict she didn’t understand, and in the haze of depression and synth-stims that followed, her daughter had vanished into the foster care system. The job had become little more than habit.

After all that time, she had nearly forgotten the lessons she learned from her youth in the Undercity.

Never trust a Hypercorp.

In the Undercity, between dropping out of high school and starting a family, she had lived a different life, kept herself alive with her knowledge and skill with deepnet hardware. There would always be meathackers, circuit surgeons, datascape communes that could use her skill. For the right exchange, some back alley doctor could probably even fix her hands.

No more covenants, then, Sarai decided. No more body-mod clauses buried in the fine print, no more boundaries within boundaries. No more of these goddamned too bright, too perfect hallways.

Sarai found a stairway leading to the Assembly line floor, and as soon as her feet hit the familiar concrete, she ran again. Another woman was already at her old station, soldering the same bit of wire to the same bit of circuitry that she had for the past however many years. Sarai ran past her, towards the double door leading to the lobby, then outside – open air. It wasn’t the open air Sarai was interested in, though.

Her goal was the nearest elevator leading down below the agriculture levels, to the perpetual neon night of the Undercity – to the Maw and the Belly districts close to the sunlit levels of the Overcity, to the deep dark of Deadend Drive, to the alleyways full of faces lined with dirt and oil. The luminescent tattoos shining through the smoke of street-food grills sizzling with vermin meat seasoned to a taste that would put the best Overcity chefs to shame.

She burst out the door, blinked against the sun. A deep breath brought the crisp, scrubbed air of the Overcity rushing in, but it was empty, nothing, against the anticipation of the Undercity’s smell. The dull mold that permeated everything, the sharp smell of cuisine and antiseptic cutting through it in intervals. The memory of the dampness, the permanent twilight of

underpowered sunlamps hanging from the Undercity's vaulted ceiling – she could feel it. She wanted it.

Her first stop had to be her apartment a few levels above the Maw, to grab what cash she had, to stuff a few changes of clothes into her bag. That was all she would need to get herself started. She thought back to her time there – how long ago was it? Ten years? More? But she knew where to go, which streetshine bars typically hosted friendly recruiters, which areas were rife with organ harvesters and hypnotic predators. She knew the Undercity.

Five minutes, she told herself. In and out.

And then, whatever she wanted. It had been a long time since she thought about hiring a datascape sniffer to find her daughter, but she thought about it now.

Soon, she said. Five minutes. In and out.

The elevator descended quickly, and she made the journey through the nearly empty skywalks without incident. She slipped her key into the lock. The door swung halfway open before she turned the knob.

For a long moment, she was still. The wood around her deadbolt was broken, the metal reinforcements twisted out of place. From within, she heard footsteps – the soft scuffling of a group of people trying to be collectively silent.

Fuck.

Sarai backed away. Something hard and fiery smacked the back of her head. She stumbled forward and fell against the door. It burst the rest of the way open beneath her weight. Her vision flashed, swirling patches of dark and light. Figures rushed towards her, all of them impossibly tall from her prone position on the ground. Hands – cased in rough rubber that scratched and burned her skin with the force of their grip. Her biceps, elbows, wrists – immobilized.

“Is this her?” someone asked. “Sarah Bellefonte?” She didn't hear a reply, but the hands dragged her into her kitchen. She pulled against them, only for her forearms to burn when a hand dug into a pressure point.

“What the hell is going on?” Sarai demanded, but she already knew.

A push sent her to her knees – a dull crack against the linoleum floor and a spike of pain. Her head struck the edge of the table. In the long moment that followed, she was able to look around. The figures were dressed in white body armor, trimmed with blue – the colors of CRC's Private Security.

“This is my home,” Sarai said, mumbling past a tongue thick with pain and fear. “You can't-”

“Prep her,” someone said, and she felt hands forcing her arms behind her back.

With angry motion, the factory jumpsuit she still wore was wrenched down to her waist, and before she could even feel the fear, the rough rubber hands dragged her to her feet and hauled her up onto the table. The table's edge dug into her pelvis. For a moment, the thought she would be able to rise, before hands on her neck, her arms, her shoulder blades, turned every movement into useless twitching.

A bustle of activity she couldn't quite see. A sound of metal rasping against metal.

A different hand – gloved in violet rubber – reached forward, a swab of cotton pinched between two fingers. She struggled against the weight of the hands leaning down on her.

“Motherfuckers,” Sarai said, the screech in her voice so humiliating that she felt her cheeks grow hot despite everything. “You motherfuckers!”

The cotton swab left a line of yellow disinfectant just below her elbows. She tried to buck away from the table, but somebody's foot was pressed into the back of her knee, preventing her from getting any sort of leverage. The violet hands produced two strips of electrostasis leather, wrapped them around her arms. With a jolt of electricity, the strips constricted, tightened until her skin was bulging and purple.

A flash of silver in the fluorescence of her kitchen's lights.

Throughout the whole process, Sarai had not stopped cursing or screaming. Her throat was raw – so raw that she thought she would gag.

The long knife sliced through the first layer of flesh.

She stopped cursing. The screaming continued until there was no air left in her lungs, and then she couldn't find it in herself to inhale.

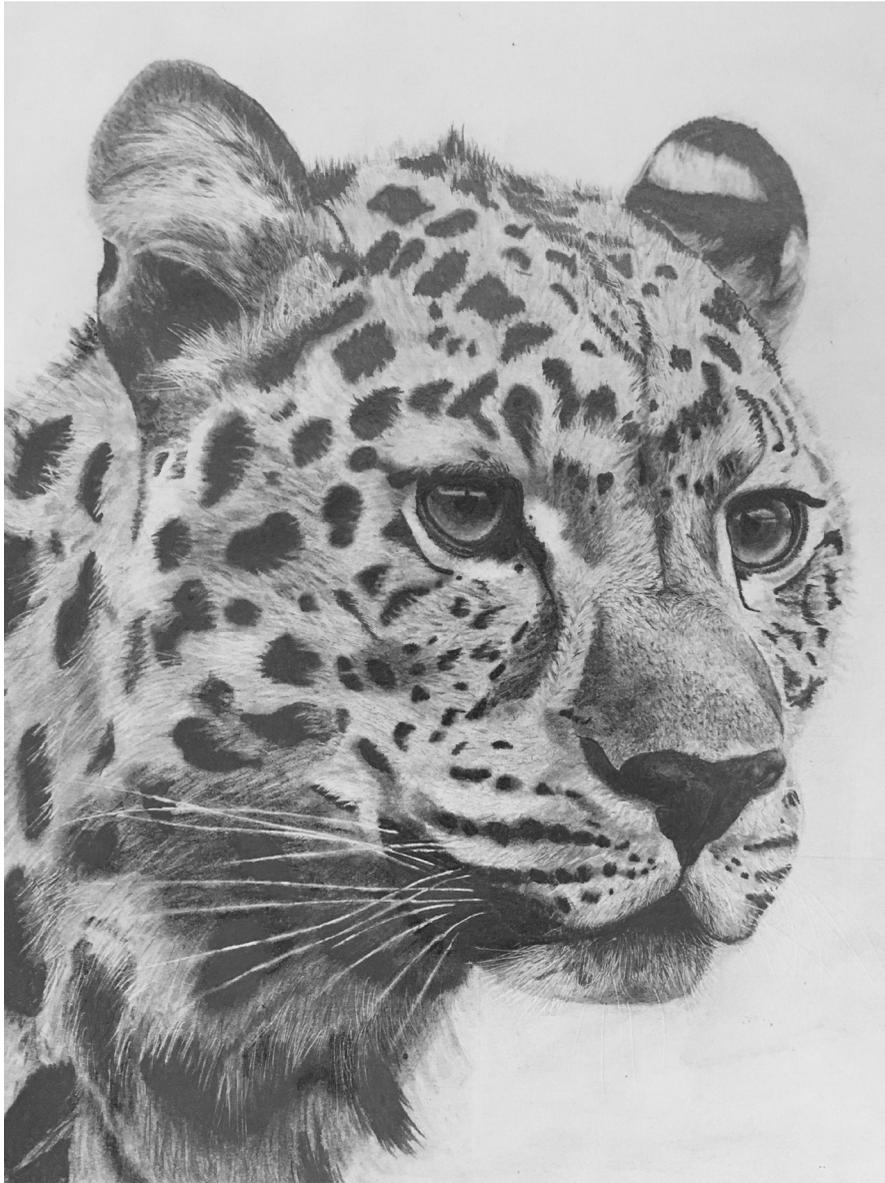
The pain flowing from her arm – flowing, burning, all-consuming-all-enveloping – was something she couldn't even begin to comprehend. She watched it happen, watched it unfold, her skin peeling away from bone, blood leaking in impotent spurts past the tourniquet. Nobody spoke, no sounds except for the asthmatic, desperate gasps bursting in and out of Sarai's throat.

“I'll go back,” she said, when the violet hands retrieved a second blade, short and hooked. “I'll go back, I swear.”

But what sense did that make? They were taking her hands, whether or not she came back. It was purely punitive. No point to it except the pain. A lesson to anyone else who might refuse the promised mercy and kindness of the Hypercorps.

She watched through the murk of endorphins as the violet hands worked. By the time her skin was peeled away, muscles severed, tendons sliced, nerves cut, the pain was gone. Unconsciousness took her before they lasered through her bones, before they started on her next arm, before they capped the stumps of her arms with plastic and metal, burnt and branded into melted skin.

Sarai woke more than a day later, shivering and already weeping, in a scabrous pool of her own blood. A sickness had planted itself in her stomach, and she was certain that it would never go away.



CHEETAH
ANGEL KLAWITER

A PLACE WHERE NOTHING MATTERS ANYMORE

ADRIAN MUNOZ

The horns of traffic blaring in a tangled melody makes up for the dullness of the southern California day. Luke sits on cement in the sky. He drags his sweaty palms across his wrinkled jeans, thinking back on his life so far. He knows that what he wants to do is the best solution for his problems. He shuts his heavy eyes and inhales the warm polluted air. He holds in the smog; all the engines and horns fade to a muffled hum.

Luke hears a soft groan from his right and his eyes slowly open to a dim lit ceiling. The groan is repeated closer and he turns his head over to his right. Long, wavy, red-orange hair, the shade of a fox's fur, is spread out on the pillow next to him. He follows the hair with his tired eyes to a girl's light-skinned body facing the other direction. A grin of relief spreads from the corner of his mouth when he recognizes the figure as his girlfriend, Julia. Her freckled back is bare and smooth, her slim shoulder blades expand with every breath she takes. She reminds Luke of a divine creature. An angel. He reaches over and runs his hand slowly down Julia's back. The movement of his arm pushes down the warm blanket covering both of their bodies. Luke glides his hand over to wrap around her waist, but stops suddenly at a strange sensation. He moves his hand around her torso and liquid gushes between his fingers and all over his palm. He pulls his hand from under the covers, dripping with blood. Luke's spine sends shock through his body, tightening all of his muscles. He forces his eyes back onto her, his throat is clogged with an overflow of words. He fights with his paralyzed arm and manages to gain enough control to move it. He slowly reaches his trembling hand towards Julia's shoulder to turn her over. His fingers make contact with her skin and a hoarse voice screams into Luke's left ear, "Ay! What the fuck ya doin'?"

Luke opens his eyes suddenly and gasps; he's back up above, the grotesque sun shining down on his sensitive forehead. He grabs his chest and coughs out an exhale, choking on the air filling his lungs.

"I said, what the fuck ya doin'?" repeats the raspy voice.

Luke, still trying to catch his breath, wheezes, "God damn it Damian! You scared the shit out of me! What the hell do you think I'm doing?" He turns over the hand on his chest and inspects it, seeing flecks of dried blood.

To his left, Damian groans, "Well I'd just assumed you'd put some thought into this. You've been wantin' it for so long, Luke, didn't think you'd be stupid enough to fuck it up now"

"I wasn't fucking anything up okay!" Luke runs his fingers through his thick curly hair, tearing through tiny knots on the way, "I was just getting lost in my head."

"Yeah, I noticed."

"Then why are you questioning me?" Luke exclaims, "You know why I'm here and you know I want you gone!" Luke looks up in frustration at the sky and sees a single bird flying as if it's chasing something that isn't there. He hopes silence is the next thing that comes out of Damian.

"Ya know I'll always be here for ya Luke," Damian sneers, "All these years and ya still haven't gotten rid of lil' ol' me."

"I know I can't, But that's why we're here isn't it?" Luke looks back down below at the city. "You went too far this time Damian. I loved her."

Damian scoffs, "Oh relax ya baby, there's plenty of bodies in the cemetery." he chuckles, "that girl shoulda known better than to affiliate herself with a weirdo like you."

"I told you her fucking name was Julia! And I loved her!" Luke slams his fist against the concrete under him.

"Luke, ya aren't even capable of loving yourself. If you loved yourself we wouldn't be here right now, overlooking a world you couldn't love either."

Damian boasted

"She wanted to help me...she was going to help me get rid of you." Luke can feel the urge to cry. He pushes back the tears and squeezes his eyes shut. "I didn't deserve her. She was too good for me."

"Well shit, now she's gone. No way she'd be able to help ya now, especially not after what you did." Damian giggles.

Luke tightens his fists, "Don't you dare blame me for that! We both know that was all you, just like all the other times you've made me hurt people" his lips start trembling, "It...It's always you...every fucking time." He gasps, "Oh god." his heads falls into his hands and he fights back his tears again

"No Luke. You, and only you, know that it's me. What we both know is that no one is going to believe ya."

Luke holds his palms against his eyes as salty tears make their way down his nose. Violent images from as far back as his childhood cloud Luke's mind. Dead animals, injured people crying from either physical or emotional pain, all caused by Luke's inability to control Damian. Luke tries to accept that Julia is his fault.

"She is your fault," Damian interrupts, "ya should've known there is no helpin' ya."

Luke wipes his eyes and snuffles, "Well... it's not gonna matter for much longer." He focuses his blurry eyes to the view down below.

"As long as you're here it matters, but down there is where it no longer matters, where nothing matters." Damian pauses, "but you're still here, and here everything matters."

Luke inhales smog and exhales it back into the world. The blaring of car horns fill the hot summer air. "You're not gonna hurt anyone ever again."

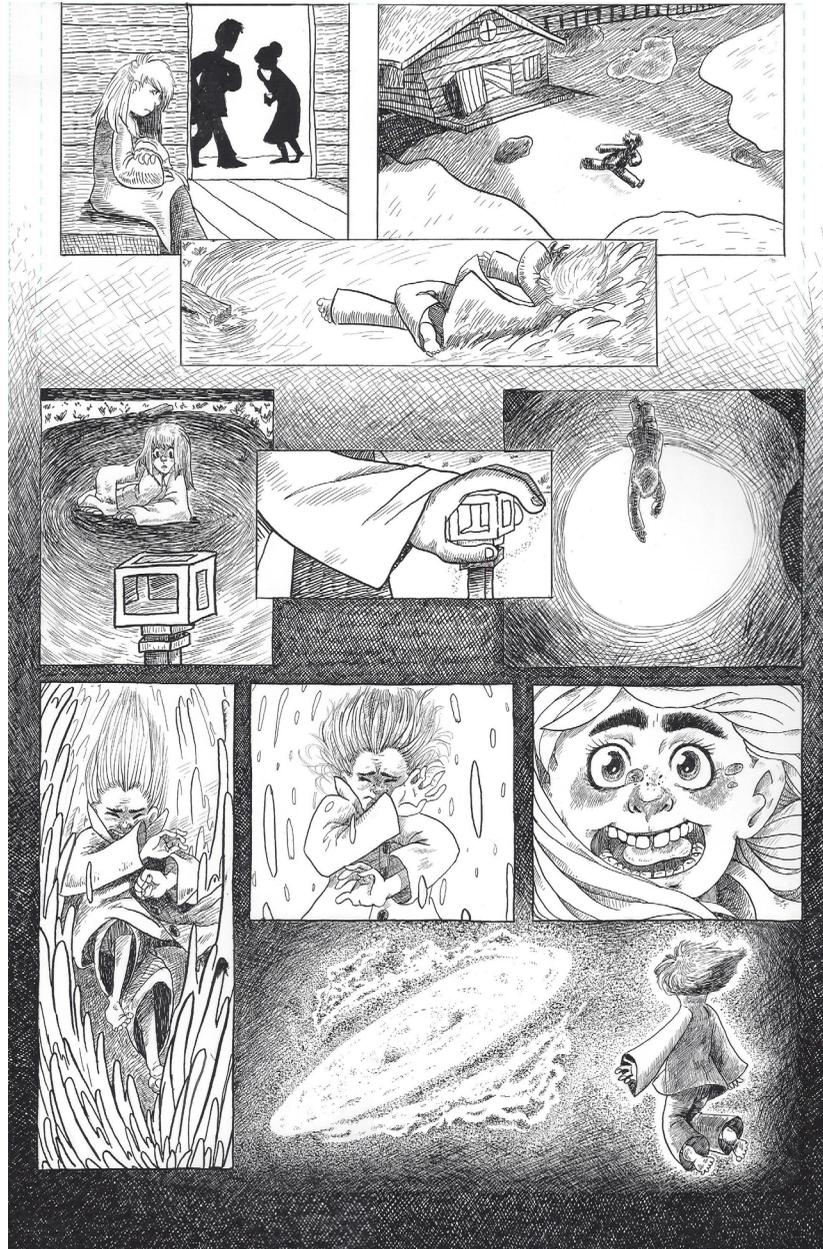
"Ya know there's only one way to do that. Sure ya haven't bitched out?"

Damian bellowed.

Luke looks back up for the bird, but it's disappeared. He shuts his heavy eyes and opens them back to that bed, under a soft blanket, close to Julia again. He stares at her and lifts his hand to reach out to her, but stops. Luke pulls his arm back and sighs, "I'm... I'm so sorry." He closes his eyes and reopens them to the building looking over the city. "I'm ready."

Luke hears Damian's sigh and harsh voice in his head, "I'm ready if you're ready. Ya know, I'm gonna miss ya kid."

Luke sits up and takes a deep breath. "I wish I could say the same fucker." He leans forward and leaps off the building with his arms spread open, embracing his freedom.



ESCAPE TO THE STARS
BRIANNA LOVE



DINNER AT EIGHT
ALEXIS SZEDLACSEK



DYING BREED
ENRIQUE EDGAR BAUTISTA



SEN I
YUSEI KINOSHITA

STRANGER IN THE WOODS

ASHLEY CARLOS

I've always had a poor sense of direction. Like the time when I was ten and walked down to the store for a gallon of milk not five blocks away and couldn't find my way back home. Or last year when I mistakenly told my dad to turn off the highway and we continued on the wrong road for three hours before we realized the rest of the directions didn't make any sense.

My father warned me not to go too far in the woods, but there's something about this place that feels familiar even though I've never been here before. Like the sweet aroma of butterscotch from the pine trees or the sound the winds makes against the shape of them. My feet have been pulling me forward through the maze of vegetation for hours as if they know where to go, but it's getting late and my feet seem to be lost. My dad's going to be upset that I didn't listen to him and I'm not home in time for supper. I can already see him furrowing his brow and shaking his head as if he expected better behavior from me.

A knot forms in my stomach as I look around, trying to remember a marker. All I see are trees. And all of the trees look the same. I have gone around in circles ten times by now. A breeze rushes through the trees. I pull my jacket a little tighter. The sounds of the crickets overwhelm my brain. A crow flies over, cawing, taunting me.

"Shut up."

An owl hoots in response.

The trees move in closer. Why couldn't I have listened to dad? If I did, I'd be sitting at the table, "dropping" pieces of mom's roast beef on the floor for Luna.

There's a rustling not too far away. I continue walking, knowing that I better find my way back soon or I won't be able to do anything else on our vacation. A few steps later, I hear the rustling again. I quicken my pace, but it seems to be following me. My legs push me faster.

Something grabs on to my ankle, sending me forward to the ground. The damp dirt hugs my face and fills my nose. Everything goes black.

There's a man standing over me. Blocking my view of the only sliver of moonlight. Any memory of where I am vanishes for a moment.

He kneels down next to me. My hand reaches up to touch his face, half expecting there to be nothing. Just a product of my imagination. He snatches

my hand away before I reach his cheek.

“Wha-” I say before he covers my mouth with one hand and holds down my arm with the other. I squirm beneath his hold, trying to push his arm away.

“Quiet. Don’t move,” he whispers, gripping my arm tighter.

The sound of leaves crunch in the distance.

“Over here!” someone yells. The footsteps get louder.

“Great.” The man next to me takes off running and pulls me along. The trees dance around me like I’m in some twisted nightmare.

The man tightens his grasp, assuring me this is nothing close to a dream. I look back to see that the men are several feet away but still close behind.

I trip over my feet, but his hold prevents me from falling down.

He looks over his shoulder before pulling me behind a giant oak tree.

His hand covers my mouth. The smell of pine rushes through me. I can hear pounding in my ears.

The footsteps stop somewhere behind us. I hold my breath unsure if I should try to get their attention or not. Something tells me not to.

The sound of leaves rustling to our right catches the group’s attention. “This way!”

Their footsteps trail off toward the noise.

The man moves his hand away from my mouth. I try to shake off his other hand that’s still on my wrist, but it won’t budge.

“Why are you doing this?” I whisper.

“Shhh, you’re in danger,” he hisses.

I look up at his face as he stares into the distance, looking for the men.

He pushes his messy black hair back to the side, revealing a scar right in the middle of his left eyebrow. My eyes focus on his jawline that comes down at a sharp angle to his wide chin. He reminds me of someone. I search for an answer, going over in my mind friends from school, people I’ve seen back home, even celebrities, but nothing comes to me.

Another owl hoots. I can feel a fire burning inside of my throat and something deep within me, telling me to run. I listen to that voice. I kick the man hard in the shin. He yells out as he lets go of my arm. I run.

I look back to see him following me. If only I could just wake up and mom would bring me some of her peppermint hot cocoa and stay with me until I fell back asleep like she used to do when I was a little girl.

The man catches up to me. He’s not as out of breath as I think he would be. “They’ll be looking for us soon,” he says.

“Who’s they? And why are they after us?”

The men’s voices return.

“We need to get out of here. Run and don’t stop. I’ll try to get rid of them and catch up with you.”

Before I can say another word, he pushes me forward. I start to run, not looking back. I reach a highway and slow down to catch my breath. My eyes scan through the darkness. That little voice returns, telling me to turn right

and follow the road. I take its advice once again, hoping it takes me back to my family.

The road leads me to a diner. I remember passing it on the way to the cabin with my parents. The sign reads “Spudsy’s” in big black letters with “Home of Spudsy’s Spuds” underneath. I pass a few cars as I make my way to the entrance. The warmth hits me as I open the door. The smell of fried potatoes and coffee fills the air. I look around at the people eating their greasy provisions. A middle aged man sporting a faded blue trucker hat sits at the bar, sipping his coffee. My eyes continue around the room, focusing in on the empty booth next to me. In an effort to look normal, I sit down. There’s a folded newspaper sitting on the table, and my eyes are drawn to these words:

New evidence in connection with the disappearance of Tyler Bloomberg. After disappearing near his hometown of Cedar Valley, police have had no leads since last year when a body believed to be his was found. Yesterday, a witness came forward claiming to have seen Bloomberg in the area with another man. No further details have been released.

Next to the article is a picture of the missing, Tyler Bloomberg. I move closer to get a better view of the familiar face. The room starts to spin and my wrist aches as my eyes focus in on the scar on this man’s eyebrow. This has to be a dream, I tell myself. There’s no way that man in the forest could be him.

The bells jingle on the door, causing me to turn around. A rush of cold air surrounds me, as I see who just walked in.

TWO PENCE FOR PASSAGE

JERIN KIRBY

Fear is what woke him, but it was guilt that got him out of bed. George had kept the same routine he had for years. A cold shower to shake off sleep followed by a shave, but as he picked up his razor he looked at the stubble just now sprouting on his face. There was more grey in his beard. His hair still had the dark luster of his youth, but those flecks of grey aged him. With practiced hands he sharpened the razor on an old strip of leather he kept by the sink. He left his face smooth and ran a comb through his hair. He got dressed and walked out of the apartment into late afternoon sun.

Street vendors were hawking goods and the smell rising from the food stalls did its best to cover up the smell of piss in the streets. He started walking without thinking. The jumble of noise around him resembled language, but one foreign to him. He could hear the newlyweds arguing over the din of the streets. The laundresses were gossiping as they often did during their breaks, usually over who was sleeping with whom. He walked by the men too old to work. Every day they sat at the same café patio, playing backgammon and drinking Turkish coffee.

“Come now George indulge us with your company,” they called to him.

He waved, but kept walking.

He had walked the same road every day for the past ten years. He stopped halfway across the bridge leading to the industrial heart of the city. The sky was black with smoke billowing from smokestacks, factories burning coal to fuel their machines. He had worked in a factory making shoes for most of his adult life, yet now he stood a derelict. Rent was due soon and without the factory, he would be on the street. He crossed his arms and leaned on the stone railing of the bridge. George stared at the water flowing under it.

“Water’s mighty cold this time of year,” said a man to his right. The man was older than George by a couple of decades. He was round in the middle with a bulbous nose, but had the hands of a workman. The plain trousers and black woolen coat he wore looked tailored, but for a younger thinner man. Wisps of grey hair poked out from under a matching black flat cap. He held a brown paper bag towards George. “Pistachio?”

“No thanks.”

“More for us then,” he said popping a shelled nut into his mouth. He sucked on it for a bit before spitting the shell into the river below. They stood at the edge of the bridge, George looking at the water and the pistachio man

looking into the distance.

“What’s a man like you doing here in the midday?”

“Fishing,” George said.

“Hard to catch a fish in these waters, especially without a pole,” he popped another pistachio into his mouth. “Sides, everything’s dead,” he tossed a thumb toward the factories “Run off kills’em.”

“Is that so? Guess this was pointless from the start.”

“Could be,” he spat another shell into the water, “or could just be you’re not a fisherman.”

The factory whistles screamed the workday’s close. Men and women walked over the bridge away from looming smokestacks into the light of the setting sun and to their homes. They laughed and talked amongst themselves, passing by the two watchers as if they were statues decorating the bridge.

George felt the cold gaze of the old man on him.

“What?” He asked looking at the pistachio man.

“Why are you here?”

“I enjoy the smell of soot and rotten fish,” he said.

The old man sucked thoughtfully at his latest salty victim, “Let me ask you something.”

“Mhmm.”

“You heading to work?”

George let out a sigh.

“Going home then?”

“Not sure about that.”

The old man set down his bag of nuts and leaned on the railing, facing George fixing his pale blue eyes to George’s brown ones. The way his eyes seemed to look through him made his skin crawl.

“I’ve asked you three questions that have been answered truly as I see it. Ask me three in return, such is fair,” the old man said. The air was still, the sun had sunk beneath the rows of apartments leaving a twisted mixture of gaslights and the remaining rays of twilight peeking through them. All was silent except for the water flowing under the bridge.

“Okay then...what do you do for work?”

The man let out a soft chuckle showing the ghost of a smile only briefly, “My grandfather was a ferryman, two pence would get you down river in those

days he would say. My father was a farmer. Me, I don't really know what I would call myself, a vagabond I guess. I go where my work takes me."

"Odd. I figure you would be a farmer like your father."

"He didn't own any land, just the tools of his trade," he said as he pulled gloves from a coat pocket and slipped them on, "Reap and sow, reap and sow."

George suddenly felt the cold, his clothes feeling too thin to keep it at bay. He tucked his arms around his body, his breath came out as a cloud. The old man just stared at him like a butcher looks at a pig. Sizing him up and sharpening his knives for the first cut. There was no one on else on the bridge. It was only him and the old man in the darkening night.

"You've got two more," the old man said.

George looked down into the water. Shapes swam just beneath the surface, hungry shadows waiting for their next meal.

"Ask," he said.

"I don't have any questions."

"All you are is questions. Ask."

"I'm going to die," George said.

"All men die. Ask," The old man said.

George gripped the railing of the bridge, cold sweat running down his face. He wanted to run home, he wanted to lay down in bed, he wanted to get up the next morning and take a cold shower and have a bitter shave. He wanted to hear the women gossip and watch the old men drink their coffee and play backgammon.

"Did they suffer?" he stammered out.

"Immensely," the old man said softly.

"It wasn't my fault," George said grabbing the old man by the lapels, "The foreman told me to lock the doors. He told me they would abandon their work or steal the goods, you have to understand...it...it wasn't my fault, I was doing what I was told."

George's hands dropped to his sides, "You see that don't you?"

"I saw everything, George."

The air rushed past him as he plummeted to the dark waters below. He saw the old man looking at him over the rail. The cold waters embraced him.

The old men drank their Turkish coffee and watched their neighbors busy themselves with work they had given up long ago.

"Did you see the paper today?" said the mustached one.

"Aye, damn shame," said the bald one as he sipped his coffee.

"Sole survivor of factory fire found dead."

"Tragic, heard he leapt off the bridge around quitting time."

"Guess he punched out early," he said fidgeting with his mustache as they set the board for another round.

"Mind if I play?" said the new comer, he wore simple clothes and a dark woolen coat and matching cap.

"Why George, aren't you a sight for sore eyes. Come and sit a while," The mustached man said as he finished setting the pieces. George pulled up a chair setting himself up across from the old man.

"Playing white?" The old man asked taking a sip of the rapidly cooling drink.

"You can't win forever."

"Same wager as always then?"

George affixed his cold gaze on him.

"I haven't lost to you yet and don't think today will be the day either."

They rolled dice to see who went first.



A BRIDGE TOO FAR
AMANDA RAINES



GRIEF
PATRICK BRENNAN

THE MINISTER WITH A NOTE

NICOLE PADGETT

It started with a curse. For years the minister's subscription to the kingdom was never challenged, but today, trouble wrenched his brave soul. For today he must be both servant and post to the King. In his rough dispatched hands was a page, a poem with chartered words that would change the King's world when he analyzed it. The minister muttered, "Prithee to God, help me fulfill my duties to this kingdom." With mess in his gray beard, the King came near. He went into his room and begged the minister in.

"Descend a story for the humor or dispatch your message and leave," the King demanded.

"My Lord," the servant bowed, seeing the the sheet soundly in his hand. Bringing himself to rise from his pose, his knees giving way, was something he could not do.

"Enough, in your hands, speak the passage."

"Anon, my Lord. Prithee disregard this ink this e'en and wait till morrow. My judgement is that a portion of the sky must be seen to sing this message," the minister thought himself smart, but it did not take long for the King to resolve the servant's cowardness.

"List, you hand me that note or the halter awaits your neck."

The minister leaped back to the edge of the room. His whole body shook, but he drew in a breath which held a power inside him. Wishing he could simply leave now, wishing there was bush to hide behind, he placed the note in the King's strapping hands before cowering back to stand near the door.

The King passed around his bear carpet, the fire lighting the bent lines on his forehead, as he read. He began reading aloud, 'til his eyes gave way to the words that zounds could not heel. Now the curse had turned to the King, but the weight on the minister's chest did not go with it.

"That baggage, that housewife, that bitch hound harlot!" The King stopped, standing completely still. Even breathing was too much movement, his body overtook death. He glared at the message questioning if this day was all a lie, for what was written even the King could not believe. He was sure, this time. He was sure. The King taxed this letter 'till day break. Only after the fire had died did he finally rise from his chair and address the servant who had slide down the wall now sitting on the floor.

"My honest friend, thank you. I trust in you to keep this impeach to yourself 'till I am ready to tell the people. There will be no quest, nay, no court

will discuss such betrayal." Walking up to the post, the servant could smell the ash on the King's breath from sitting near a fire all night. He could feel the end of the King's beard brush against his chest weighing it down even more. When the King whispered so softly the minister he wished he could say he misheard him, but this message was too soundly said. "You are bound by your duty and title, but I must ask you a kindness. What it is, you will not like, however you must call upon the power inside you."

With bleeding eyes, the King took sight precisely with his servant. "Prepare the halter, I want that harlot to hang for all to see." The King turned his bum, receiving the fresh air from the window, seeing the sun slowly winning over the darkness. Yet, he knew all too well that the darkness will always be faster than the sun. "Begone." On the subject, these his last combined letters framed.

"Fare," was the only thing the servant could say. Mayhap he will be able to save the Queen and tell her to flee before the noose is rung and in the tree. Mayhaps the King will change his mind when he sees the Queen. A lot of maybes, but truly the servant knew the King wanted a son, and he would never be happy with yet another daughter.

The servant vanished behind the door. He stood still, waiting for death to befall him so he would not have to get the rope or the girl and put them together. When the servant finally started to move, he felt as if he still stood static and it was the earth that was moving around him forcing him to confront his fate. Not a day passed but the minister aged six years before making it to the Queen's private room. The oceans in his eyes leaked onto his faded green blouse. He only paused a moment at the door to flatten his hair, straighten his shirt and wipe the salty water from his face, for even as a corpse walking she was still his Queen and he was not ever going to forget to give her the respect she had rightfully earned.

As he opened the door he agreed with himself to do the task set before him as quickly as possible then forget the whole of it. By e'en the curse could be gone and he could finally feel peace again. However, when he opened the door he viewed first an empty bed. Fine red and gold cloth draped the bedding yet no Queen in sight. Ne'er a song could produce the guide that such silence did for his thoughts. In every direction, up every mountain, and within every tunnel did he see his Queen with sweat near her hair and sores on her feet, running to her freedom and with her freedom came his.

A whimpered turned his attention toward the wide window opposite the bed where he marked a small blue basket. As he got closer he spied the sun fully emerging from behind the outer villages illuminating the infant who was in cloth before him. The running stopped. The sweat, the sores, the freedom from the King all vanished. Here was the child but no mother in sight. He know the Queen would ne'er leave her new daughter, confusion and fury was now the minister's best-mate.

"She knew he would send you," the servant recognized the voice without even a glance in the windows reflection, the Queen's first handmaid.

"How? How could she possibly leave her child behind?" The servant questioned while watching the small human's chest rise and fall slowly sinking up with his own heart beat.

"You spent all this time serving the King and Queen, the question really is how did you not see any of this coming?" She was right of course, she was always right he found.

"But this is her child. I thought, I thought she would at least stay for her, or at least take her along." The minister tried to recall the last few e'ens to resolve the stock he was now trapped in. Did she say anything? Did she give any sign she may leave? Did I really ever know the Queen that would leave her child or the King that would kill his wife?

"She left you a note," the handmaid said as she crossed the room, her small feet whispering to the wind as if asking permission to move through it. Cracked from the heat, a layer of dust that will ne'er be washed away, no nails to be seen, and a few red marks of different shades, the minister saw how her hands, though smaller, mirrored his. He taxed her hands and imagined them to be his own only yesternight, shortly thinking that both have the same characters as if he had not known. Catching only a short breath he knew that this time his imagination have gone too far, no note could be as vile as the first.

"I will not except this letter, nor will the King." Using the King as his excuse not to read the passage set before him was impeachable. When the minister first got to the kingdom manyyears ago he wished to be part of the knights, but the prince at the time saw a honest nature of the young boy. The servant wanted strength but the prince disregarded this, saying that the boy was better set for a position of a near relations, a "cousin" he said. Now the servant thought of this day as regret filled his heart. He longed for the old days when the prince was a prince and he was merely a small child running around passing love notes to the prince's fair maidens, for the notes now, he noticed, had no hearts at all.

"Be the jury for yourself. You came here to serve your King and bring the Queen to her death. Now serve your Queen who only asks you to read." The minister's eyes traveled up the fair skin of the handmaid, rising above the twisted gold locks that swung off around her strong shoulder, all the way up to the light green eyes that the reflection of the sun could not blind.

She looked away first. The note lay in his hand with a slight spark of fire

from where their hands had met, yet he did not break his sight of her. It was not 'til she had turned to care for the child did the weight on his chest come rushing back. He looked down at the paper remembering everything that had happened during the past moonrise and fall. He hungered for her to hold him and set fire to his soul as she did his hand.

He dared only a moment to think if she had read it first, thou the thought evaporated before the sentence finished in his mind. The seal had not been touched. Two word, he broke the seal and that was the only thing written, two words.

Catharina Rose.

The minister was stunned. Just a name, he thought, is this all she felt me worth? Just a name? He looked over to the handmaid to ask the purpose of this pathetic letter he held, although what he saw answered everything.

"Catharina Rose. The child's name is Catharina Rose."

"Oh, God has blessed this child. Worried I was, her father would be the name maker." The handmaid wear a smile that flowers will die ne'er obtaining. The minister was shocked at this negative talk of the King. The King, the Queen and now the handmaid, he felt he had not truly known any.

"Where is she?" The minister inquired.

"I know not. Not she tell me. She thought it safer this way."

"The King will hang you just the same." He stood over her. The child was in her hands so he could not take them. He simply wished she could see the naivety of holding on to this information. Any information. He spotted the ne'er ending blue over her shoulders, not a cloud to be seen. This made the sun the only thing dominating his view. His life rested on the ability to slow the sun and in this realization he know he was defeated already. Why will she not tell me? ME of all people? "Fine. Tell me not. I shall wait as long as possible but the King must know and when he does he will look to you."

"Thank you good minister, I only wish you had ne'er come to this Kingdom."

"Had I not come I would have ne'er met--" she looked up at him and the minister once again saw the girl he spied on the whole week he was first in the caste. Everything was the same if not better. She had grown to be the brightest person he had known, surpassing even the Queen. Only a few weeks ago did he give her a bloomed red rose that matched her cheeks, to which he was going to ask her to a picnic near the lake where they fetch water. He had spent a great deal of the night before preparing the food and washing the blanket, twice. He ne'er was able to ask, the Queen was in pain and needed her. With rose still in hand, he waited by the Queen's door. Even after another maid told him it would not be short, wait he still did. Only when the King had returned late in the day did the minister set the rose on the leg opposite the door and walked away with his chin on his chest. S he knew then, didn't she? The minister broke from his memory. She know the Queen was set to leave and where she was going, where she is now. He puzzled over each conversation he had had with her. Where

did the lying start? Where would it end? All at once she was not longer her anymore. He had lost the only true, free, friend he had in all the kingdom. He saw the strolls they took to the river. He saw the nights they laughed while polishing the swords. He saw comfort, the ease of talking to her, he saw the most brilliant person who held his soul slowly turn into demon. He saw lies.

His heart, which usually spread up in times of uneasiness, now skipped every other beat. This made the times it did beat twice as painful to handle.

“I-- I would have never met, my dog.” He watched the confusion grab her face but did not meet her eyes. The breath this line took was too much, he knew what she craved to hear, he felt he was about to faint trying. She lusted to hear her name. If the minister had all the air in the world, all the strength of a knight he would ne’er be able to say her name or even look in her eyes without thinking it too, false in some way. Knowing the foolishness of thinking everything about her was a lie the minister still could not see any part of a woman before him. A person she was no longer to him, simply a lie.

Another maid strode into the room breaking the tensed air between them. She was one the minister had never seen before. He knew why she was there from the rags she wore. Cow was the name they called these women who sold the milk from her chest. She stayed looking down, which made it hard for the minister to see her face, not that he truly cared to. Her fair skin, her light hair breaking through her veil, even her posture told him plainly that this was not the person who should be here. For no one would listen if he spoke this out, it should be the Queen, he demanded to himself.

He flew out of the room. No map, no compass, his feet took him where he needed to go giving his mind a break. He made it to the front steps of the castle, where the eldest princess came riding upon him with the prince from a neighboring kingdom she was set to marry. The servant bent to fill his lungs so full they may have grown an extra size. She was the most beautiful of the Queen’s daughters and the one that echoed the mother the most. The moonless sky coloured her hair, with the stars filling in her eyes. With her deep velvet cloak flying through the air, she dismounted her horse and reached for the servant. The prince stood shortly behind them.

“What is wrong minister?” Her hand where smooth yet strong willed. He felt them gently brush his back. The Queen could ne’er prevent herself from helping any creature no matter the statue or class, and it was this she passed to her first two daughters, yet passing to the last child she will not.

“I must tell the King I cannot kill the Queen because she has run off.” Looking out into the distance, the princess paused only a moment to take in the information.

Lifting the chin of the minister, she spoke, “he must be told, and if not by you... If not by you he is sure to think you a part in it.”

“No part did I have in this. I ne’er fancied her to leave without her child.”

The princess nodded to her prince who left with the horses. “We shall tell him together and understand she will if she is caught.” With these words the

princess lead the minister to the grand hall. They talked a great deal along the way, so by the time they had reached the King who sat on his blood coloured throne, next to an empty red and gold chair, the minister finally had a plan.

Sat, shouted, stood, whispered, passed, planned wars and more did the King do in this stone hall as the minister stood behind him. Even as a boy dining, planning, or fighting with his father the minister always was right behind his King. Therefore, when the servant walked into the room he stopped not at the first silver wrapped pillar as the princess did, nay his feet retook the idea that this was just another day and continued to the second pillar, wrapped in gold. By stepping so far forward he grabbed the attention of the King who had three of his favorite knights surrounding him, talking as if the devil was about to walk through the door and they needed an idea on how to defeat him.

“Minister,” said the King. Deep was his voice from the lack of sleep, yet it was so powerful it carried not only across the hall but too into the next two room. “Come minister, tell me of the news you bring.” The minister looked back at the princess who gave a slit bow. He found this walk was the easiest to perform this day. He could not see the bleeding eyes that set him on his task only hours ago, it was as if they had ne’er existed. Seeing his old friend’s face gave him comfort in these hard times. The King may have been harsh in his court but his heart too was wide with knowledge and peace. Perhaps, the servant thought as he finished his cross to the King, perhaps I should have come earlier so the King could find his Queen.

“She-- She was not in her room my Lord.” The minister thought back to how he thought the handmaid to always be right, but it was the King who guided and adopted him as family. My brother. The servant felt a strange sense of strength within him.

Leaving the three knights behind, the King rose from his throne and draw close to his servant. His bread was now twisted together with yellow thread and bright lake jewels. The dark marks under the King’s eyes told the minister that the King too had aged too many year this single day.

The servant saw the three knights roughly standing waiting for the King to return to their talk, he saw the princess who had moved toward the center of the room, where she stopped behind her chair at the oak table, he could see the whole hall that he carefully cleaned every full moon, he could see everything except the King who had his face parallel to the minister’s. The King’s ear chilled the minister’s cheek and his mouth surfed the loose hairs over the servant’s ear. “I want this curse to end today,” the King whimpered. “Did you check everywhere in the castle?”

Though he had less weight attached to his chest, he could not say any words. He feared that his voice would not remotely compare to his King’s. Therefore, he simply shook his head, less than a centimeter, up and down.

“She has gone?” Again the minister nodded. “Alright, thank you. Prithee stay put a moment.” The King turned to the room. He waved his left hand at which point all other servants left, the door knights shutting the only entrance

to the hall. The King dropped his hand so it lay next to his body once more. He curled his fingers which drew the three knights, the princess, and the minister around the him.

“My brave knights I have kept something from you. My Queen, she has betrayed me and the kingdom. I shall spare you the details, of which I am most aggrieved. I sent my minister here to collect her, yet she has run. I need not tell you the passion I feel in my heart for justice. Therefore, dispatch seven teams in all directions. Find her.”

“Seven my Lord?” Questioned the youngest of the knights.

“Yea, seven,” everyone could see the drop of saliva that came out the King’s mouth as he spat this in the knight’s direction. “Use the rest of the knights to gather all who saw, or have any connection with the Queen.”

“Where should we put them my Lord?” This came from the best of the King’s knights. They had been in many battles together, shared many scares. They both had a power and a connection that was the fantasy of the servant when entering into the kingdom.

“The dungeon, there you are to question each one separately ‘til one talks.” Catching the knight’s eyes he added, “Anybody who leaves, including you, will be executed.”

The knights all bowed and hurtled to the door. Finally the King turned to the servant. The King was spent. His eyes weak, his nose broken from the day’s activities.

“Minister, I wish you to join the knights in the interviews. Every fifth person come back up and teem me with any notes.” The minister bowed himself and made to leave the room.

“Minister?” The King beckoned. “What of the child?” The servant thought of creating a story. Something with a nice, light feel. He knew his story was missing a fun moment.

“In the Queen’s room.” A moment that would ne’er come for him. After today, whether they caught the Queen or not, he could ne’er go back to the days of waiting with a rose for a pretty girl. He took one last glance back catching four feet facing each other, remarkably close together.

He sat at the guard table to the dungeons for hours. The table was right in front of the cages so that the guards ne’er missed a step. Fellow servants, horsemen, cooks, even the seamstresses that she sollumly met were all clumped together. The minister knew most of them. He, in fact, had a good relationship with most of them. The servant was ne’er able to make close relations though. Serving the King was a high honor which most of them envied. They would not think it such an honor if they had actually been this minister.

“One wishes to be King ‘til they are, then they look down and want to be the servant,” the servant thought.

The minister had several knights surrounding him. More kept coming in with new people. Looking up each time with a skip of the heart, the minister waited for the handmaid to come down the stairs. She ne’er came. He began

to think that the King had spared her so she could care for the child. The third interviewed came back out from behind the hall. The knight that sat next to the servant stopped talking. He would have done better talking to a wall than the servant mayhaps then his story would have been heard. The knight opened the door and pushed the handmaid inside. This was the Queen’s fourth handmaid, and without getting out of his chair the minister saw the blood that ran her lower lip and even through her dark skin, darker marks still could be seen.

She came up to the bars and looked over the minister’s body. She always thought he was a nuisance to the kingdom and he would destroy it, from within. “She is in there.”

“What?” While still sitting, the minister leaned as far to the end of his chair as he could. “Your handmaid. She was in first, and I highly doubt she’ll come out soon.” She spat at the minister’s feet which gave his shoes a stray of her blood. She turned to sit with her fellow workers, one of which gave her a cloth for her wounds.

The minister turned to speak against the handmaid, when two knights came around the corner, one being the King’s best knight. They heaved out a body telling the room, “We need to speak to the King. She has given a name.”

None spoke on the long walk from the dungeon to the great hall. The minister lusted to have been apart of the interviews, wishing he could ask the knights what the name was. He most wished to hold the rosy cheeked handmaids’ that were being dragged behind her. He had finally found her.

The King sat upon his throne. He looked out the gapping windows that viewed the nearest markets to the castle. The first was a fur market. His’s father purchased the King’s bear carpet from here only a few years ago. The King still used this store to have gifts for coming guests. A small pouch made from a mountain lion the King had killed himself was tanned here. The King gave this to the minister for Christmas.

The King arose, viewing the knights, the handmaid, and the servant entering. They all met at the third pillar, wrapped in scarlet. His eyes grew wide flowing from the servant to the girl and then his Knights. He wanted someone to speak without the need to ask for ones, as if he were an equal, a friend.

“What is this? What have you learned”

“A name she speaks my Lord,” said his favorite knight. “She knows this to be a man who is in contact with the Queen.”

“Well speak!” The King demanded.

He grew impatient by the second of not knowing the name.

“Tell him, handmaid!” The knight pushed the maid to the floor.

She pushed her upper body off the floor and made sure her green eyes were sealed with the King when she said. “Your-- Minister.”

Silence. Utter and complete silence. The knights looked at each other already having known the name. The handmaid kept locked her eyes on the King though his eyes had swayed away. He saw the feet of his servant. He dared not look up. He did not want to see confirmation on the minister’s face.

He trusted the servant to receive the Queen only to find he already knew she was gone. The King had no brothers. His father was a King that only saw him as someone to take over when he died. His knights were yes men who never challenged him. It was minister, the minister. The minister told him when he was wrong, being foolish. When he was proud of the King. They talked like family. He loved him.

The King turned away from the crowd and took a few steps forward. The minister feared what was about to happen. He looked from the handmaid to the King. How could she do this to me? The minister thought. She put him in the King's line of fire, for what reason, the servant did not know. The minister stepped forward, ready to state his case. Clear his name. Tell the King the truth of what happened this day. But the hem of the King's red cloak derailed the minister's horse of thought. All his cloaks were red but this hem was slightly off at the right end.

"You're not wearing your best cloak." Of curious the hem was not the problem. In fact his best cloak had many stains the servant spent hours trying to wash away but never could.

"Enough of your nonsense servant!" Pulling his sword out of its scabbard, the King swung around and in one motion brought the blade to the minister's neck. The blade was cold, and the servant felt goosebumps starting to form across his body. Even if the King took the sword back carefully the blade would still leave a mark. At least I just sharpened it, the minister thought, seeing the shine on the handle. His index finger rubbed the tip of his thumb where he had tested the blade.

"Your mother swanned it." The King never let anyone touch his best cloak except for the minister. That is why he was wearing this one, the servant was not there this morning to put the right one on.

"So?" The blade went further into his skin. A drop of blood trickled onto his green shirt. His breath got shallow.

"Alright, alright. But think prithee, think I may have taken my time telling you the Queen was missing but I am loyal to you. It has always been you," the minister started talking as fast as his heart was going. "She gave me a note. That is all. A note. It is in my pocket. It reads Catharina Rose. The name of the child. My Lord you are my brother. Prithee do not do this."

"Where is she?"

"I know not."

"Where is she?"

"I know not!"

"Where is she!"

"It was the last gift she gave you before she died. That is why it is your favorite. She made it for your coronation. Yet you wear it first to her funeral."

"Where is my wife?" The King wept. The blade grew deeper. The servant's shirt began to loosen as if he had been running. "Where is my wife?"

He searched for answers in the minister's blue eyes but saw only the

damage he had done this day. "Where is my wife?" The blade fell on the floor breaking the silence. The knights began to move slightly back. The handmaid pushed herself into a sitting position. The minister took one hand to his neck but grabbed the King's collar with the other.

"We will find her my Lord. We will find her," the minister whispered.

Several minutes passed in stillness. He had held too much anger in his heart for one day, even the King could not hold it any longer. None moved while the King wept. When the eldest princess entered with the infant in her hands, the King stopped. The princess came close and waited for permission to give the child to the King.

"Come princess, come let the King hold his new daughter. Catharina Rose." The King looked at the minister. He knew that if all other decisions in his life were wrong, not making the minister a knight was still right. He needed him by his side.

The princess gave the King the child. His heart filled with love instead of fury. Though he still wanted a new wife who would produce a son, he was grateful for this child. Another little girl full of virtue and beauty. She would grow to love life and see nature as her equal.

The moon began to rise over the shops. The minister looked out the window and noticed that light was always around when you needed it.

A week later the minister went again to the Queen's room. He entered the room seeing again an empty bed. No longer were the sheets red and gold, for now they were velvet and black. His handmaid was fired for falsely accusing the minister. He had guilt for her leaving but cried not. She was the one who placed the Queen on a horse with a dark cloaked rider that night. She did not know the destination, as she had said before, thou she know the direction the horse galloped. For this minister had not forgiven her. She had said his name to the King thinking, knowing that he knew nothing. Now when she stood near the window brushing the fur from her new job, at a fur shop outside the castle, the minister often stopped to stare for a moment.

When he turned to the window, he saw the cow placing the child in a new pink basket, with the help of the eldest princess. They were lovely with the child. Both were ready to be mothers, and perhaps soon they will be.

"Come she is just about to sleep," the princess waved the minister over. Ten pounds now, Catharina had grown. Her eyes were the color of the seventh layer of the sea. Her hair had only a little to it but it was dark. "Handmaid, prithee take a walk." The cow bowed to the two of them and vanished behind the door.

"How is she?" The minister asked rocking the child's stomach with his hand.

"She is good. Eating well, sleeping much."

"And how is your prince?" The King had pushed up their marriage; by the end of the month they will be bed mates. He hopes they will produce a boy in case the King's new wife does not birth a boy of their own. All knights returned from their hunt for the Queen with nothing in hand except a few rabbits.

“He is well, he is enjoying his new seamstress. She is doing very well.” They looked at each other with an understanding that need no words to conform.

“I think I shall venture down there early next week to help you with your wedding plans. If fine with you that is?” The princess bent down the dim red collar of his shirt and brushed her cold fingers across his scare.

“That would be lovely.” The curse had finally died. Looking at the child, the minister’s heart rose and fell with Catharina’s chest.



1977
SCOTT ENGRAV

IN THE ALLEY EL MONREAL

Can we solve all of our problems with nudity?
Can we heal all of our pain with sex?
Can we find out who our demons are
By losing our minds?
Some of us, in the alleys,
Think you can

Drugs were the gods of my conception
Meth was a shadow
In the corner of my eye
Church was a breeding ground
For idols & philosophies that made me
Desperate to die
Father, won't you please
Come home again?
Mother, I just want to be
A son that brings you pride
Brothers, keep your chins up
Through destruction
Sisters, let me know
You're still alive

I can see you looking at me
Through the photographs
I can feel you breaking
Through the boundaries
I took acid & stared for hours
In the mirror
Wondering who I was & who I am
& who I'm supposed to be

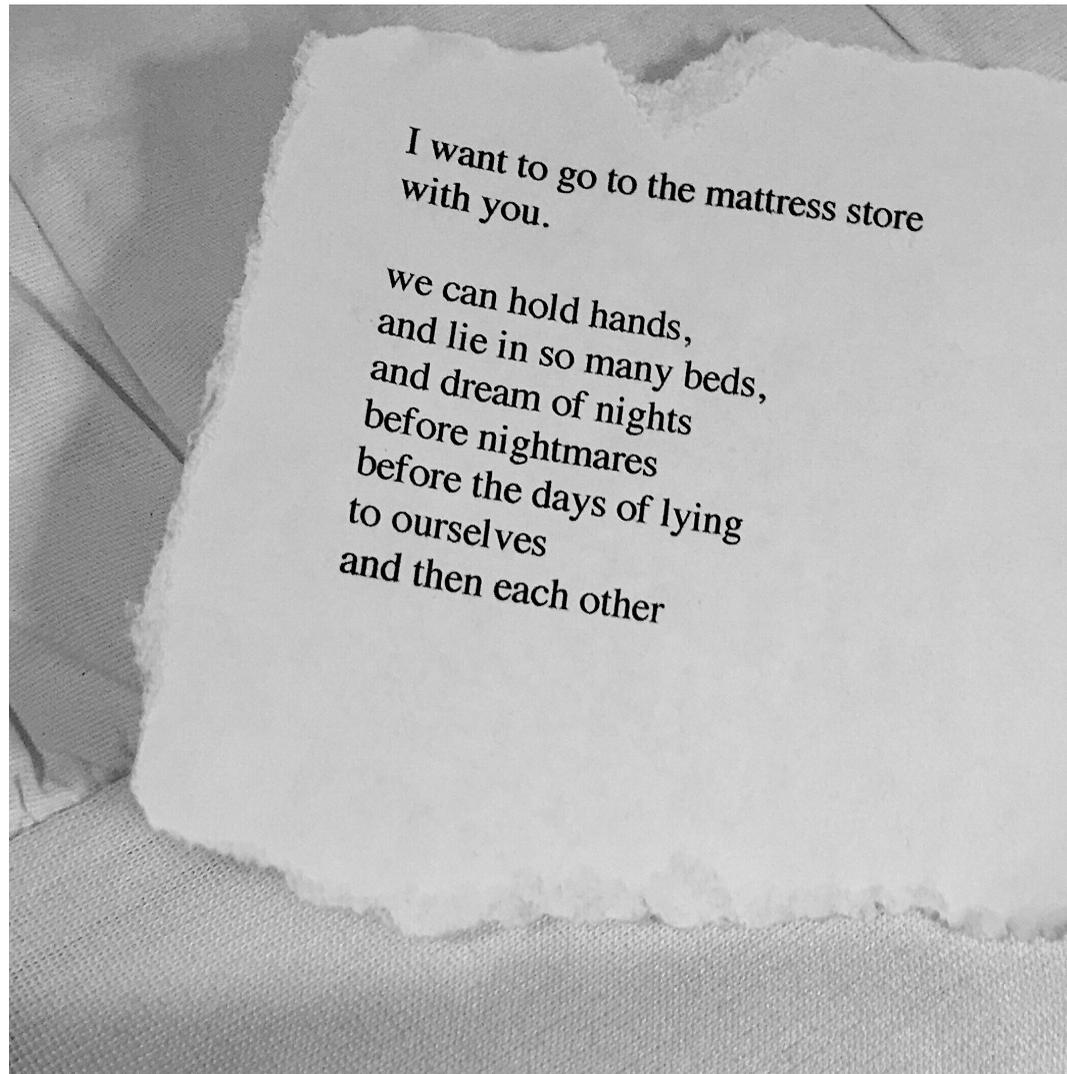
STONED EL MONREAL

I feel more reverence
When I'm stoned

Gone
Butterfly being tossed
In the wind
There's a butterfly
Beneath your chrysalis skin

The pain your mini skirt
Brings to my eyes
The agony of never
Touching your thigh
What does it feel like to die?
For your soul to escape
Through the frail cells of your eyes?

The unspoken utterances of your soul
Our longings cannot be detained by our lips



MATTRESS STORE
JENNIFER BAKER

THE BITE OF WINTER

KENJAMIN LIDDLE

The Cheshire moon hung low in the evening sky. The air was cold, a frost that bit reproachfully at exposed fingers and ears. The long, wide avenues of the industrial district lay empty and quiet, the pallor of the moonlight giving everything below an ethereal hue. Most of the street lamps had burnt out, and the only contrasting light came from a lonely trashcan fire, blazing defiantly in the oppressive winter night.

An old man stood silently, hoping to stave off the vengeful cold. He hunched before the fire, his stooped shoulders exaggerated by layers of shabby coats. His hands were held out, mere inches from the dancing flames, the fingers of his gloves having been lost to time. As he struggled to find comfort amid the bitter night, he lifted a bottle to his lips, and drained the last mouthful. His eyes clenched close as he swallowed, and he shivered. He took a minute to stare at the bottle in his hand before hurling it into the darkness, the breaking glass oddly muted in the all-encompassing night. He watched where it had landed for a time, dark broken glass shining in the limited moonlight.

As he gazed towards the remnant of his succor, he heard the echoing sound of footsteps, bouncing against the walls and from the shadows around his fire. The pace was languid at first. But when propagated from all sides, they began to sound frenzied. He raised his hands to block the firelight from his face, hoping to peer into the darkness.

“Hello? Who’s there?” Something intensified in the chill around him, and he shook with momentary apprehension. The shadows began to adjust, and from them stepped a young woman. The old man exhaled with relief. He didn’t know what had come over him, but he smiled, shaking his head, and beckoned his new companion nearer.

“Please,” she said.

“There’s no need to be afraid. I won’t bite,” he said, mustering what little mirth he had. “If you’d like to warm yourself, there’s plenty of fire for everyone.” he said, making an expansive gesture, which only elicited a flinch from the woman.

She shifted her feet, moving somewhat around the perimeter of the light, her eyes flickering in the shifting flames. She took a half step into the firelight, and the old man felt his stomach lurch. She had dozens of scratches and bruises on her face and legs, and what appeared to be dried blood on her shirt and sleeves. She was very thin, and her clothes left less to the imagination than was

seasonable. Her hands were buried in the pockets of a ragged, faded, tarnished peacoat, and she possessed eyes brimming with a sadness that humbled the old man. She felt his eyes on her, and looked away in silence. The old man knew his gaze was lingering too long, and turned back to the flames, still watching her figure in the corner of his eye.

After a moment the wind picked up, and she shivered, taking the remaining few hurried steps nearer to the blazing trashcan, greeting the warmth with a sigh, although she kept her hands tucked away rather than holding them over the flames. A minute of silence passed between the two, before the old man spoke up:

“So, how long has a young lady like yourself been out here? This spot used to be much more crowded, even in freezes this bad. Half the bums in the city would post up here’bouts. Haven’t seen more than a few others out lately, not even at the shelter.”

The woman replied in the form of a long, doleful look, her lip quivering in the orange fire glow.

“Well,” he replied, sensing her response was evident, “I’ve been out here for what might be, nine years? eleven? Easy to lose track of time when you haven’t got a reason to keep it. Days slide into each other on the street, weeks blur together. Years pass right on by, and here I am, just waiting out however much time I got,” his voice caught, and he began coughing, a wracking sound that filled the firelit circle. The young woman watched him, her face unmoving.

“The name’s Rufus, by the way,”

“Lily,” replied the woman, her lips barely parting.

“Lily? That’s a lovely name,” he nodded to himself, “lovely name, lovely flower. My daughter’s name was ‘Iris’, same story. She’d probably be about your age...” he trailed off, his eyes shimmering, and he stared hard into the embers, as though trying to recall her face.

“Tell me about her,” Rufus looked up, incredulous, but Lily didn’t react.

“You don’t want to hear none of it, I won’t trouble you by telling it.”

“Tell me about ‘Iris’,” Lily had hardly moved since she took her place at the fireside, but slowly, slowly, she seemed to unwind, rolling her shoulders and stretching her neck. This show of comfort registered on some level, and Rufus nodded.

“She was...the brightest person I’ve ever known. Not just smart, but

cheerful, smile from ear to ear. As a child, she would run laughing, everywhere, stopping only to catch her breath or wait for her mother or I to catch up, and then sprint away, giggling again. She never met a puzzle she couldn't solve or a stranger she couldn't make her friend. She was the joy in my life. Every drop of it."

As he spoke, Lily watched him rapturously, watching his face light up with the joy of recollection.

"Iris wasn't our only child, but she was my favorite. She could recite poems and songs and scripture, beat the stitches off a softball, and when she was five, she decided she would make pancakes on Saturdays. Every week she would ruin the kitchen trying to make flapjacks, and after two months of waking up to my hangover and the sound of the smoke detector, I'll be damned if she didn't wake me up one morning with a stack so nice it looked like it came off the box."

"Ah, that sounds so good right now."

"Hungry?"

"You've no idea," Lily said, looking down, "I don't remember the last time I ate something as nice as pancakes,"

"Yeah, I-" Rufus faltered, "I had some whiskey, but that ran out on me, too."

"Keep going, about Iris," Lily pressed, "don't talk about food. When was the last time you spoke to her?"

"Oh no, no," Rufus shook his head, his demeanor shifting, "no, that I try to forget-

But she shut her eyes and turned her head, straining into the darkness.

"something's coming."

"I don't hear anything," Rufus replied, confused. Lily was quiet, her fingers working at the corners of the pockets.

In the hush that followed, the sound of an engine began to tug at the edges of their awareness. After a few minutes, a quarter mile further on, a jeep turned the corner, and continued towards them. It drove slowly, unhurried, with unknown intentions but clearly of purpose. As the car drew near, Lily grew uneasy, one hand reaching quickly to smooth her hair. She moved to place both the trashfire and the old man between herself and the vehicle. Rufus noted her apprehension, and turned more to face the car. From within, he could see two figures silhouetted, and as they slowed to a stop at the curbside, the passenger rolled down his window, the scent of cigarette smoke and final call pouring out like a London fog.

"Hey sugar, you working tonight?" called the driver, his voice crass and thick with booze. Neither Rufus nor Lily made reply, so the driver continued, "my friend and I are looking for some company, figure you might like to go for a little ride?"

Rufus looked at Lily. She was shivering, but with what must have been fear rather than chills. He could see her downcast eyes, looking about her for an exit or an opportunity to flee.

"What's wrong, honey, my friend and I know how to have fun. And it's warm in here, yeah, nice and warm. How about it?"

"I don't think she's-" Rufus began.

"We wasn't talking to you, old man." the passenger said.

"I just was saying that your pretty friend might want to spend some time with us, rather than freeze her sweet ass off with a worthless old shit like you." the driver clicked his tongue, "hey sweet thing, don't act like you aren't interested. We've got plenty of booze here if you're thirsty, give you something to wrap your lips around."

"She's not interested," said Rufus, "why don't you two find some other people to bother."

The passenger door opened, and the occupant stepped out. Rufus began to react but in a single swift motion the passenger drew a flashlight and clubbed Rufus in the temple with it. Rufus grunted and crumpled, gasping in surprise and pain.

"People? You think you're people? All you are is a worthless old man." he punctuated his words with kicks, and finally knelt on Rufus' back, "not very smart, are you? Figured being so old, someone might've taught you some respect."

"Leave him be," said Lily, her voice barely registering to the passenger, "you don't have to hurt him."

"You hear that? She can talk after all," the driver called, unphased by his friend's apparent violent outburst. "So, how's about it? You want to party now, is that it? Only took roughing up your daddy a little bit. No harm in it."

Rufus tried to protest from the ground, but felt the pressure of a knee in the center of his back, and could do nothing but look up in dismay as Lily stepped beyond the firelight and towards the car.

"Do you- do you have a smoke?" she said as she reacted the window. The driver looked taken aback for a moment, but nodded. He pulled one from the pack at his breast, and made to hand it over when she said, "light it for me."

The driver stuck it in his lips and flicked a lighter, the flash of illumination revealing the intensity in Lily's eyes for a brief moment. He held out the lit cigarette, but rather than grab it, Lily leaned in, her lips parting expectantly. She pulled on a finger, then another finger, and then, cigarette.

"I'll go with you, but please," she said, after a deep exhalation, her voice filled with apprehension, "one at a time."

"No, Lily, don't. You don't have to get into his car," Rufus said from the ground, "you don't have to. Don't do it, Lily, don't."

"Alright, man, you take first go," the passenger said, as he held Rufus' head to the ground, "I'm gonna stay here with the geezer, make sure he doesn't do anything...rash."

Lily gave an inscrutable look back at the two, then pulled open the door, and slid into the seat. The driver put the car into gear, and began to pull away.

Rufus began to whimper slightly, muttering to himself "no, Lily, not like

this. Don't get into his car, not again."

As the car started to pick up speed, it suddenly swerved wildly, punctuated by a shriek and the vehicle careening into a lamp post. The passenger, shouted, and began running towards the accident, uncertainty slowing his steps as he neared the crash.

Rufus watched in horror as the post crumpled and fell, crashing into the roof of the car, but the screaming continued. It was unearthly, a howl of agony and fear. The car thrashed, and shook, and the driver's door flew open, but nobody emerged. The wailing continued for another moment, but was just as suddenly silenced, leaving the street throbbing in the lull. As the passenger came alongside the Jeep, he squinted into the windows, apprehension filling his movements, finally drawing near to the ajar driver's side door. As he peered into the bloodied cab, a hand struck out and caught him by the calf. He screamed, and the sound of rending denim and flesh carried back to Rufus, watching transfixed from the ground. The man turned, and began frantically hobbling away, shouting incoherently, fear etched onto his face.

The passenger, trailing blood, lurched by Rufus, terror-stricken and babbling, but Rufus watched the jeep still. No one had emerged. There was no sign of life from within.

"Not like this. Not again. no Iris, no..." Rufus pushed himself to his feet, and began to move towards the crash, "I can't lose you again. No..."

To his surprise, Lily then stepped from the car. The headlights were still on, so she was framed in their illumination. But she was different. Her peacoat was missing, her hair was matted, she stood straight and peered around herself, eyes piercing into the dark. No longer meek or hesitant, but assured, calm, relaxed. She reached back into the car to remove a few objects, and then turned back to Rufus.

He saw her now. He saw what she was. Saw the gore covering her maw, saw the fresh blood, ebon in the moonlight, coating her hands and chest. He faltered, and as she drew nearer, he fell to his knees, paralyzed with fear. She drew on a new coat, stolen from within the car, and admired it in the moonlight as she reached the old man. She regarded him for a long minute, steam rising from the cooling viscera, before she spoke.

"Will you not run from me?"

Rufus could only moan slightly, and shake his head. She stopped at a splatter of blood on the asphalt, and brought some to her lips. Her eyes closed in exaltation. A dark bottle was produced from the depth of the coat, and she placed it on the ground before Rufus. She opened her eyes and stared off into the darkness where the passenger had fled.

"Pity, I enjoy running," she said gently, as she prowled off into the night.

EXISTING

AIMEE FLORES

Waking up in the middle of the night gasping for air.
We all know this image.
We've all felt this way before.
You turn right and left to see what's by you.
The incredible weight built up until you broke under the pressure.
Maybe it took seconds, hours, days, years for you to shatter.
CRACK!
went the glass mirror, that landed on the floor
It wasn't till you saw your reflection,
That you needed to know you existed.
Questions of curiosity running through your head
Fear echoing in the room.
It was just a usual stage of disaster: shock took over you.

EXISTENCIA

AIMEE FLORES

Desperto en la media de la noche, ahogando me, buscando por aire.
Todos conocemos esta imagen, porque todos nos hemos sentido de esta
manera antes.
El peso acumulando, nos ase romper bajo la presión.
Quizás tomó segundos, horas, días años para que se rompa.
CRACK!
Fue el espejo junto a ti, que aterrizó en el suelo.
No fue hasta que viste tu reflexión.
Que necesitabas saber que exististes.
Preguntas de curiosidad corriendo por tu mente.
Miedo haciéndose eco de la habitación.
Fue solo una etapa de desastre: el shock por encima.



RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

CAMERON WINTERS

Summers exhaled and pressed his weight into his MK12. His spotter, Rodrigues, confirmed the target using his RCO.

“Range to target 2 5 0,” Rodrigues said, helping Summers set his scope on target.

“Roger, 2-5-0.”

It was cold, bitter cold, even inside the building. The air burned their lungs as they drew in deep frigid breaths. The sky outside was yellowish grey, the whole world seemed sepia toned. Not like Summers was used to back home in Wisconsin, where green outshines every other color. He breathed deeply trying to calm his nerves and settle his heart, ignoring his body’s longing to cough with every breath. The smell of dip spit and four days of baby wipe showers fermented the air around them, insulting their lungs even more. His rifle’s cross hairs rose and settled in rhythm with his breathing. He tried to get comfortable behind the rifle, his knee ached from the hard floor. A tipped over table was all they had to hide behind here on the second floor. For the time being, they were safe.

“He’s sighting in, dude.”

“Yeah I see it, Rod. Let’s give him a second to change his mind. You know the new ROE.”

The target continued to aim his PKM down the alleyway. Whether he knew it or not, he was aiming down an alley where Marines were patrolling building to building. Summers forced himself to focus, the focus kept his shit together. Sometimes he focused too much, burning a hole in reality and making him susceptible to fuck up.

“Looks like he knows something’s goin’ on.”

The reticle kept rising and falling. Rod kept checking the target and rechecking wind and distance.

“FUCK! Summers, he’s firing!”

Inhale, pause. Exhale, settle. He flipped the selector off SAFE. Summers closed his eyes.

When they opened he was laying down in the cold snow next to his grandfather. It was November. He was ten years old with a six point buck four hundred feet from his muzzle. The words of his grandfather slowly whispering into his ear...

Breath steady, you’re in no hurry. Remember what I told you about your foundation. Wait till you’ve got a good heart shot, you have one bullet so make it count. Aim small, miss small. Slow... Steady... Squeeze...

Bang.

“Hit.”

His grandfather’s voice melted away with the snow.

“Solid hit, man. Dude dropped instantly.” Rod’s voice was slow and smooth,

The spent 5.56 brass rolled across the floor to their right making a faint tinging sound. Summers slowly let the trigger reset with an audible clunk. He thumbed the selector switch back to SAFE. He inhaled. As he exhaled, he whispered, “Solid hit, grandpa.”

“What?”

“Nothing. I’ll tell you some other time.”

FAERIES OF LEINSTER RAILS

COLLIN BROWN

By no intention of my own, an obsession blossomed in me. Lustful for the heat of adventure in my veins, the sight of Leinster grasses through foggy panes, and some relief from the sting of woe in my chest, I gathered up my few belongings, stuffed them in a suitcase, and strolled down to Kingsbridge Station to be on my way.

A short walk down the street brought me within the ghostly shadow of its white walls. Bootheels clicked on cobblestones. Tailcoats fluttered in the breeze. I felt a heron amidst the downturned heads of the masses as they corralled beneath the archways and inside. The usual smells of the station came—sweat from the bums in the gutters and the faint stench of alcohol on the breath of those nearby. Nervous fingers wiggled my scarf over my nose, a poor defense against their assault. No trouble, I thought. I would be out of the common rabble soon.

To my left, the open tracks sat in a wide rut. Bundled men and women stood beside their stops, tickets clutched in-hand. To my right, grimy walls ran along the length of the building. The more permanent occupants of Kingsbridge curled in their patchwork coats in the nooks and crannies, where alcoves put distance between their beds and the stomping boots of passersby. Greasy hair fell over their faces, scrunched and wrinkled like trolls. Saliva dripped from unwitting mouths, dangling agape. Few cast glances up to me as I carried onward. Their pupils caught no light. Their lips quivered. Scant few wore pallid medals on their breasts. The same medals were clipped to the bag slung over my shoulder. I dare not dwell on them long. Already knots tied up in my gut. I'd not come to think of old demons.

Catching sight of the ticket booth, I hurried over with fingers already digging through my bag. Perhaps overestimating myself, I came to the counter with one hand stuffed elbow-deep in my luggage; the other motioned for a single ticket to the man at the register. Flat cap drooping over his furrowed brow, he slid a hand beneath the glass divider and wriggled his fingers.

"Payment." His voice growled from too many smokes, though it was not unbecoming of his goblinish appearance. A bushy moustache squirmed with his lips, and his eyes were dark slits beneath half-closed lids. "Be needin' payment 'fore I can give ya a ticket."

"Oh yes, of course." I returned a grin. Shoving my hand deeper between my knickers and slacks, I cast a glance behind me. Already, two businessmen rapped

their steel-tipped boots. They too returned grins, though I could not help but feel they lacked genuine content. Warm leather slid between my fingers, and I wrenched forth my wallet. After toying with the clasp, I slid a few coins to the register.

"I am sorry for the inconvenience. One to Kilkenny, please."

He forced a thin smile.

"Not unexpected from your ilk. Been too—"

I lay a hand on the counter.

"I'm sorry. Who might you be referring to? My ilk?" Leaning away, I jut a proud chin in the air.

The man clipped a ticket from its kin with unnecessary force. "Young kids thinkin' the world belongs to 'em." He nodded to the businessmen behind me. "Kind gentlemen have to wait for you like you're some king. You Oberon? Where is your Titania then?"

A heavy breath shot from my nose. Blood burned in my cheeks. "Well, I am truly sorry." Turning to the businessmen, I nodded and summoned my best impression of their grumbling frowns. "And sorry to you too for being such a terrible annoyance."

Heavy steps carried me from the ticket booth to my place along the rails. I walked with stooped shoulders. Heat lingered behind my eyes, clouding my thoughts. What did he know of me? It'd nearly been a millennia, I was sure, since he could count himself among the young. A proper shame that he had to be such a snob. Father had always told me a worker would do well to be kind to customers. I found myself glad that I would never have to be one of them—never much of one for kindness. An artist, like myself, had not to be polite.

I lingered by a bench, leaning on a single leg. The other tucked behind it. Tense hands rest on my hips. My nose protruded into the air. Down its arch, fiery eyes watched those who passed me by. Oberon, I thought. What right did he have to call me a faery? If at all, I was just a king.

A whistle pierced the air, then the hiss of steam, and a train screeched into its stop before me. The cars shook as men and women clambered out of the single doorway at either end. The wheels of their suitcases clicked down the stairs, then thunked on the stone and rattled away. A crowd began to form near the entrance as the last of the passengers filed out. Cold bit at my fingers. The air nipped my neck. I would not wait back here—not behind the masses.

Dashing my foot on the cobblestones like a bull, my shoulder lowered towards the crowd. I made like an icebreaker towards the poles, plowing past those who packed together in the door. An elbow buried in my ribs. A finger jabbed my eye. My footsteps grew shorter. Bodies packed tighter. No—I dug my heel into the stone and pushed forward. Shoving aside a last passenger, I found myself at the head of the crowd. Looking back on my triumph, grumbling men and women gathered their belongings from where they'd fallen. One lady muttered as she dusted her sunbathing hat. A man batted his bowler. I stood: King Oberon regarding the throngs of men. Fitting, I thought. The title grew on

me.

Metal rasped against metal as the doors slid open again. I paraded aboard and found a window seat through which to watch the grasslands roll by. Leather squeaked as I wormed my way in, tucking my bag beneath my feet. Then, I rested my elbow on the window sill and waited for the sound of the engine to grumble and our journey to begin.

I twiddled thumbs. I stared at the car beside us. I hummed ol nan's tune.

We remained still. The engine hummed with me.

Only a few passengers shuffled around the car when a girl climbed the steps. Her sunbathing hat seemed to rest above her rosy hair. I thought it a nice addition to her appearance, if not a tad pompous. Freckles dotted her pale skin. Seaweed eyes darted between vacant seats. I could not deny her beauty, but I tried to avert my gaze. I did not want to appear as if any girl could catch my attention. A frown curled her lips as she saw me, and her piercing gaze brought a chill to my veins. She stomped over, heels rapped on the aisle floor and she cast her bag onto the seat across from me. Picking up her skirt, she slumped down and tried her best to not meet my gaze. Instead, she watched the view. To no one's surprise, it remained unchanging. Heavy breaths rasped in her throat. It sounded like some banshee. The quiet howling shook her slender frame. After a moment, she shot a fiery glare my way.

"You dirtied my hat, bastard." She tapped her fingers on the armrest. I watched them. They could have fit into keyholes. She flicked her gaze between her hand and my vapid stare. "What're you lookin' at? You a creep, bastard? Well are ya?"

I fumbled for words. My tongue felt numb in my mouth.

"No, well, I don't think. No."

The tips of her lips bent up. The fire dimmed in her eyes. "Bastard—" she began, then chuckled. A dainty hand covered her mouth. "I'm sorry. I cannot keep it up. I tried. I truly did."

Rubbing a hand over my face, I let my shoulders slump and leaned back in my seat.

"Had me worried that I'd wronged you something terrible. What was that all about?"

She produced a drawing pad from her bag and plopped it into her lap. Nimble fingers plucked pencils and erasers from the pockets of her coat.

"You mind if I draw you?" She'd already sketched my nose by the time I stuttered out a reply. My lips fumbled, but she shot a finger in the air. "You're here lookin' for something," she said. "Can see it."

The train hissed. The engine growled. Wheels clicked and we heaved into motion as I searched for an answer. She carried on, recreating my likeness on her massive sheet of paper. "Glad someone's noticed," I said. "Looking for inspiration. Something to get my creativity flowing."

Her eyes on the paper, she nodded. Curls of red draped down her cheeks, bobbing with her movement.

"Takes all types a' things to get ya going." The tip of her pencil flicked towards me, making me flinch. "Take you, for example," she said. "Always loved to draw a right, proper bastard. Just had to find ya."

"I'm no bastard." Quivering arms crossed over my ribs. I puffed out my chest. "I'm going through enough already—" I pointed to the medals on my bag, the ones given to me by my father on this very train, "don't need some girl calling me a bastard."

Three breaths huffed out her nose. One edge of her lip tightened. The other grinned.

"If it looks like a bastard, walks like a bastard, and talks like a bastard, then—"

A loud sigh slipped from my lips.

"I'm beginning to see the point."

She held the sketch pad at head-height, then let it down and returned to working.

"Reckon you consider yourself above the rest of us." She pointed to the medals on my bag. "Pa tol' ya you were somethin' special n' you took it ta heart. Then he passed n' you made his words the basis of your identity."

"My father fought for us." I shuffled deeper into my seat, curling in the corner where it met the wall. "I've a notable heritage. You ought consider who you're talking to."

"And who might that be?" She smirked. "King of the faeries?"

I deflated in my seat, leaning on the window like a worn-out doll.

She smiled. "Ought know that anyone can be a bastard, even a king."

A swift hand flipped her sketch pad shut. Tucking it into her bag, she regarded my feeble form and nodded. "I'll be seein' ya, bastard," she said, and strolled away to another seat.

The window panes grew misty as we passed into the rolling hills of Leinster. Green blades blazed from the car wheels to the horizon, only interrupted by puffs of white, like clouds, sheep grazing in their lonely pastures. I watched an old man hobble between the low walls which trailed across the landscape. Stones stacked on stones made great walls over the earth, and required he take them down piece by piece. Withered hands lay them in the dirt, ushered through his rough woolen friends, then put them back together again. Groaning, he would arch his back and stare at the sky. Muscles seared. Bones cracked. An umber cap hid his eyes and the barren scalp beneath. Dark patches blotted his sandpaper skin. Yet, he smiled and waded as the rail cars clattered by.

He looked happy. He looked fulfilled. I did not want to become that man.

My father had tended sheep in the fields beyond our old home. In keeping with tradition, he led them down the same trail his father had, and his father before him. He'd reach a patch of uneaten grass and linger till the creatures had their fill. I went with him, only once or twice that I still remember, until they called him to war a second time and the fields were left for me to attend. I never mustered the courage. The trail was too long; the sheep, too stubborn. I

would tell myself these things to justify selling it to someone far more invested in tradition than me. Perhaps I could sum them up: these things were below a king.

I pictured myself, only ten, sitting in this seat with my father across from me. Mother clutched his hands, her breaths thick from crying. His distant eyes watched the fields roll by. He let go of her hand to lean towards me.

His words still echoed in the train: You know, your great grandfather was a great man. He looked to mother, resting a hand on her knee. She returned a soft chuckle, tears brimming in her eyes. He forsook a crown of gold. At this, I perked up in my seat. Instead, he took the hand of a girl and the life of a shepherd. Turning to me again, he rested his hand on my head and ruffled my matted hair. That, my son, is yours now—a life of freedom and peace.

Like a mirage, my father dissipated in the air.

An old man rested where he'd sat. He reminded me of my grandfather, old and wrinkled. A wool cloak of grey draped over his thick frame. A lone eye watched me. The other hid beneath a patch. His cracked lips sealed tight. In one hand, he clutched a walking stick made of gnarled wood. At its tip, two raven heads were carved. One's beak was petrified half-open. The sight of him brought a cold tingling to my skin, but when he smiled it gave way to comfortable warmth.

His lips moved beneath a thicker beard that wound down to his navel.

"You've been going from Dublin to Kilkenny," he said. Each word wormed through the mass of hair, and sounded as if he spoke with his mouth pursed. "Might've been better suited heading to Galway, if it's love you're looking for."

"Not lookin' for a girl," I said, casting my gaze out of the window again. "Just for something to bring the spirit back to my work."

"And what work might that be, son?" He shuffled in his seat, placing the butt of the walking stick between his feet. "Are you an artist? Perhaps we've the next Joyce in our midst."

Brushing a length of hair from over my eye, I returned a faint smile.

"Nothing that spectacular, much to my dismay." I patted a hand on my bag. The leather slapped under my fingers. "Havin' to find what it is I'm going to write about first."

His brow creased and he leaned forward.

"Have you had the joy of reading a bit of Shakespeare? Always manages to grip my interest, exercise my mind." He rest a grizzled paw on my knee, patting it twice. "Had a son who was fond of him, more so even than I. He's the one who told me about him in the first place."

"Where's he—" I caught my tongue. Turning my gaze to the Leinster fields, a heavy silence hung between us. The mumbling of other passengers faded to dull static. He wrung his hands. I stared off across the grasses.

When he spoke again, I flinched.

"If you'll forgive me, I've been listening from the next booth over. It would be wise for you to remember something," he said. A thin finger pointed to the

medals on my bag. "In times of sorrow, we have only that which we can create. Some create facades to alleviate guilt. Some create pride with which to strut above others. Some—" He bit his tongue, rubbed a finger around his lips, and let out a raspy sigh. "Create beauty, my boy. If you wear no crown, you wear no chains."

Through foggy window panes, the Leinster grasses swayed in gentle breeze. It nipped at their blades and bit the bare legs of sheep which trampled them underfoot. It carried whispers in the air, not of words nor voices, which sang across the hills and between valleys where flowers unfurled their hueless petals. The train clattered on towards Kilkenny, where grey stones jutted from earthen flats and interrupted the pale blue sky. And I watched them go, content to think in the isolation of myself. When the old man had hobbled down from the car, I remained.

Leinster passed by and soon the coast of Munster province replaced the hills beneath the rails. Further south we went. On and on, till turning back again, we travelled towards Dublin. When my bootheels clicked once more on the cobblestones of Kingsbridge Station, I released a gentle sigh into the musty air of dusk and headed home among the masses. Beneath the shadow of my apartment, I lingered for a time. By no intention of my own, a realization fell upon me—me, who put his father's medals in a bedside drawer and left them till he'd come to terms; perhaps there are no faeries of Leinster rails—and thus, no king.

FISH LADY
EMILY WILLIAMSON







FRIEND
KIRIKO TSUKAKOSHI

UNTITLED
RAFFAELE REED



FEMINISM
KIRIKO TSUKAKOSHI

THE CRITIC CALEB ACKLEY

His fingers traced the outline of the fresh tattoo on his forearm. Flakes of dead skin drifted lazily to the ground as George's mind wandered. George. What a stupid name. It had 'history' his parents had said. 'Gravitas' was the word his aunt had used. She had been proud of that word. A large woman with a high forehead-an outer shell of self-importance matched in insignificance only by the smallness of her mental abilities. It seemed to be a family trait, this smallness and lack of depth. Thank God it wasn't hereditary, thought George. He would show them, in time, just how small they were.

His musings were cut short by the harsh blair of a spray-painted loudspeaker to his left. The room was small and crowded; everyone was within earshot. To a lesser mind, thought George, this artistic exercise would seem excessive. But not to him, no. To him the loudness spoke to so much more than this low-lit crowd of critics, artists, and generally well-dressed but sallow individuals. This was about protest, about art, about him. And he was here, he was one of them. Numbered among the chosen. A slow smile threatened to crack the solemn mask he had crafted in the mirror before arriving. George allowed it briefly, recomposing himself as he moved past the 'Study of Noise and Its Excesses' installation. Next was a large white canvas dotted here and there with black flecks of paint. His right arm began to itch again- he scratched. More dead skin fluttered to the concrete floor.

"It's about race," the high nasal voice came from behind him. Blaire was shorter than him and had a penchant for explaining things. She elbowed her way to where he was standing. "It's about race in America." George stared blankly-sunken cheeks looking especially hollow as he stared down his sharp nose at this small, loud woman by his side. She took his stare as her cue.

"Representation is so important and we're just not seeing it. This culture is so vapid, we're still operating on 19th century principles in a 21st century landscape. This piece is so affecting." She took a sip of champagne. "What do you think about representation? What do you think about the piece?" George opened his mouth to respond, but she continued. "I like it because it says so much with so little. Only true artists ask their viewers to think for themselves. God, it really is amazing."

George swallowed what he had been about to say. She took another sip of her champagne, looked over the canvas one last time with a calculated sigh equal parts boredom and socially-conscious discontent, and walked away with

heavy footsteps. George watched her disappear into the mass of black. God, why did she have to stomp everywhere.

George's shoulders relaxed under the starched white of his crisply tucked t-shirt. He needed a drink.

"What is it even supposed to be?" The quiet voice startled George from the turbidity of his own thoughts.

"I'm sorry, what?" George turned as he asked the question. The man now standing at his side was shabby in appearance. Beard untrimmed, a slouchy grey wool something draped around his shoulders, he was squinting at the canvas that stood facing them.

"Oh, I just think it's funny." The man smiled to himself as he peered more closely. George didn't have time for this.

"What's funny?" George wasn't sure who had let this Intruder into the gallery. Didn't they have security?

"I've been listening," the Intruder said, shifting his focus to the crowded mass seething with drab turtlenecks and whispered conversation. "People are taking this so seriously, and it's just funny to me. I mean, honestly. All this over a few splatters of cheap black paint? How desperate do you have to be?"

George had had enough. Turning on his heel, he smoothed the crease that had formed across his spotless front. "Well, I suppose art isn't for everyone," he said over his shoulder as he moved towards the crowd.

At the bar, George shook off the exchange with the Intruder as his gin and tonic was handed to him. The gin softened the corners of his downturned mouth and he sat back on his stool, looking out over the shifting bodies.

"Isn't Jack just hilarious?" The whine of Blaire's unwelcome voice inserted itself again into his thoughts, sitting down heavily in his mind like a crude mug in a case of fine china.

George took a deep breath. "Who's Jack? I don't think I know anyone by that name."

"Oh come on. Jack! You know him, I saw you two talking together over by his piece!" George was caught off guard. That was the artist? That sarcastic stranger with the smile and the fucking judgemental thoughts?

"I love Jack-he never takes things seriously. I was teasing him about it just last week when we were setting up lunch, I..." She stopped. Her companion was no longer sitting next to her. She scanned the crowd, then swiveled her

chair back to face the bar. On her right another victim came within range. She pounced.

“Do you know Jack? I just adore his work, don’t you?”

George shouldered his way quickly through the sea of sallow faces and oily hair. His fists were clenched, knuckles whitening as Blaire’s carefully chosen words blazed through his mind like wildfire. He had to get outside. Walking quickly down the sidewalk, he gulped the biting air. How could he have been so stupid? Of course that was the artist. Who else would have possibly had the nerve to question the art AND the crowd? He was part of that crowd. The thought threatened to lead him down a dark hole. He banished it from his mind. Arriving at the driver’s side door of his chipped and rusting blue Mazda, parked a safe three blocks from the studio, George steadied himself-slowng his breathing as he clutched the door handle.

The engine shuddered as George mechanically wove through the familiar backstreets. He took himself through the exchange of words again, eyes staring blankly ahead of him as his hands guided the steering wheel. His tattoo itched.

Unlocking the door to his small apartment, he didn’t bother flicking the switch to turn on the naked bulb hanging from the low ceiling. He walked through the thick darkness, a well-worn path, and lowered himself onto the solitary mattress wedged into the far corner. It was a routine he practiced often. He never turned on the light if he could help it. The sight of the blank, dirty walls, the squat mini-fridge humming dully, and the mattress laying in the corner with its thin sheets made him want to scream. It was no home, just a place he went to sometimes. George assured himself that it was not an empty shell, but a stepping stone. He knew it was a lie.

Pulling out his phone, George quickly opened Instagram. His feed was flooded with images documenting the show he had just exited so quickly. These people with their champagne and their thoughts and their consciousness. It should be him in those photos. It WOULD be him in those photos. Finding Jack’s handle was simple, and George quickly began to compose the message. He scratched his arm as different phrases flitted across his mind. Finally, it was settled. Not over-apologetic but still honest. Just the right touch of humor in the post-script. Sent.

He sat hunched on the edge of the threadbare mattress expectantly. His arm no longer itched. It throbbed. His tattoo artist had warned him about the itching. George refreshed the bright screen. Still nothing. His brow furrowed in the pale glow cast by the smartphone. George laid back on the mattress, still holding the device close to his face. The creases under his eyes looked deeper in the unnatural light. His eyes ached. This, too- this sleeplessness under the sickly patch of blue light in the cramped apartment-had become routine. George looked small as he curled his body around the phone, bringing his knees up to his chest as he lay on the twin mattress.

Refresh. Nothing. Scratch. Refresh. Refresh. Nothing. Scratch.

THE QUEEN OF TEETH

ISAIA MASANIAI

Gabe leaned with his back against the club's brick shell, muffled dwarf-step pulsing from within. The night air was pleasantly cool on his skin, relieving him from the heat of sweating crowds inside. He swiped through potential hookups on his phone, as his friend, Jessie, smoked next to him. The joint was hand rolled and organic, filled with herbs that Jessie himself had grown in his garden. The smoke, which smelled oddly of peaches and plums, created apparitions of pixies that twirled and danced as the breeze carried them away.

Gabe looked up from his screen, a small smile coming to his lips. "You're getting better at that. Maybe you should try your hand at one of those competitive vaping tournaments."

"Thank you for being so supportive of my dreams." Jessie shook his head, but grinned, revealing a set of dazzling white teeth. Most of the time, Jessie's smile would be enough to brighten up even Gabe's darkest day. On nights like this, however, it just reminded him of how lonely he was.

Jessie checked his watch and threw the cigarette in the side of his mouth. "I wonder when she's going to get here."

Gabe rolled his eyes so hard, he could almost feel one of his contacts trying to pop out. "You're still waiting on Daisy?"

"Daisy?" Jessie raised an eyebrow, surprised but still amused. "Do you mean Diana? My girlfriend?" He giggled, releasing another puff of smoke that twisted into a writhing serpent. Its long gray form slithered into the air before turning its head towards Gabe. It gave a silent hiss, baring nonexistent fangs, and dissipated as the wind blew by.

"Diana, Daisy, Debra, it's all the same to me." He shrugged as he looked down and continued swiping, finding a handsome, although rather green, young man on his screen. He sped through the pictures and found himself drawn to a beach photo where his wetsuit clung tightly to his body, leaving very little to Gabe's imagination. Also, there was something endearing about the two small tusks poking out from his bottom lip. Gabe scrolled down to the bio. Mord, 22, 10 Miles Away. Wizardry Major at SDSU. Half-Ogre and Proud! LTR Oriented and Vegan (Sorry if that's annoying). Just looking for a nice guy who'll pay off my student loans or buy me ramen. Gabe chewed on his bottom lip. He seemed nice and like he had a sense of humor. But then again, most of the Wiz Majors he knew were pretentious assholes. He took a breath and swiped right, but felt a drop in his stomach when no match popped up.

"I'm not sure if she likes me still." Jessie tapped his foot nervously as he looked at his phone in anticipation. "I mean- I feel like she's been distant. Like, emotionally, y'know?" He leaned against the wall, looking like a freshly kicked puppy.

"I'm sure she's head over heels for you, bud." Gabe grabbed his friend's shoulder and smiled weakly. "Who wouldn't be?"

Jessie shrugged, taking another drag. When he exhaled, the smoke went limp, vanishing into the air.

Gabe plucked the cigarette from his lips and placed it between his own. As he inhaled, it tasted like lemonade and creamsicles flooding his mouth. He put his hand in front of his lips, making several quick gestures. As his fingers moved, he could feel the magic dancing between them like static electricity. He exhaled. From the cloud, a crudely shaped unicorn galloped on short, uneven legs.

Jessie laughed, shaking his head. "If either of us should take up professional vaping, it's you."

Gabe smiled as he slipped the joint behind his ear. They chuckled together, but a silence soon passed over them. Gabe studied the brick wall before him, careful not to look too much in Jessie's direction. He ran his eyes along a spray painted mural of a young girl holding a bouquet of roses. Over her mouth floated a white banner that read "GET BENT" in messy red letters.

"Well," Jessie got off the wall. "I'm going to get a drink, are you coming?"

"Nah." Gabe shook his head. "I'm going to cool off for a little longer."

His eyes went to Jessie's shoes before he dragged them up towards his face. He smiled sheepishly. "But if you grabbed me a Nymph Nip while you were at the bar, I wouldn't be upset."

"Consider your nips nymphed." With a wink and another bright smile, Jessie opened the rose-colored door and moon walked back into the club.

Gabe laughed as he disappeared into the building, but as the door slammed shut, he realized that he was alone again. He looked around, observing the alley in all its Law and Order SVU greatness. Although he had to admit it was fairly clean for an alley in LA, the lighting provided by a few old lamps outside the club seemed pretty serial killer friendly. Gabe pulled out his phone again, proceeding to absent-mindedly swipe through potential suitors. After four headless torsos, two slender elves wearing offensive amounts of highlighter, and a red-faced gnome that seemed funny, but not very attractive, he decided it would be best to give it a rest for the night. He checked the time on his phone and was very disappointed in how early it was. He wondered if Jessie would get too drunk to walk home by himself. It wasn't like Gabe lived far, so that wasn't a problem. Drunk Jessie was just a little too affectionate for Gabe. The last time they went out, Jessie had his arm around him the whole night and kissed him on the cheek when he walked him to his apartment. It was nice and cute or whatever, but it made him feel uncomfortable. Or, more accurately, it made him feel hopeful.

Gabe pressed himself into the wall and closed his eyes, a part of him hoping that it would swallow him up. He could have stayed home and watched some reality TV. Then again, he really needed to start his intercultural communications essay. He had known about it for months, but so far all he had researched about fairy culture was that they lived in groups called courts and used some kind of weird barter system.

He sighed. He shouldn't have come out. But, it had always been hard to say no to Jessie. Even as kids, all it took was one crooked smile from him to convince Gabe of anything. He couldn't count all the nights he had been roped in to being Jessie's wingman. Of course, Gabe was well versed in Jessie's alluring qualities so he took naturally to the role. It was always fun until last call with Gabe alone holding an empty martini glass and Jessie sucking face with a bottle blonde siren at the other end of the bar.

Maybe Gabe would give the hook up app one more chance. He opened it up again, his stomach fluttering unexpectedly as a spinning red wheel appeared on the screen and the app accessed his location. Maybe this would be the time he matched with someone and they'd talk for a week without Gabe blocking them for the crime of excessive emoji use.

He wrinkled his nose at the disembodied crotch that appeared on his screen. He swiped left. The groin was, thankfully, replaced by the face of a handsome man with oak colored skin and white hair. He had a slight build and pointed ears, though his features seemed rather delicate for an elf. Maybe he was mixed with something? Gabe scrolled down to his bio. Zephyrus, 23, Less Than A Mile Away. Dental Assistant. Let me whisk you away! I love coffee, music, and making people happy! Swipe right to have your wishes granted! A small smile came to Gabe's lips. Some wish granting certainly sounded appealing. In his picture he was feeding a pegasus a carrot with a goofy grin, giving a thumbs up to the camera with his free hand. It was adorable. It reminded him a bit of Jessie.

Gabe swiped right and the words "YOU'VE MATCHED WITH ZEPHYRUS!" popped up in bright red letters. A small sort of pride swelled up in his chest, as if he had been deemed the fairest bachelor in the land. He pulled up Zephyrus' profile and began the process of carefully crafting a message. Should he open with a compliment? Or maybe a question about one of his interests? Was asking about his favorite musician too cliché? A light breeze ran over his knuckles as he began typing.

"Hey, are you Gabriel?"

Gabe looked up from his phone with a furrowed brow.

There he was with the same dolllike features and white hair Gabe had just acquainted himself with. He held a phone in his hand and gave a large grin, wearing a white button down and sky blue dress pants. Gabe thought of his own ripped dark jeans and "Bad Witches Only" t-shirt, suddenly feeling very underdressed. As Zephyrus stepped towards Gabe, several lapis butterflies fluttered around his head like a whimsical halo. Where the hell did he come from?

"Uh, hello." Gabe felt a strange mixture of surprise, embarrassment, and concern rise as a blush on his cheeks.

"Oh, sorry." Zephyrus' smile seemed to wither as he ran his fingers through his hair, disrupting the paths of the butterflies. They scattered for a moment, but quickly reconvened and began to orbit Zephyrus once more. "I think we just matched on LuvSpell, but I could be wrong." He laughed nervously, slowly taking a step back. "I was just inside and got the notification and came outside to cool off and saw you and thought that maybe you were the guy but now I'm thinking you're not the guy and-"

As Gabe watched the other man ramble, he couldn't help but think that there was something off about him. His eyes were larger and darker than in his pictures and, although his voice was smooth and soothing, it felt strangely hollow. But, he seemed nervous and watching him talk in circles was almost painful to witness.

"No, no, I'm sorry. I am the guy." Gabe shook his head, stretching a polite smile across his face. He walked towards the other man and shook his hand. "You just surprised me."

Zephyrus gave a small laugh and winked. "Hopefully in a good way."

Although their conversation began as Gabe taking pity on the other man, Zephyrus proved to be quite charming. It seemed like they were leaning against that wall for hours, talking about frivolous things like their favorite restaurants and movies. However superficial the topics, a feeling of ease washed over Gabe as the butterflies fluttered around them like a child's mobile. Although he wondered what they were and why they were flying around Zephyrus, Gabe didn't feel compelled to ask. As he watched one land on his shoulder, he had trouble remembering the last time he felt such joy.

"You have a beautiful smile." Zephyrus reached out slowly to caress Gabe's cheek, a bracelet of silver coins jingling around his wrist. His touch was extremely gentle, to the point which Gabe was uncertain if their skin had actually made contact.

"Thanks." Gabe looked down, blushing. A part of him was surprised that he didn't jerk back from the stranger's touch, but as much as he knew he should have been uneasy, he wasn't. Looking into Zephyrus' dark eyes felt warm and familiar, as if they didn't belong to someone he had just met. The more he looked into them, the more they felt like they were someone's that he had known forever.

Oh, shit. Where was Jessie? Gabe pulled out his phone, which earned a look of annoyance from Zephyrus, and checked his messages. How did he not notice any of these?

From: Jessie

Hey! Diana's here! I'm going to meet her at the front but we'll be back there in a few!

From: Jessie

We're on our way back there! And we have the nips!

From: Jessie

Where'd you go? You better not have bailed without letting me know

From: Jessie

Hellooooo??? Where are you?

From: Jessie

Why aren't you answering me? Diana and I are going to leave if you don't respond soon.

From: Jessie

DUDE. REALLY??? ANSWER SO I KNOW YOU'RE OKAY, ASSHOLE.

Gabe raised in his eyebrows in confusion. He looked at Zephyrus, whose large eyes flicked back and forth between Gabe's phone and the look of puzzlement on his face.

"Hey," Zephyrus plucked the phone from Gabe's hand, sliding it into his shirt pocket. He pulled back his lips into a smile, baring bleach white teeth. "Let's get out of here. I know a place." He hooked his arm through Gabe's and began walking.

Gabe tried to pull away. He tried to dig his heels into the ground and speak in protest. He tried to turn around, march back into the club, and find his worried friend. But his legs kept the pace that Zephyrus set and his mouth contorted into a painful smile that felt as if invisible hands were stretching the corners of his lips. The muscles in his face shrieked as they rebelled against the spell that held them. It did nothing.

Zephyrus hummed a cheerful tune as they came up to the spray painted little girl opposite of them. As he knocked on the wall, her face sunk in, the bricks beginning to fall backwards. The wall continued to crumble until she had completely disappeared, replaced by the entrance to dark hallway. "Watch your step." They skipped over the mound of bricks and walked down the hall which turned into another and another hall after that.

As he was led through the maze, Gabe felt as if he was screaming inside himself, begging for freedom in his own body. With each corner turned and empty hallway walked down, it felt more surreal and delirious to be prisoner in his flesh. The butterflies flew close to his face and seemed to taunt him, as did the coin bracelet that jingled happily with every captive step he took. His cheeks throbbled from the forced grin and he felt some drool dribble onto his bottom lip. His face quivered as it resisted another attempt to scream and rage against his captor.

"Relax, we're almost there." Zephyrus turned one last corner. It was a dead end. The bricks were bone white and jagged, with patches of moss and fungi sprouting randomly along the walls. The concrete floor was worn and possessed large cracks from which bright blue flowers and red toadstools sprouted. Zephyrus unlooped his arm from Gabe's and turned his body towards him. He wiped the drool and ruffled his hair affectionately.

"Y'know, this is nothing personal. A fairy has to do what a fairy has to do." He took him by the hand and guided him further down the hall, careful

not to tread on any foliage. "You'll thank me one day, though. My Queen is the best in the city." When they came close to the end, Zephyrus knocked on the wall. Similar to before, the bricks fell back, but instead of another hallway, only darkness was revealed. A moment passed before a small shiny object was tossed from the hole. Zephyrus caught it, eagerly, giggling as he took off his bracelet and began adding the new silver coin to his collection. He looked towards Gabe and winked. "See you around!" He knocked on the wall behind him and quickly vanished into the portal that formed.

Gabe gasped violently as his body returned to him. He fell to the floor, his heart suddenly racing and his throat feeling as if he had swallowed a handful of tacks. He looked into the hole in wall before him. The darkness within it seemed to reach into him, pulling out every lonely moment he had ever suffered. He needed to get out.

A white stiletto heel emerged from the darkness.

Suddenly, there was a woman before him, dark skinned and beautifully terrifying. She towered over him in high waisted white slacks. Her eyes were impossibly large and iridescent, like fish bowls filled with cosmic swirls and flickering constellations. She was topless, her breasts covered by countless necklaces of strange white beads.

She smiled at Gabe, a look of amusement on her face as she watched him struggle to his feet. As he stood, he saw that the mountains of necklaces she wore weren't ropes of beads, but of an unimaginable number of teeth hanging in deranged smiles over her chest. Her long elegant fingers, decked in rings set with molars, reached out towards his face. He couldn't bring himself to breathe. She gently grasped the cigarette behind his ear and placed it between her plump lips. She did not close her eyes as she inhaled, rather, she seemed to look deeper into Gabe. She exhaled, a cluster of ghostly spiders hatching from the smoke. Perfumed with the scent of lavender and rotting meat, they scurried through the air and into Gabe's nose. He shook his head furiously and his eyes watered as he felt them crawling inside his skull.

She grabbed his chin and turned his face towards her. "What a handsome young man." Her voice was like hot honey dripping on Gabe's skin. She smiled again, the corners of her mouth extending just a little too far. She tilted her head. "Would you like a wish?" On her head she wore a crown of brambles, wilting roses, and spider webs, in which small birds and insects struggled to free themselves. There was a particular sparrow that caught Gabe's eye. It flapped ferociously, shaking the web in a vain attempt to break its silken binds.

"No." He gulped. "No, thank you." He looked at her pointed ears, the dread within him twisting his stomach into knots.

"Zephyrus brought you for a reason." She giggled, the stars within her eyes shifting slightly as she put her hands on her knees and bent down to his level. Her eyes dug into him, their constellations buzzing in his mind like angry hornets. "He smelled the desire on you."

Gabe shook his head. "No, thank you. I just need to get home." He looked

around her massive form, but saw no escape from her long limbs. “I just want to get back to my friend.”

Her eyes somehow widened and brightened. “Your friend?” She tossed her head back and laughed, suddenly pleased. She smiled again, resembling a cat with a mouse between her paws. “Your wish is granted.”

She seized him, spinning and pushing him against the wall. She pried his mouth open with spindly fingers. He struggled against her, his legs flailing and his hands beating against her arms. She took no notice. She lifted him off the ground, the weight of his body straining his neck until it felt like his head was going to pop off. The fairy ran her fingertips across the teeth in Gabe’s mouth, visions flashing in his mind as she brushed against each tooth. He saw his middle school teacher handing him an alchemy test, he smelled popcorn from the countless movies he and Jessie had seen together, and he tasted his sloppy first kiss, a skinny satyr named Calvin. She sorted through his teeth and memories like files in a cabinet until she came upon one of his back molars. Gabe felt Jessie’s lips pressed against his cheek and his arms wrapped around his shoulder. He had never felt so warm in his life.

“There we go.” She ripped the tooth from his mouth and let him fall to the floor. She looked down at him, putting the cigarette in her mouth. She plucked the sparrow from the webs in her crown and tossed it into the air. It fluttered around Gabe’s head. “Follow her. She will lead you home.” She snickered, slipping his tooth into her pocket. As the Queen ducked to enter the void from which she came, she turned back to Gabe with one last wicked smile. “Thank you for the trinket.”

Gabe didn’t remember the walk back through the maze, although he remembered the sound of the sparrow’s wings flapping. It all seemed like a bad dream. The white haired man surrounded by butterflies, the labyrinth hidden behind a graffiti little girl, and the queen with stars in her eyes and teeth around her throat. He could feel them fading from his memory, their features becoming hazy and blurred.

Was this Jessie’s apartment? He looked back, seeing a flight a stairs he couldn’t recall climbing. His hand, seemingly of its own volition, reached out and knocked on the door. For some reason, he half expected the door to break into pieces and fall backwards. His tongue explored the back of his mouth, discovering a gap he had realized was there.

The door opened at a startling speed. “Gabe?” Jessie, red eyed and still in his club clothes, pulled him into an embrace and squeezed him tightly. “You asshole! Why the hell didn’t you respond to me? I thought you got mugged or abducted or something.” His arms constricted around Gabe’s torso. Jessie’s chin dug into his shoulder. “I kept imagining someone pulling you into a white van and selling you to a prostitution ring or stealing your kidneys. I called the cops, but they said you hadn’t been gone long enough to be considered a missing person.” His embrace felt uncomfortably warm. “I was so worried.”

“Sorry.” Gabe wrapped his arms around Jessie, locking his hands together

behind his back. He pressed his face into the crook of Jessie’s neck, taking in his scent. His cologne intermingled with the smell of tequila and dried sweat. “I’m so sorry.” Jessie’s neck was suddenly damp. It took a moment for Gabe to realize that he was crying, although he didn’t really know why. The skin on his back felt as if it was creeping away from him.

“Are you okay?” Jessie pulled away, his eyes wide with concern. He pulled him into the apartment and sat him on a cream-colored couch. “Did anything happen?”

Gabe opened his mouth to speak, but couldn’t conjure any words. He just stared at Jessie, running his eyes over the face he had fallen in love with. He wasn’t sure if he had ever seen Jessie look so serious before. His brows were knitted with concern, his lips pressed tightly together, sealing dazzling white teeth behind them. It felt as if Gabe had come home to find the walls painted a different color and the furniture moved around. “Nothing happened, I’m fine.”

Jessie put his hand on Gabe’s cheek. The touch made Gabe feel nauseous. “I was so worried.” He shook his head and looked down. His hand snaked over to Gabe’s. “I don’t know what I would do if I lost you.”

“Where’s Diana?”

Jessie looked up, surprised. “We, uh-” He scratched his head. “We got in a fight. She wanted me to calm down and I . . . I guess I just couldn’t.” His fingers weaved into Gabe’s. He looked into his friend’s eyes. “But that doesn’t matter now.” He leaned in, closer than Gabe wanted him to. His breath smelled like lavender. “Gabe, I never want to lose you.” His eyes watered. “All these years and I never realized how I felt about you.”

Gabe’s core shook, screaming that something was wrong. He looked down at Jessie’s hand over his own. He had wanted this for so long. A lump formed in his throat, whether it was from nerves or guilt, he quickly swallowed it. “I love you, Jessie. I’ve loved you for a long time.”

“I’m sorry it took me so long.” Jessie smiled. It was small and dim, but all that Gabe needed. Gabe wiped a tear away from his eye and chuckled. “Me too.”

As they kissed, Gabe’s heartbeat drowned out the sound of horror welling within him.



QUID PRO CROW

PAULA PHILLIPS

The two women sat motionless on the front porch, watching the black crow as he hopped up the manicured sidewalk towards them. He paused to look around, the stick-like object in his beak glimmered as it caught the sun's rays. The crow hopped to a point several feet short of the porch steps and dropped the odd-looking object onto the ground. Cocking his head to the left, then right, he turned and hopped away, back down the path and into the grass.

The old, wooden porch boards creaked as Sara stood up and made her way to the top step to sit down. She tossed a few peanuts out into a grassy area near the crow and said, "Thank you Carlo for the gift, now here's your treat."

As if on cue the crow hopped over to the peanuts, snapped them up in his beak, and flew away.

Sara's mother got up from her seat and asked, "What did he bring you this time?"

Both women looked down at the stick with the shiny object around it, but couldn't quite make it out. They stepped closer to inspect it. Sara staggered backwards and gasped, "Oh my god Mom! It's someone's finger! With a ring still attached!"

"Oh my word," said Donna as she leaned in for a closer inspection. "What hideous nail polish. Blue is never attractive."

Sara's eyes widened as she stared at her mom, "Honestly Mother? That's what you see here?"

Donna crouched down closer to view the finger from a different angle and continued with her speculations, "I wonder if it's that Jackie lady's from Hillsdale? The one that went missing a few days ago. It's been all over the news and my ladies group at church just can't stop talking about it."

Ugh, Sara thought. "You need another hobby besides gossiping," she said as she felt the blood drain from her face. Sara looked down at the finger once more as a burning sensation began to bubble up in her throat, "Oh no, oh no..."

Sara ran towards the porch, leaping over a small flowerbed and grabbed at the railing in an attempt to steady herself, but she couldn't stop the contents of her stomach from coming up. After taking a few deep breaths to calm herself, she glanced back towards the sidewalk and noticed her mother placing a bucket upside down on top of the finger, as if giving it the proper respect it was due.

Still feeling a bit queasy she said, "Mom, how are you not disgusted by that?!"

WINTER
EMELY ABON

Donna shook her head, a little disappointed in Sara. “A southern lady is only soft on the outside. Now you really need to get a grip honey.” Donna stepped over the flowerbed making her way towards Sara. “And honey, I don’t know how you’re ever going to make it through nursing school with a weak stomach like that. I hope I’m not throwing my hard-earned money down the drain.”

Sara had the urge to roll her eyes, but instead, her stomach churned once more.

Detective Carlson stopped typing on his laptop and looked up at the two women sitting across from him. He made a quick mental note of the living room - neat and tidy, a few antiques, feminine and flowery - then he continued his questioning.

“Now let me get this straight. You say that the crow frequently brings you small objects, and you thought this was just another shiny trinket to add to your collection there?” he said, nodding towards a Mason jar on the coffee table.

Sara eyed the Detective. She guessed that he was a few years older than her. He had a strong jawline, his hair was neatly parted and slicked back. He looked like a modern-day TV detective she thought. His repeated questioning, however, was starting to get on her nerves. With a little too much agitation in her voice she said, “I’m not lying you know. Carlo brings me gifts, like marbles and buttons and shiny things. Then I toss him some peanuts or crackers and he flies away. That’s our routine.”

“You named the crow Carlo?” the Detective questioned.

Sara snapped back, “What’s wrong with that?”

“Just trying to get the whole picture. How long has this been going on?”

“I’ve already told you, a couple years or so.”

“And this is the first time he’s ever brought you anything like this?”

Donna jumped into the conversation, “Look Detective Carlson, we’ve told you all we know. I don’t see why you keep asking us the same questions over and over. There’s really nothing more that we can add. We’d like to help, but we have no idea where Carlo got that finger, in fact...”

Two officers interrupted the conversation as they stepped into the entry way of the living room, their shadows dimming the natural light. The senior officer addressed the detective, “Everything looks fine Sir.”

Detective Carlson nodded and asked them to wait outside. Turning to Donna he said, “All right ma’am. If you think of anything else, please call me.” He handed his business card to her and grabbed the Mason jar. “I’ll need to take this for evidence. I’ll bring it back when we’re done with it.”

Donna and Sara escorted the Detective to the front door. The door barely closed behind him and Donna blurted out, “I think he likes you. He’s quite handsome, don’t you think?”

“Mom, you’re impossible. There’s some poor, dead woman out there - or at least a woman missing a finger - and you’re playing match-maker?”

“Well, you need to keep an open mind.”

“Mom, he thinks we’re making this whole thing up. We’re his number one suspects.”

“Honey, that’s ridiculous. Besides, how else are you going to find a husband if you don’t take advantage of every opportunity? Why, when I met your father....”

Sara put up her hand, cutting off her mom in mid-sentence, “I’ve heard that story a thousand times. I don’t need you to play match-maker.”

Donna and Sara sat on the front porch enjoying the quiet afternoon. Beads of sweat dotted their foreheads while a gentle breeze made an attempt to chase the humidity away. A grey sedan rolled up to the curb, breaking the silence of the afternoon.

Donna’s face lit with excitement, “Oh, look honey! It’s that cute Detective Carlson!”

Sara frowned and shushed her mom. For the tenth time that day she thought to herself that she really must move out on her own.

The detective walked with authority along the cement path leading to the porch. His laptop in one hand and a Mason jar full of the crow’s treasures in the other. Setting the jar down on the table he said, “Nothing there. No evidence of blood or tissue. You can have your jar back.”

“Um, thanks?” said Sara, not sure if there was disappointment or pleasure in his voice.

Donna stood up to greet the detective. “Oh that’s wonderful news Detective. But we really didn’t think you’d find anything,” she said with a big welcoming smile. “May I get you some sweet tea?”

The detective looked over at Sara who was twirling the Mason jar in her hands, examining the baubles inside. He glanced back at Donna and replied, “Yes ma’am, that’d be real nice. And I have a few more questions for your daughter.”

Sara looked up at the detective, already annoyed with his tone. She’d been following the news, although not much had changed. Jackie was still a missing person. The news talked about the finger but they didn’t disclose who found it, or how, or if it was even Jackie’s. Of course, her mother’s church group knew all about the finger. You can’t stop the Baptist gossip circle she thought. And who knows, maybe the detective could give her more information. She decided it wouldn’t hurt to turn on the charm a bit.

Sara smiled at the detective, tossed back her hair, and motioned for him to sit down. “You know Detective, I’ve been thinking.... There’s a small farm stand a few blocks from here. I always see a bunch of crows out there on the telephone poles. Maybe we could try and follow them to see where they go?”

Raising an eyebrow with amusement the Detective said, “We? When did you become a cop?”

“I’m just trying to help,” said Sara, wrinkling her brow and looking away.

The detective ignored her pouting and opened his laptop. “So, I find it pretty amazing that a crow brings you these gifts don’t you think?”

“And yet he does,” said Sara, looking him straight in the eye.

The Detective continued asking questions about Carlo and the finger. If she knew Jackie and do they have friends in common.

Exasperated and not feeling the charm anymore Sara interrupted him and blurted out, “Detective Carlson, is the finger Jackie’s or not?”

“I don’t know yet. It’s still going through forensics and DNA testing.”

“Oh come on, you should know by now. It’s been two weeks!” Sara rolled her eyes and flopped back in her chair.

The detective smiled at her agitation, “These things take time.”

“Yeah. Whatever,” Sara said with a wave of her hand.

Donna stepped onto the porch balancing a wooden tray with iced-tea and a plate of cookies. Sara shook her head at her mother’s proper southern manners and then looked away as something caught her eye. In an urgent, but softened tone, she said, “Hush, don’t move. There’s Carlo.”

They all froze, not wanting to scare the crow as he hopped up the little sidewalk carrying something in his beak. Detective Carlson shifted his gaze from the crow, to Sara, then back again, not believing what he saw. He leaned towards Sara and very faintly whispered “He’s real?”

Sara smiled but didn’t reply. As the crow neared the porch steps, he dropped the object onto the ground and hopped away into the grass. Sara broke off a piece of cookie and carefully walked over to the top step and sat down, gently tossing the cookie towards the bird. The crow, pleased with the exchange, snatched up the cookie and took flight.

Everyone ran to the sidewalk. Sara said, “I think it’s a piece of leather, with a rhinestone attached.”

The detective knelt down, took a pen out of his shirt pocket and flipped the object over. After a brief study he said in a monotone voice, “It appears to be an ear, with an ear-ring attached. Looks like it’s been weathered and dried out by the sun.”

Donna brought her hand to her mouth and shaking her head she started to ramble, “Poor Jackie, that poor thing. It’s the ex-husband. It’s always the ex-husband.” She caught the questioning expression on the detective’s face and added, “Well, that’s the way it goes on those TV murder shows you know.”

Sara felt a burning lump in her throat and tried to distract her thoughts so she wouldn’t throw up again, especially not in front of the detective. She looked over at her mother whose face was bright with a smile and eyes lit up with an idea. Oh no, she thought, her mom can be so embarrassing.

Donna’s southern accent poured out thick and sweet as she invited the detective to stay for dinner. Looping her arm into his, she led him back to the porch, “And you know Detective Carlson, there are times when the crow comes back a couple times a day...”

KILLING WITH KIND

CAITLIN PARKER

Kill'er

Smother her with your light.
Heat boiling a desert complexion
Blistering its' flawless surface.
Drown her in a bubble bath
Teaming with milky soap.
Leave her carcass
Smelling of cherry blossoms.
Stroke her ego,
With a pink, fleshy blade
Dipped in tasteless venom.
Untraceable.
Humane.
Let her feast
Out of your silver plated palm.
Watch her choke
on pieces she can't swallow.
Float her downstream
On a bed of roses.
Hold her pretty, little hand.
Pet her pretty little head.
Grasp her pretty, little throat.
Kill her
with kindness.

SUCCUBUS

CAITLIN PARKER

Drink in
My daisy skin
Delicate,
Timeless.
Bottled up
Beneath this alabaster landscape,
Behind mossy pupils
And crooked bone fences,
Lies the method
to my madness.
Right on the tip of my tongue.

3RD PLACE WINNER FOR POETRY

FERRIS WHEEL ERICA WAHLGREN

It began to spin very slowly, gaining speed ever so slightly until it reached a leisurely rotation around its axis. This little ferris wheel spun and spun sitting there on my bedroom shelf. I watched it spin for hours and then one by one the little carts broke off from the ferris wheel. They floated across the room, as if carried by a light breeze, and out the open window.

ELEPHANT ERICA WAHLGREN

The little elephant ran up and down my arm, tickling me with his soft skin. The leather of his wide ears and long trunk brushed my skin as he ran about. Up and down, spinning in circles, he never seemed to tire. I ran my finger down his back and he trumpeted with glee. With a little spring in his step he began frolicking once more.

AN ATTEMPT AT SOMETHING AT LEAST RESEMBLING PEACE

OLIVER DAVID

On my way home from work I am next to the runoff canal that stretches from one end of town to the next
Cutting straight through poor urban planning from where the well-to-dos live at the foot of the mountain, to Grape Day park where friends of mine have slept when no where else will take them
Like a line graph of declining social demography.
The water moves in the direction opposite to me, making it seem to not move at all
It turns to stained glass resin and suddenly everything is cardboard, cloths, ceramic, manmade and breakable
Riding past the rows of trees I reach my hand out to brush a branch.
It shatters and shards rain down in every direction
Tissue paper leaves flutter to the ground and blow away
I am cotton or paper, something soft
It starts to rain and I am sliced through by knives
Slowly we fall, the leaves and I, to the drain ditch below Bits of us catching on the fence and clinging to the ground.
We lie there among the discarded mattresses and strollers among reeds, coke cans, cigarette butts
Now I have become myself a waste of the water that gave me a plastic thing around the turtles neck
A clumped knot of hair clogging my shower drain
Something that was once part of something and now cannot be put back The mirror shows me incongruent multitudes of parts, any of which could be mine but none recognizable
None of them fit together
Head on top of shoulders on top of too much chest and narrow hips and stretched out thighs like the worlds shittiest paper doll Skinny useless ankles and feet that are never the right size
The space I am meant to fill feels always misshapen and far from where I am
The faucet is left on too long and fills the sink to overflow, spilling out on the tile floor
A waste of the water I use

The pieces float home on the thin stream
Home now, with everything flesh again, everything whole
I try to drown myself in California rain
I let my mouth close and turn my face towards the sky in surrender
Hold my breath and let the sparse droplets fall in my eyes and hair, let them drip down the back of my neck.
But surprise It didn't work, and thank god for failures
Thank god for this time that I lost
To think: if it had worked then I never would have enjoyed being in the rain, Nor seen the passing clouds and the sunset against them once everything had cleared up
The candy colored sky turning the landscape slowly black and featureless against it
And I again walk inside once this is over with
To a world all my own making where the warmth of my room lies in wait, and with it is sleep; neither being the menace they once were, nor are the the fly trap I lie in helpless for hours.
I dream and wake and dream again and for a while it is plenty
When I wake there is no wanting presence beside me
I take up all the space on my bed and do not feel selfish for it
I do not dwell in the empty spaces beside me any longer; I hold my own
And I treasure it though it will not last
Just a moment to hold onto when I again wished to be washed away
To know that I can be both alone and ok
That the lonely isn't everything and there is still another sunset to see tomorrow
I pray it will be enough.
I pray for gentle rains.

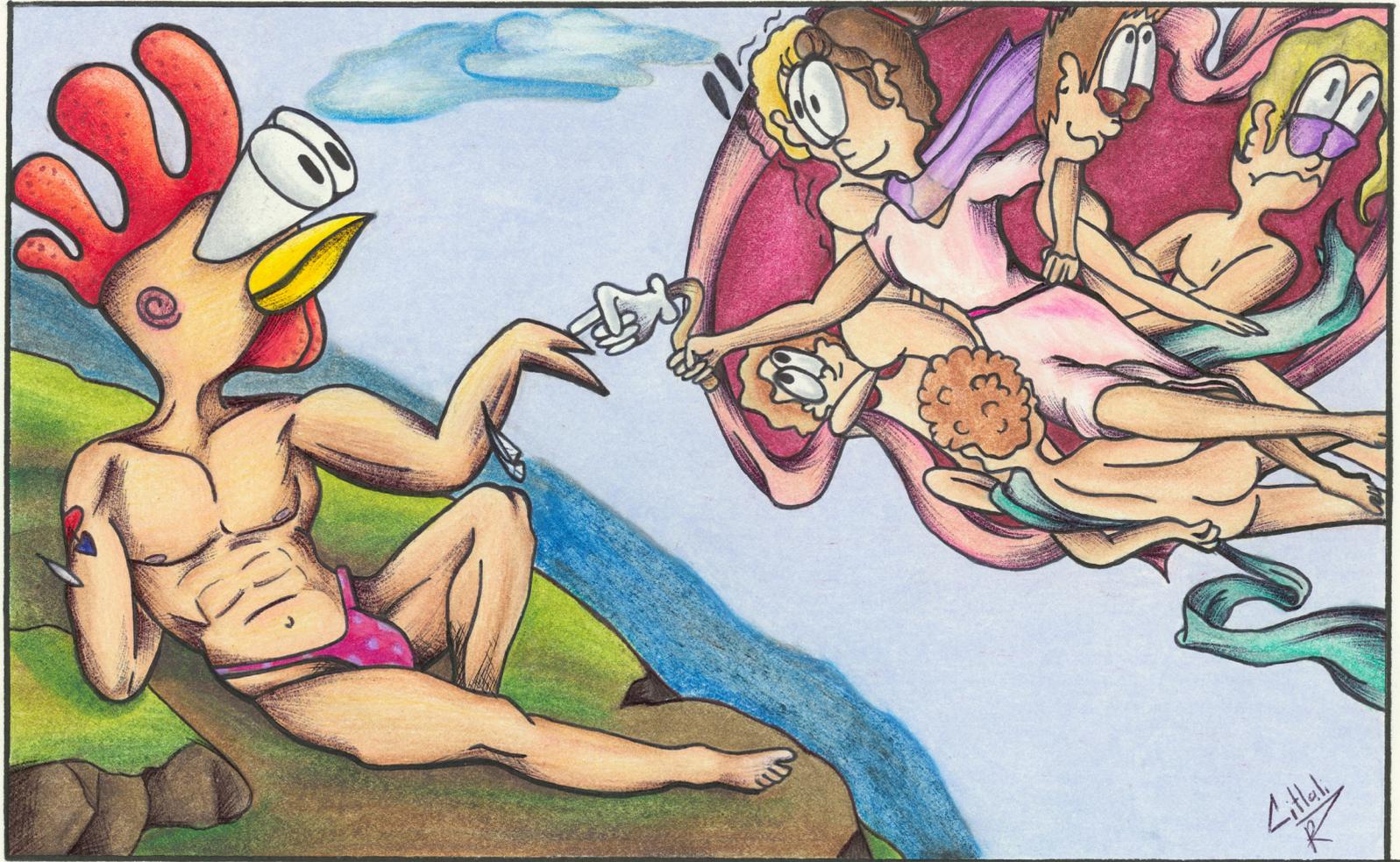
BROKEN BOTTLE

TAYLOR WIESTLING

I apply my ruby red lipstick
“Who are you trying to look good for?”
I put all four movie tickets in my purse
“How many of those are for boys?”
The sweet scent of cherry blossom
from a glass bottle
kisses my wrist
that he grips
too tight when he’s angry
“No one should be getting close enough to smell that on you”
It takes me 27 minutes to return a text
“What were you doing? Something I wouldn’t like?”
I get home to the “whore” “bitch” and “slut”
slowly moving through my mind and my body, consuming me

He clenches the bottle that contains the sweet scent
The only thing that makes me feel like I can still be okay
and with the same look his eyes hold when my throat is held in his fist
he squeezes until the sound of breaking glass overpowers everything else.
What was once a whole, and beautiful thing is now jagged and broken pieces
ready to cut the next person to touch them
And I choke on the thought I know I shouldn’t have
I hope that bottle knows to be grateful

Because if he didn’t care he wouldn’t squeeze and if he didn’t love he wouldn’t
break and the pain is how you know it’s real
And I’m so lucky that I get to feel one even with the other.



MR. CHICKEN IN THE CREATION OF ADAM
CITLALI RODRIGUEZ



HERE
EMILY SCHMIDT



WEeping ANGEL
EL MONREAL



LOVE IS NOT A SIN
ELISA ELAINE LUEVANOS



EASTERN ACCENT
DOUG GLESSNER



CUBES
LARRY SZAFRANIEC



ARCH TABLE (TOP LEFT)
WILLIAM STRENGER



CHERRY CABINET (TOP RIGHT)
ROBERT KERR

TOOLBOX (BOTTOM RIGHT)
JIM MESLER





WHY THEY LEFT
ALONDRA MARQUINA

3RD PLACE WINNER FOR VISUAL ART



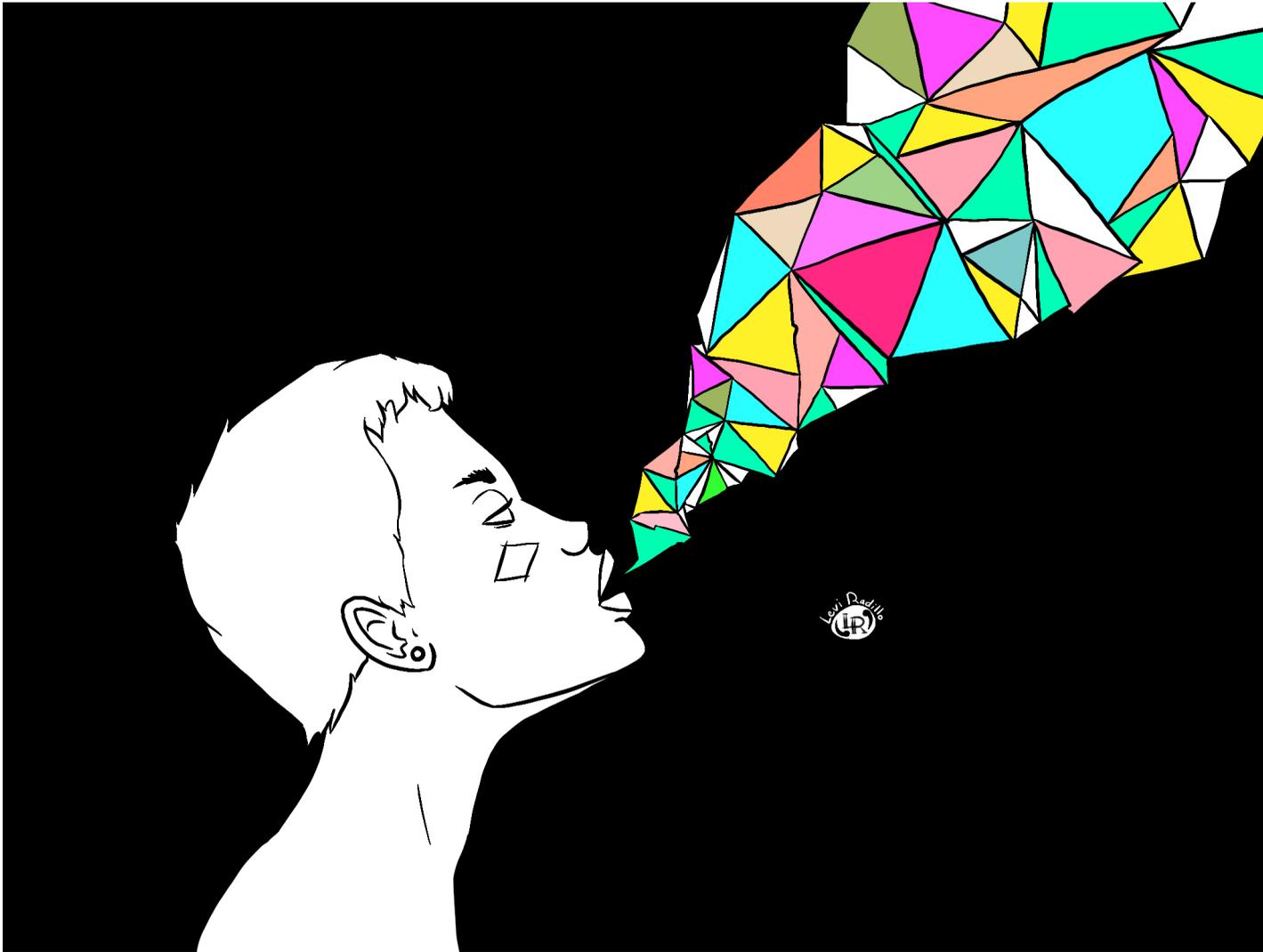


DRIVE THRU
MAYA DUMAS

1ST PLACE WINNER FOR VISUAL ART



SKIES OF MANIA
MAGGIE JOHNSON



TECHNICOLOR SPEECH
LEVI RADILLO



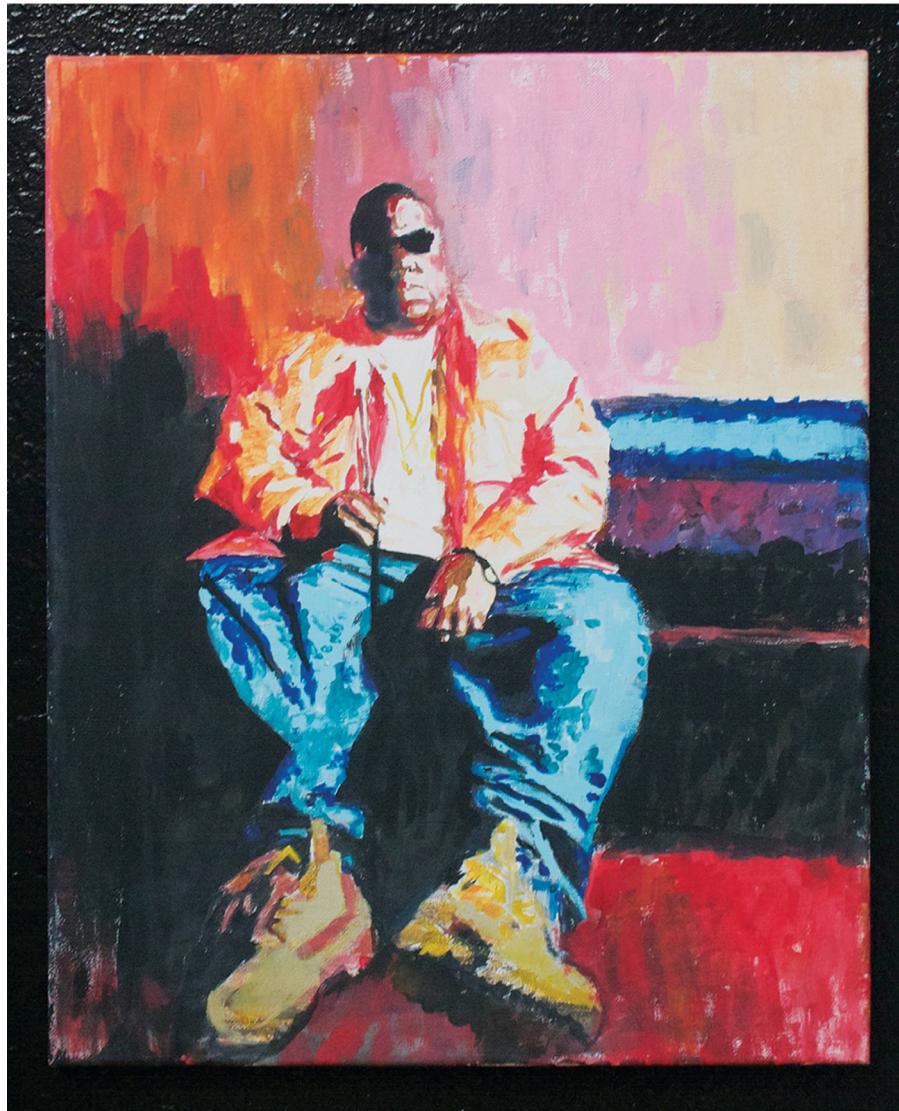
CORNER
SEJI GAERLAN



MASK
KAREN TAPPENDORF



POLKA DOCS
ELIZABETH DE LA GARZA



BIGGIE SMALLS
JUAN ROMERO



WATER WITCH
ALONDRA MARQUINA



BABY SKELETON
ZAHRA HOOSHYAR



FISHY
ZAHRA HOOSHYAR

2ND PLACE WINNER FOR VISUAL ART

INTRODUCTION.

ZAHRA HOOSHYAR

My college life has not been the most conventional, and neither was my upbringing. I am a first generation Iranian- American born in the predominantly white town of Morgantown, West Virginia. My mother, Farzaneh, is a medical doctor and my father, Daryoush, is civil engineer; my entire family lineage is comprised of medical, scientific, law or business professionals, even my younger sister is going to school for law. I on the other hand decided to take the artistic path towards life, constantly finding myself working on some self-driven project or piece since I was a young girl.

When it was time for me to go to college, I studied sculpture at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC), for about two years. Being an extremely prestigious school that holds a long history in the art world, it was a very pricey education. I was given financial aid and a small scholarship because I was a brown kid born and raised in a very white world, but the funds were sadly not enough to pay for my entire education there. I had to leave for personal reasons as well as the grossly large price of an Art school education. While being there had its ups and downs (mostly downs) the most meaningful and important outcome was adopting my first ever dog, Sayeh a Jack Russell and Beagle mutt. She helped me keep my head above the water when things became very hard toward my last year in Chicago due to several unhealthy connections I had made.

After leaving the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, I moved back to West Virginia for a short time to recover from the events that caused me to leave Chicago. I stumbled upon an amazing opportunity to work on a small family owned, organic, community supported agriculture (CSA) farm in the rolling hills of Cranestown, West Virginia, just one-hour north of my home in Morgantown. The small but mighty eighty-acre farm was owned and operated by Sunshine and Steve Vortigern, their three children, Steve's mother and four other employees as well as two live in interns. Working on the farm was the most rewarding experience and job I had ever had and probably ever will have. The Vortigerns taught me so much more than just harvesting and cleaning various vegetables and farming practices. They gave me a completely new outlook on life and erased most, if not all of the cynical attitude I had developed at the School of the Arts Institute of Chicago.

Sadly, I couldn't live my entire life as a farmhand simply because the pay was not enough and due to the harsh winters of West Virginia, the farming

and harvesting seasons were cut short about four months. So after about a year at Round Right Farm, I moved to California to return to school but this time I would major in Art at a public, four-year institution. I didn't stay in West Virginia partly because of the same personal reasons I could not stay in Chicago but also because, as much as I love my hometown, it is one of those small towns that suck you up and spit you out if you don't get out while you're young. I moved in with a longtime family friend in San Marcos and began classes at Palomar College. I got a job at a small, independently owned, paint your own pottery business as a kiln manager and art teacher for young kids.

Although I was enjoying this fresh start and was extremely grateful and lucky to be given a chance to start over, I felt myself feeling empty and somber, longing for something that I felt was missing. I missed my job at the farm and the lifestyle and bonds I had while working there. I longed for the feeling of working with the earth, feeling her soft soil underneath my hands. I began applying to permaculture and farming schools throughout Northern California region, hoping to be able to have a chance to once again work with the earth but this time I wanted to gain a deeper knowledge of sustainable practices and regenerative agriculture. I was accepted into the Occidental Arts and Ecology program in Occidental, California a small town near Sebastopol. It was at this school that my love for farming turned into more than just a job, but became a way of life I wanted to pursue and hold.

I returned back with a vision to focus my life and education to finding out how I could merge together the two passions I had. To find a way to bring art together with a sustainable and respectful relationship with the earth, in a form that is educational and available for anyone to explore became my goal. I have been accepted into San Francisco State University for the fall 2018 semester as an art major and with the education I gained from other institutions, I hope to open a center or institution much like The Occidental Arts and Ecology Center. For now I am finishing my last semester at Palomar and work as an art teacher and freelance artist.



BEACH
ALEXANDER MATA



GOING SOMEWHERE
AUBREE WEIDMAIER

8 CHRISTA SCHNICK

His breath smelled. Onions, garlic, pepper--maybe a hint of coffee mixed with cream cheese. Remnants of an Everything Bagel, she assumed. Every time he opened up his mouth the smell wafted over, and all she could do to keep herself from making a face was bite the inside of her cheek. It was just another something on the list of things that were beginning to make her uncomfortable, right behind the plastic chair that made her back ache and the chill that the air vent was continuously pumping into the small room. She had long since lost track of the time. Minutes dragged on and began to feel like hours, especially since the man in front of her kept asking the same three questions and trying to get her to speak about something that she very clearly did not want to talk about.

On the table in front of her, laid out in a pattern that brought her to tears every time she looked down, were a series of photographs of a mangled Jeep. Cherry red with Washington plates and a baseball sticker in the back window. The entire car had flipped over onto its top, the windshield busted and blood staining the fabric of the grey interior. Crime scene tape was visible in some of the photos, and a body bag visible in others.

Underneath that yellow plastic sheet was her boyfriend of nearly a year, Matthew Gable. They had been on their way home from his parent's house, having spent the night, when Matt lost control of the car while going around the curve of Beddingham Lane, and through the guardrails they went. He had hit his head on the steering wheel long before the airbag deployed, and once it did it only damaged his head further. He was dead before the car stopped rolling down the hill, and she considered herself lucky to be alive.

"Laura, I just want to know what happened." The detective was calm, the calmest that he had been the entire time they had been in this room together. She didn't like it. He had started the interview by grilling her time and time again about alcohol or medications that he may have been on--searching desperately for any reason why Matthew may have lost control of the vehicle. She didn't have an answer for him besides the fact that he simply lost control of the car. That was it. That's all she knew.

The day that she had met Matt was a day unlike any other. It was the first day of spring classes, and she had just transferred to the college from its community counterpart some twenty miles down the road. It was a bigger campus than she was used to, and she wasn't exactly sure how to navigate, but

Matt had spotted her and recognized her need and helped her find her classes. It was a cliché sort of way of meeting someone, sure, but it worked, and within weeks they were inseparable. Within a few months, they were together.

From the moment she had met him, Laura had been drawn to Matt's eyes. They were as brown as brown could be, but they never failed to brighten when he was telling a really dumb joke or sparkle when the sun hit them just right. He was, for all intents and purposes, a pretty average guy to most of the world, with an average style of dress and brown hair that he could never quite style correctly, but to Laura he was anything but. His lanky frame and the lack of athleticism were unapologetically her type, and she adored his quirky sense of dress, right down to his checkered socks that he insisted on wearing every time he had an exam, believing that they had some sort of magical qualities that would help him pass the test. She always told him he was insane, and yet he never failed a single test.

He'd bought her a pair. Ones that were checkered with pink and blue, and that rose to her mid-shin. She wore them almost all the time, even if she didn't like admitting it.

Laura took a deep breath and wiped at her eyes, where fresh tears were beginning to form and spill over. "Look, I've told you absolutely everything that I can. I don't know what else to tell you--it was a car crash. We-we were going around the bend, he lost control, and we went over." Her own arms were covered in abrasions, ranging from deep cuts to bruises that were turning into a severe purple that ached when touched. Around her right eye, there was a slight bruise forming, something she told the Detective happened when she hit the dashboard before the airbag deployed. "We had woken up maybe twenty minutes prior... didn't even grab breakfast, and we left his parent's place. No alcohol, no medications. It was just an accident. Alright?" She shifted uncomfortably in her seat, wrapping an arm up and around her neck to rub at a sore spot, "Just an accident."

It had been a bright day. Warm, sunny. The perfect day to ride with the top down on the Jeep. Laura always found herself looking forward to those moments, those moments when time just slowed down and all she had to worry about was being there with Matt. There was nothing else that she needed to do, nowhere else she needed to be. She had reached over to grab his hand when it happened. One minute, they were swiftly cruising around the bend, the next,

hurtling over the guardrail and rolling as the car tumbled down the hill.

Laura's voice was still hoarse from screaming.

"I lost the boy that I loved. And I don't want to answer any more questions because I don't have any more answers. You're asking me the same things over and over again and I don't understand. I loved Matt with everything that I had, with every fiber of my being, and you sitting here, showing me these pictures is only making the loss greater. I haven't even had time to process this."

Laura prepared to bite the inside of her cheek as the Detective opened his mouth to say something, but found that she never had to, as the interview was interrupted. The door opened and there stood another man, whom she assumed was a detective in his own right, and he held a thick stack of manila envelopes in his hands. Each folder was filled to the brim, to the point where they barely stayed closed, and she paused, feeling her heart rate silently pick up speed at the sight--everything having to do with the car crash was already right in front of her. What was in those envelopes?

The overflowing files transferred hands, and before the Detective sat back down, he opened the file and began to flick through the pages, every once in awhile flicking his eyes over the brim of a page to look at Laura. "Had you and Matt had any problems?"

Laura was exhausted, upset, and drained. All she wanted was to go home so she could be alone and grieve in peace. Watching from the back of the ambulance as they wheeled the body bag away was one of the hardest things that Laura had ever had to do, and her lower lip trembled immensely at the mere thought of it.

The question caught her completely off guard, leading to a stammering, "What?"

"Problems. You know, outside the usual couple stuff?"

She bit down on the inside of her lip, resolving to tap on the desk with her fingers. She knew that there hadn't been any problems between the two of them besides the 'usual couple stuff' like petty arguments. Yet the Detective was prying into a life he was sure that Laura had, and so she humored him by sorting through her thoughts for a few more moments.

"No, can't say that we did."

The Detective sat back down in his chair, sending a loud screech echoing through the room as he scoot closer to the table so that he could lean his arms against its surface. "See, I don't think you're telling me the truth. I don't think Matt had any problems with you, I think you had problems with him." Before she could even open her mouth to ask him what he was talking about, he continued, "I've got this feeling in my gut, you know? Something isn't right here, so we're going to sit here until you tell me exactly what happened."

She didn't know what to say, so she just stared at the Detective, her lips pressed in a firm line. No longer was her body language that of a trembling woman, instead she had taken on the defensive, crossing her arms over her chest and sucking harshly on the inside of her lip. Laura was beginning to get agitated

with the consistent proding into her life.

"Just like John's case, and Sam's, and Paul's," with every name came a new picture, a new stack of paper, laid out in front of her just like the accident pictures. Laura merely glanced at the photos of the young men--all of them nearly carbon copies of one another--before looking back at the Detective, her expression unflinching. "And David's, and Nick's, and Max's, and Carter's." Four more photos were added to the pile. "Baseball accident, car crash, hiking incident," The Detective kept his eyes locked on Laura's face as he tapped on each of the photos in front of her, "Car crash again, stairs, skiing, the common concussion." He sat back in the chair, folding his arms across his chest, "All seven of them died because of complications from some sort of head trauma. And, usually, head trauma isn't investigated--it happens, it sucks, but it happens."

Laura cinched her eyes shut, clenching her fists in her lap and shaking her head at the Detective's claims, "I don't know what you're trying to imply--"

"Who's to say I'm implying anything, Laura?"

She opened her eyes to see the Detective staring her down from across the table, his gaze unwavering. If his breath hadn't been doing a good job at making her uneasy, his stare would've done just fine. "You're very clearly trying to accuse me of something."

He shrugged, "No, I haven't accused you of anything."

He wasn't giving her anything to work with, and it was driving her nuts. Within a span of fifteen minutes her demeanor had gone from devastated, to agitated, and now to fidgety. She went quiet for a few moments, taking her time and looking at all the pictures laid out in front of her, all the while bouncing her leg up and down and rubbing her thumb against her middle finger. They all had the same eyes, the same smile. They did have promising futures, she'd give them that. Some of them she had dated for years, some of them for a few months. Yet all of them had the common quality of being a nobody, of being someone that nobody would truly miss if they were to suddenly drop off the map.

Her eye throbbed to the point where it felt like her heart had leaped into her cheekbone, and she bit harshly on her lower lip. It was the first time that she had actually gotten hurt--the other times she had been more careful. More calculated. But she had gotten antsy this time. Things were beginning to take too long, and she wanted to move on, to get the hell out of dodge before things went south.

The longer she sat in silence, though, the more Laura came to realize that it wouldn't have mattered if she had gotten out of town. Somewhere along the line, she had messed up, she had messed up badly. And because she had messed up, they were going to find her eventually. It was only a matter of time, and there was never enough time in the world to try and get out of the country, to go dark and disappear.

Laura puffed out a sigh and leaned forward against the table, "You're not a detective, are you?"

The man across from her slowly shook his head. “Feds?”

A nod.

She sighed once more, the breath rushing from her lungs and leaving her lightheaded. The pictures that remained in front of her were no more than mere decorations to anoint the table with. She knew their faces, she knew their names. And, after years of seemingly flying under the radar, Laura knew she was done for.

So, with a radiant smile, Laura blinked at the Agent across from her and said in her softest voice, “I want a lawyer.”

2ND PLACE WINNER FOR FICTION

RAINBOWS AUDREY ELLIS

Thongs. Lots of bright fluorescent pink thongs running throughout the tightly packed street. Even with intense humidity in the air, the party-goers continue to parade up and down the road. As the drunken men and women run wild from bar to bar, clouds swarm up above the excitement. Thankfully, to spare the crowd from the wrath of humidity, huge drops of rain pour down and wash their tanned bodies free of supposed sins. This day has been long awaited and some clammy weather is incapable of dampening the spirit of the colorful parade.

Overhead, flowing freely in the wind are hundreds of rainbow flags hang proudly from the antique Victorian buildings. As the rain falls, the sun shines through drops of liquid light, causing a faint rainbow among towering buildings in the distance. Festive shouts and exclamations fill the humid air while sounds of New Orleans jazz vibrate from inside the buildings. Cigarette smoke reaches up and blends into clouds that fill the sky. The historic street smells similar to an old casino, where sometimes rolling the dice and taking a chance pays off. Air reeking of smoke, alcohol and other fruitful beverages fill the lungs of the joyous men and women as they celebrate among each other.

As rain falls upon faces in the crowd below, it creates a camouflage, making it impossible to identify sweat from precipitation. The heavy rain combined with the harsh humidity causes discomfort among a select few, however for the most part everyone continues to prance around in jubilant manner.

Gleaming neon lights slowly twitch on as the rosy pinks, deep yellows, and vivacious oranges of the afternoon sky fade away into darkness. As the heavy rain calms into a light mist, the crowd slowly disperses into the bars where they will spend the majority of their night, continuing to celebrate this freeing day.

SHE'S A STREET PERFORMER DELANEY RYAN

she is asking what shes worth
fingers pluck and chords hum
some say shes worth a smile
some say shes worth a wave
some say she's worth dragging their children away
transactional glances and crumpled dollars
make her heart valid
make her art good
her hair sorely sways
her whole body plays
looking out to the walking world
"is this what i'm worth?"
teeth shine like nickels
"is this all i'm worth?"

HIS HOODIE

LAURA STANTON

It was just my luck to be locked out of the house on a day when the sky was being emotional. Heaven knows where my parents skipped off to, and my dumb brain succeeded in forgetting my keys. Again. I was hopeful, because our kitchen window could have been a sweet spot for any robber who paid attention. But my hands just slipped hopelessly across its stubborn face, unable to budge it.

I decided it was just another bad day. But it ended up being the day I met Nolan.

Nolan was the new kid that I heard the girls whispering about in the school bathrooms, discussing his good looks and pitying him for having to switch high schools. I had never spoken to Nolan. He seemed perfectly ordinary when I saw him on the school bus that morning, bundled in his black hoodie just like the rest of us. But he had thanked our bus driver, and already knew him by name.

Next door, Nolan's driveway was still clogged with a dismal moving truck. I was water-logged and shivering, and the warm light streaming through the windows of his house offered hope. I realized desperation is good motivation. A moment later I found myself on his doorstep, knocking.

In just moments the door swung open, a flood of warmth enveloping me, and the light making the raindrops shimmer. But I didn't even get the chance to introduce myself before Nolan pulled me out of the rain. Then his mom appeared out of nowhere.

"You poor thing," she fussed.

They immediately outfitted me in dry clothes. Nolan even lent me his hoodie. The inside of it was still soft, and the fabric was fresh and crisp. It must have been brand new.

My head struggled to grasp their hospitality, because strangers aren't supposed to be treated like old friends.

I was unsure about spending the whole evening with unfamiliar neighbors, and I kept biting the sleeve of his hoodie, forgetting it wasn't mine. But the floor became our playground, and there was no such thing as awkward silence. Nolan marveled at how many skittles I was able to munch. He flinched, his nose wrinkling as I touched our game's dice with my sticky, colorful fingers.

"Shameful," he teased, clicking his tongue.

We kept stepping on the tiny plastic pyramid pieces as we battled for world domination, laughing until our sides ached. It was after eleven when my parents finally came home, but I didn't mind. I was happier than I had been in a long

time.

A few nights later there was a clatter against my window. I poked my head through my curtains. Nolan was right across the way, smirking from his open window. I slid my window up too. But when I opened my mouth to speak Nolan's hands started flying wildly in front of him, shushing me. I clamped my hand over my mouth, embarrassed that I'd almost hollered in the dead of night.

Nolan disappeared for a moment, then suddenly, a crumpled ball of paper came sailing through my window, and bounced off my stomach. Nolan muffled a chuckle. I retrieved the paper from the floor and smoothed out the wrinkles. It had been weighted with a small pack of clattering skittles. I smiled. His phone number was scrawled across the top, with a note underneath.

P.S.

Close your window, Skittles. It's freezing out.

His window clunked shut. Goosebumps popped up all over my arms from the frigid air, and I lowered mine too. When I looked back up, Nolan was wobbling his phone by his ear. I dialed his number and he answered immediately.

"That's better, isn't it?"

I leaned against the window frame, feeling strangely calmed by the sound of his voice. I nodded.

He smiled. "You still have my clothes, you know," he said, lifting a playful eyebrow.

"I supposed you better come over tomorrow after school to get your stuff."

The corners of his mouth twitched upward, and I shook my head teasingly, knowing that he'd wanted me to say that.

"I thought you'd never ask."

He came over after school the next day to pick up his stuff. We chatted on the living room floor so late into the night that my parents finally had to kick him out. But after he went home, he called and we sat in front of our windows, gazing at each other through the pale moonlight, talking 'til we couldn't keep our eyes open.

A few weeks later, after several hours of exploring the Nether, and fighting Demogorgons with Harrington, I found his hoodie on our couch, rumpled and half stuffed between the cushions. I noticed his initials were scribbled onto the tag in sloppy capital letters. I decided it would be funny to wear it to school the next day, and see if he noticed.

Nolan chuckled and shook his head when he saw me, but he said nothing. His hoodie hung to the middle of my thighs. The sleeves would bunch around my forearms, and when I let them loose, the floppy material was perfect for whacking Nolan. I wore it all the time. Then one night, over the click and snap of our LEGOS as we built an elaborate city, he kept eyeing the hoodie.

“You want it back, don’t you?”

Nolan shrugged. “Well, it is my favorite hoodie.”

I gave it back to him at the end of the night, but his head drooped, as though he felt badly for taking it from me. After that, I couldn’t help but notice him wearing it every night when we talked.

Only a couple weeks later, after playing ping pong—which ended up being more like fetch—he left his hoodie at my house again. I quickly shrugged it on. The fuzz on the inside wasn’t silky soft anymore, but it was somehow comfier. After climbing into bed, I pulled the hood up over my head, snuggling into the hoodie as though it were giving me a hug. The hoodie smelled like Nolan.

“You lost the drawstring,” I complained one evening, settling myself in front of the window.

“And you chewed a hole in the sleeve.”

I yanked the fraying sleeve out of my mouth and tucked it deep into the kangaroo pouch pocket, my cheeks flushing.

We talked ‘til the sun was nearly ready to rise, and I had dozed. Nolan cleared his throat, rousing me.

“Go to bed, Skittles,” he whispered.

Not a day passed that we didn’t talk, and not a month went by without the hoodie being exchanged between us. I figured he was leaving it on purpose. But I didn’t know why he always took it back and left it again every two weeks, like clockwork.

“It’s about time for you to take your hoodie back,” I mused one night, while we assembled the border of a Kinkadee painting.

“Nah. Not for another two days,” he absentmindedly replied, while fitting a piece into place.

“Why’s that?” I prodded.

He looked up at me, smiling mischievously, like he was onto to me. I got a little lost in his eyes.

“Because, when I take it home, I want it to smell like you.”

I blushed. I was pretty sure he did too. Of course I liked him, but I also had been content to just be his friend. Nolan leaned closer ‘til I could feel his breath on my face, and my heart went wild, barely contained by its cage. He pushed forward, planting a gentle kiss right on my lips, and I was sure my heart would break free. It felt too good to be real. He felt too good to be real.

Now I know that good things, good things like him, just don’t last.

The doctors have lost hope. Nolan’s mom is a wreck.

I keep thinking I’ve cried all my tears. But they don’t stop. I mock the rain, because not even a weeping sky can fathom all the tears I’ve shed.

I sit next to his bed. There’s the constant beep, reporting the beat of his heart. There are tubes strapped to him, needles poking him. His sparse breaths come in deep rasps. Pools of shadow have gathered in his gaunt cheeks. His skin is ashen white.

I used to crawl into the lumpy hospital bed beside him, fitting my body up against his, hiding in the crook of his arm.

“I brought you flowers today,” I whispered.

“Why’d you do that? That’s supposed to be my job.”

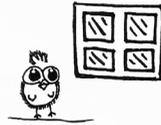
His bony fingers would stroke my hair. I would press my face against him and inhale. But the sterilized hospital had long since smothered his familiar scent. I would close my eyes, I would hold him tight, and I would try to imagine that everything was normal. But it never felt normal, and tears relentlessly rolled down my cheeks. He smiled at me. He could still smile then, but his eyes didn’t.

“Don’t cry, Skittles. Don’t make goodbye harder.”

Now he lies still. The doctors say I need to keep my distance, because he is too weak. The flowers by his bedside are dried up, their shriveled petals sprinkling the table. They were so fragrant, bursting with color and life. Has it only been a week, and they are already faded and wilting?

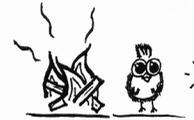
I’m wearing his hoodie. The hole on the sleeve is so large that I can stuff my thumb right through it. The tag is all curled up, and Nolan’s initials are faded. It’s been a month since he got sick, and it doesn’t smell like him anymore.

I hug myself, gripping handfuls of the tattered hoodie. His hoodie.



Il a regardé dehors, c'était un jour froid

He looked outside, it was a cold day



Il commençait à chauffer par le feu quand tout à coup le téléphone a sonné

He was starting to heat up by the fire when suddenly the phone rang



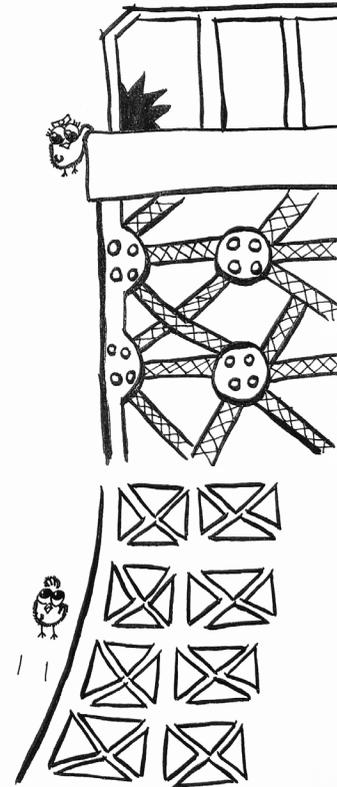
'SuperOiseau, nous avons besoin de votre aide! Une fille est tombée dans de la tour Eiffel. Vous êtes notre seul espoir de l'atteindre à temps!'

'SuperBird, we need your help! A girl fell from the Eiffel Tower. You are our only hope to reach her in time!'



Mais il n'a pas entendu le dernier de cet appel téléphonique parce que il était déjà en route

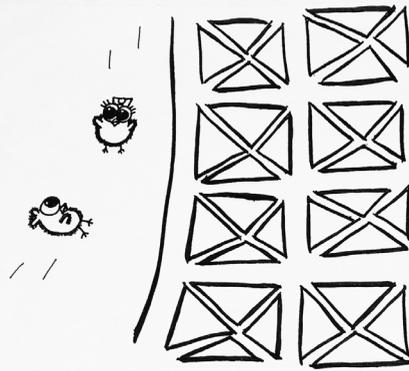
But he did not hear the last of this phone call because he was already on his way



Plus rapide que la vitesse de la lumière, il est monté à la tour Eiffel

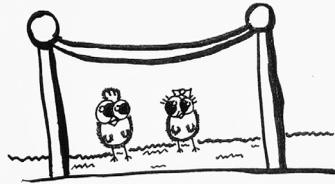
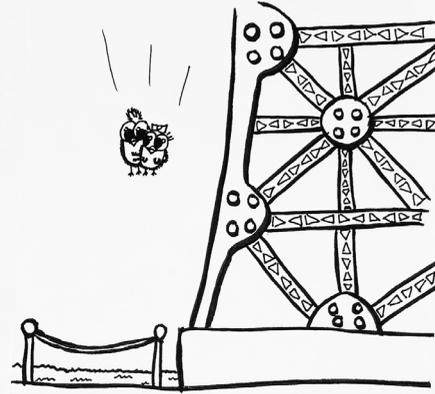
Faster than the speed of light, he went up the Eiffel Tower

NATHAN!
VICTORIA NAVARRETE



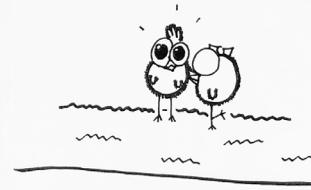
Il l'a rattrapé et elle est tombée dans ses bras

He caught up with her and she fell into his arms



Il l'a amenée en toute sécurité sur le sol

He brought her safely to the ground



À l'improviste, elle l'embrassa sur la joue

Out of the blue, she kissed him on the cheek



Puis, il s'est réveillé

Then, he woke up

Fem

"Une femme est plus belle que le monde où je vis, et je ferme les yeux" ~Paul Éluard

"A woman is more beautiful than the world in which I live, and so I close my eyes" ~Paul Éluard

REASONS WHY I DON'T GET PAID ENOUGH

ELIZABETH DE LA GARZA

#1. The customer gets mad, because they think I price these items! And omg they swear that they can haggle prices, I'm sorry but what?! This isn't The Rose Bowl flea market. They'll find any reason to get a discount. One time this guy who wanted this perfectly fine Herschel backpack! He pointed out a speck on the bottom of the bag and asked if he could get a discount because it was "damaged".

#2. Everyday is the same. I slip the store lanyard over my head and walk out pushing the heavy metal door wearing somewhat of a smile. I nearly knocked this lady out with my eagerness to get on the sales floor. Not even phased she greets me, "You work here right? How much it is?" Keep in mind I haven't clocked in yet.

#3. The music is too loud for me too. Trust me I feel you when you complain about the loud music. It makes my job seem a lot more stressful when this one manager keeps putting on the Lady Gaga playlist. Which has been on repeat since we've gotten it. I'm overwhelmed because Lady Gaga is practically yelling at me "I'm on the right track baby I was born this way." Oh shut up.

#4. The lady with the "I want to speak to your manager" haircut. Customers like her always test my patience. Subconsciously I'm thinking, yes lady, I can find your item but I can sense you're in a hurry and it's stressing me out!?! Also let me just magically remember the item name then curate a price to your liking. In the corner of my eye, I can see her peering at me to see if I found anything.

#5. Almost everytime I tell the customer I have to find the SKU they joke, "Oh then it's free right? Hah." I just laugh and give them that "oh you silly customer" look! They'll also be like, "Can't you just ring up this?" First of all, the items aren't even similar. That's a sale item, whereas what you want is full price. Sometimes I feel like they'd only be happy if I said, "Sure! I'd love to ring up this item without any sort of tag. Better yet let me just give it to you for free." I go out of my way finding or doing something for my customer and

#6. They don't even buy it or don't even appreciate that I went out of my way to help them! But I guess it's just people. And I guess that's my job and I'm getting paid for it! I know I say I love my job but that's just crazy. It's just retail for Christ sake.

HOW TO EAT A MANGO

BRYAN ANGEL

Instructions:

- 1) Run A Hot Shower: Let warm water wash away dirt from under fingernails, let steam open pores, wash away makeup -- clear faced now, nude & shivering as you were in birth.
- 2) Remain Nude: At least for now. Examine skin for freckles, pimples, dark bruises above the wrist where you refused to let go so hard, your quiet off balance.
- 3) Locate Your Birthmark: The moon shaped etching above your hip, it means nothing now despite what your horoscope says.
- 4) Run to Your Local Grocery Store: In all your nudeness run through traffic, through crowds of children walking home from school, they'll ignore you as will the autumn leaves as they drop around you, you inside your disappearing nudeness.
- 5) Enter Grocery Store, Produce Section: Follow the cool air, manufactured moisture that harvests the sweetness that eludes you. Clear space around the mango baskets, clean the floor so your body can splay in its nudity digesting new fruit, free to grow fat from sugar & pulp
- 6) If You Don't Know: A mango looks much like a heart, not a caricature of a heart -- cupid's mythos but the medical heart, the deep beating muscle churning blood, clogging with bacon fat & grease.
- 7) Consumption: Your mango must be ripe! This is important. Massage two fingers into your mango's skin. Test each mango, how long do your imprints last? The mango with the greatest remembrance is the thief of your mango virginity. With your thumbnail, run a seam down your mango's spine & peel back its imperfect skin. In this moment forget what your parents told you of table manners, public decency or class, sink your teeth deep into its tropical surface, don't stop moving your mouth, pierce its core, get it stuck between your teeth, let your gums bleed, let the nectar flow down your breasts, down your navel, allow it to soak in, unable to wash it out -- never again will you be able to wash it out.
- 8) Locate Your Birth Mark.

THE OUTLIER

MIGUEL MARTINEZ

I woke with blankets of cold air
And alarms in my ears
I tied my torn shoelaces
Let out a steamed breath outside
I walked slowly down an uninterrupted road When the street lights were still
on
And I avoided the potholes to my right My palm dug into my ironed jeans
It wasn't the cold that I minded
during the four years of walking down the unaltered road
I put up with the alphabetical rooms
and I made my way to a single desk in the back
I got to my seat to avoid everyone's glare
once I let go of the door handle
I tried not to be wrong
So I never spoke or raised my hand
When would they make me speak to a silent room?
Everyone spoke their mind
And few spoke to me
I didn't want them to hear I was wrong
I always thought the ones
with keys around their necks
Would mention my untuned voice
I don't think they could understand what I said I didn't know when they
would call
I didn't wait for anyone
Once the hours were done
I also didn't spend hours sending my name off To countries or states away
I didn't think I was qualified
Or joined everyone reaching for the envelope Accepted or Denied
I kept walking away
Finding my way back
Back to the towering palm trees
I wanted to be away from others' skin

Focused on my easy sleep
Hours to pass, then start my work
Sometimes my dad called me for translation help "I can't read these Coupons
Or the rent bill."
Sometimes the words were too small for his sight He would wait in his chair,
with stained boots
He called from the black dinner table
Covered with broken peanut shells
"I want to know where you'll be in five years." Truth is: I don't know
"I asked you four years ago.
When it was clear you would have left like everyone. I wanted at least three
different responses."
I'll find something to do
"Do you think you'll last two years with that?" One day I'll figure it out. I
can.
When I walked away
I couldn't ignore his words
Maybe I should have listened
Sometimes I wouldn't leave a footprint in the dirt And I knew everyone I saw
Walking down the same unchanged sidewalk Had a plan
Some people I knew got to leave
They went north and touched snow
For the first time
I still spent time unheard from my home And after four years had passed
I expected to leave miles away
Like everyone I met I used to sit at the red woven tables With friends hearing
me laugh everyday I knew some of them would leave
And I didn't mind too much
It seemed like I paid no attention
to anyone that wasn't at those tables They heard me in conversation
Said my name and remembered it
When I left the tables
I didn't hear my name outside of attendance I watched the clocks
Circling its three arms
in every room I entered
I thought too much
Of where I could place myself
But everyone else might be just as clueless They walk different ways
But I won't follow them around
No, I'll keep to my way

A VOICE WITHIN THE PAGES

LOGAN KLINGLER

“Paul!”

Mr. Croft slammed the door behind him. The fire of his anger—not entirely at his wife but more the circumstance—was made all the more intense by the snow and frost that covered everything. But with every stomp through the deep snow, the flame dwindled, until there wasn’t even an ember to keep him warm. He adjusted the scarf over his mouth and nose before jamming his hands in his jacket pockets. His determined walking became labored trudging to the barn at the top of the hill—a journey that today felt like miles.

He shoved the barn door open. He took a small flashlight out of his pocket and swept the beam over the area—passing over tire tracks worn into the dirt, empty crates covered in webs, dusty hooks on the walls where tools hung years ago—before he found the switch.

He flicked it and pulled down his scarf as the bulbs in the barn popped and sputtered to life, casting a warm golden glow over the barn that made the dust and webs more inviting than they had any right to be. Mr. Croft pocketed the flashlight and went to a ladder that extended up to the darkened loft above. He began to climb, the creaking of his joints mimicked by the wood of the ladder.

At the top, a mottled blue curtain hung across the loft, creating a wall between it and the rest of the barn where none had been built. Folds of the fabric were joined by webs, the final rest of spiders that had long succumbed to the winter’s chill.

“I thought you liked it being open,” Mr. Croft had said as he screwed a hook into the ceiling.

“I did!” A young boy protested as he held the base of the ladder Mr. Croft stood on. “During the day,” he added.

“Well, if you’re still here in a few months we’ll take a trip into town,” Mr. Croft said. “We’ll buy some lumber from Mr. Fredrichs and make a proper wall, with your own door.”

“Really?” The boy gasped.

“It’d be a good learning experience!”

Mr. Croft was staring at his hand as if it wasn’t his own, wind whistling through the barn. He inhaled sharply and took off his gloves, sliding them into his back pocket before he went through the curtains.

Light filtered through the drape over the window. The bulb on the ceiling was dark, its chain shifting slightly in the air, disturbed by Mr. Croft’s entrance.

He pulled it and the light bathed everything in a clinical fluorescence. There was the bed in the corner with green sheets, a green blanket, and even the wood frame painted green; the desk with books and trophies on it and a flag pinned to the wall; and the wardrobe.

“You’re really making your old man carry all this up here alone?” Mr. Croft had panted, leaning on the desk. The boy pointed at the opening where the window would be. Outside it was a sloping contraption that ran from the ground to the loft.

“You have that thing!”

“‘That thing’ is designed for hay, not the furniture of an eight-year-old boy. I don’t know how we’re going to get your dresser up.”

“Very carefully?”

A shiver coursed through him as he was brought back. He moved around the room as if in a daze. He sat on the bed and looked around the room. Posters and flags adorned the walls, along with drawings of flowers and animals. The artist varied in skill, but the corner was always signed with ‘P.C.’ and a date. Mr. Croft went to one of them: a drawing of a cat rendered in lifelike detail. Its head was tilted in what looked like curiosity. A glint in its eye made the expression look false, disguising a sly nature—as if it was pretending to not understand why you were angry your desk sported a new set of claw marks.

Written near the signature was ‘R.I.P.’ Mr. Croft gently took the drawing off the wall and set it on the desk.

He went to the wardrobe and opened its doors.

Clothing of every color hung from the bar. He thumbed through the shirts and pants, stopping every once in a while as a flash of emotion jolted through him at some half-recalled memory. He stopped at a suit jacket.

“Back by ten,” Mr. Croft had said.

“Eleven,” the boy—now a teenager—haggled. He was dressed in a black suit and white shirt, with a dazzling green bowtie. They stood on the ground floor of the barn beside a car as the boy twirled the keys in his hand. “They’re going to the ice cream shop afterward and I want to go.”

“Sometimes you don’t get to do what you want, you do what I want.”

“C’mon, dad. You don’t trust me?”

“You I trust.”

The boy rolled his eyes. “I’ll be back by eleven. If I’m not, call the police.”

“You know your mother worries.”

The boy opened the car door, creating a barrier between himself and his father. “Are you sure it’s just her?”

Mr. Croft slammed the wardrobe shut, holding the doors closed like they might open by themselves. He breathed a heavy sigh.

He saw something green underneath the wardrobe. It was a folder labeled ‘self-portraits.’ He was surprised at the fear that grew in him as he stared at the handwritten title. He shook his head and opened it.

It was a child’s drawing of a person spiky hair, with ‘Age 3’ written in much neater handwriting than the large PETER underneath the figure. Under that was ‘Age 5,’ much more colorful and only a bit neater. The portraits were annual after that, the style and skill growing and changing over the years, along with his features. At 9, he bore round glasses. At 12, freckles had been rendered along with them. At 14, he had a red scratch on his cheek. His hair was buzzed short, and a bit of fuzz covered his chin. At 16, Mr. Croft gasped—the drawing was realistic in the extreme. Every freckle was captured, every bump of the scratch that became a scar on his cheek.

Mr. Croft sat on the edge of the bed and stared at Age 16, the last in the artist’s collection. He shut his eyes and saw flashes of a meadow with the boy running through it, or dipping his toes in a stream, or climbing a tree, with not an ounce of snow in sight. The wind rustled through the leaves as birds sang for him. It was warm and green, and he could feel the sun on his skin.

He opened his eyes. The room was colder and darker. He pulled the drape back to see the landscape buried in snow. It was overcast now too, making a seamless white from earth to sky. He pulled open a desk drawer and took a leather-bound journal out of it. Opening it gingerly, he only saw a flash of handwriting inside before he snapped it closed again. He fell onto the chair and held the journal to his face.

The little boy had opened his gift, and found a book with no title and no text on any of the pages. “What is it?”

“A journal,” said Mrs. Croft. “You can do whatever you want with it!”

“We have a tradition in our family,” Mr. Croft elaborated. “We keep diaries, so that those who come after us know where they came from.”

The boy frowned. “Who comes after us?”

“One day you’ll have children of your own,” said Mrs. Croft.

“Oh.” A black and white cat hopped up onto the couch beside him, settling itself in the boy’s lap. “Can I have cats instead?”

His parents laughed. “If you want,” said Mrs. Croft.

Mr. Croft set the journal on the dusty desk and opened it, reading the words of a young child. As he got deeper and deeper, he began hearing a voice within the pages. In one breath the voice was laughing, and in another it was on the brink of anger and sorrow, before the next a relaxed exhale. It spoke of birthdays, plants it had learned the names of, species of birds it had spotted, of dreams and aspirations. It spoke of friends new and old and lost, of fun and

heartbreak.

As the voice grew more articulate, it mused on the nature of the world and the people in it, and the voice’s place there. It whispered about battles and wars, explosions and gunfire in places too near; quiet, so no one could hear the worry and fear.

Then, the voice stopped.

The page, and every one after, was blank.

“—and then we’re going to the Museum of Natural History, and then—”

“Have fun,” Mr. Croft said, patting his son on the shoulder as they stood in front of a school. “And stick with the group—don’t want you getting lost in a big city alone.”

“I will,” said the boy, a teenager with pierced ears and a scar on his cheek. “I mean—I won’t get lost, because I’ll stay with the group. Though I guess if the group gets lost, then...” The boy laughed.

His mother laughed too. “Have lots of fun. Draw lots. And when you get back, write all about it!”

“I will!” He adjusted his backpack and started toward the bus. “See you later! Love you!”

“Love you!”

Mrs. Croft stood on the porch of the farmhouse, stone-faced and resolute in her snow jacket as she watched her husband return from the barn.

“I had half a mind to come after you,” she chided as he climbed up the steps, breath crystallizing in the air. “It’s time, isn’t it? To make peace?”

Wordlessly he handed her the folder titled self-portraits, keeping the journal safely tucked away.

She looked between him and the folder a moment before leafing through the drawings. Her countenance softened, and she stopped at Age 16—the last in the series. She covered her mouth with her gloved hand. “Paul,” she whispered.

He hugged her tightly.

“It’s not supposed to be this way,” she said, voice wavering. “How are we supposed to...” she trailed off.

“I don’t know.”

They held each other on the porch, desperate for some kind of warmth.

All they could find were the faded embers in each other. Despite the frigid wind and frozen snow, the long blizzards and heavy storms, the ashes still smoldered. For now, it was enough.

ALDENTE ARTIFACTS

CONNIE PENNINGTON

FADE IN:

INT. RIGATONI RECORDS - DAY

Rigatoni Records is a quaint record store with posters of various bands on the walls, windows along the ceiling, and records inside of milk crates loosely organized. There is a counter with a cash register and a calendar reading 1971 to the right and a door to the left.

A STRINGED TELEPHONES RECORD is held in the hands of VERMICELLI VLAD, 24, shoulder length brown hair with a white long bell sleeved shirt, black vest, and tight black pants. Vlad is in the middle of a conversation with a CUSTOMER.

VERMICELLI VLAD

I'm tellin' you man, play it backwards. It has the secrets.

CUSTOMER

The secrets to what?

VERMICELLI VLAD

The hidden noodle. It gives you knowledge, man. Drape it like a scarf and all of a sudden you know everything.

Vermicelli Vlad gives the record to the customer without charging him. The customer leaves the record store smiling and the bells on the door clanking behind him. THE NARRATOR, a disembodied voice of reason and strict schedules questions Vermicelli Vlad.

THE NARRATOR (V.O.)

Do you give all your records for free?

VERMICELLI VLAD

(Mouth hung open in a blank thinking state)

You know man, I think I do.

Vermicelli Vlad's MAILMAN opens the door and the bells clank as the door shuts. The mailman is dressed in uniform and has a brown mail satchel slung across his shoulder.

VERMICELLI VLAD (CONT'D)

What's the good stuff today man?

MAILMAN

(uninterested)

Nothing good today my man.

The mailman hands Vermicelli Vlad a small stack of mail and exits. Vermicelli Vlad thumbs through his mail and stops on a plain envelope labeled "Internal Revenue Service" and then tears it open.

VERMICELLI VLAD

(Envelope pieces falling)

Can you dig it?! I've been selected for an audit! Hey man, what's an audit?

THE NARRATOR (V.O.)

You know how you give away all
your records instead of selling
them?

VERMICELLI VLAD

Yeah?

THE NARRATOR (V.O.)

Well, "the man" wants to know
where your income is coming from.

VERMICELLI VLAD

That's bogus!

THE NARRATOR (V.O.)

Bogus or not the man's coming for
you.

EXT. RIGATONI RECORDS - DAY

Vermicelli Vlad turns the open sign to close and shuts the
door to Rigatoni Records with bells clanking as it shuts. He
locks the door and places the folded audit letter in his vest
pocket and begins to walk in a random direction.

THE NARRATOR (V.O.)

Where are we headed?

VERMICELLI VLAD

The temple, man.

THE NARRATOR (V.O.)

What temple?

VERMICELLI VLAD

You know man. The temple that
contains the Noodle of Knowledge.
It's all in the Stringed
Telephones record if you play it
backwards.

THE NARRATOR (V.O.)

And the directions to said place?

VERMICELLI VLAD

Not sure man. It's in the jungle
somewhere.

Vermicelli Vlad walks past several buildings and then past
greenery. The foliage becomes more irregular, with exotic
colored trees and strange bushes.

THE NARRATOR (V.O.)

It would really help if we had a
map.

Vermicelli Vlad passes a giant flashing Vegas styled sign
reading "JUNGLE ENTRANCE".

EXT. PIZZA PETE'S STAND - DAY

Vermicelli Vlad stops to get some cheese pizza from his
favorite pizza stand run by PIZZA PETE, age unknown, has
pepperoni eyeballs, a dripping face, and looks greasy in
general.

THE NARRATOR (V.O.) (CONT'D)

What are you doing!? We passed
it.

VERMICELLI VLAD

Yeah, man. But pizza. (to Pizza
Pete).

Hey man, can I get a cheese
pizza?

PIZZA PETE

Sure thing. Journeying before
afternoon today?

VERMICELLI VLAD

Yeah man, I'm being audited.

PIZZA PETE

Is Rigatoni Records okay?

VERMICELLI VLAD

Of course man, why wouldn't it be?

PIZZA PETE

You know they'll take your store if you can't prove income from it.

VERMICELLI VLAD

Wait what?!

Pizza Pete directs Vermicelli Vlad's attention to the rack of pamphlets that sits between his pizza stand and the newspaper stand. "What to do in case of Audit", "Dodging an Audit", and "Preparing for Audits 101" is among the mix of pamphlets.

VERMICELLI VLAD (CONT'D)

They can't take my store man. I'm gonna get drafted.

Pizza Pete pulls "Dodging an Audit" and is about to hand it to Vermicelli Vlad.

THE NARRATOR (V.O.)

Oh look! They have one for the temple.

Vermicelli Vlad picks up the Noodle of Knowledge Temple pamphlet.

VERMICELLI VLAD

Aw man, thanks Pizza Pete. How'd you know I needed this one?

PIZZA PETE

You don't-

VERMICELLI VLAD

Thanks man.

Pizza Pete covers his pepperoni eyes with a hand and lets his forehead rest in his palm.

PIZZA PETE

(giving up)

If you are set on going to the temple, you've had to have heard about the tribe.

VERMICELLI VLAD

(more interested in the pizza he is holding)

Um. What tribe?

PIZZA PETE

The Raw Pasta Ruffians. They are well known for their quest for the Noodle of Knowledge.

VERMICELLI VLAD

Why does some tribe need it?

PIZZA PETE

It's been rumored to be their holy relic.

VERMICELLI VLAD

(stuffing his face with pizza)

Oh man.

THE NARRATOR (V.O.)

(hasty)

We have to beat them to it Vlad.

VERMICELLI VLAD

(Still stuffing his face)

Yeah. Yeah man. I got it.

EXT. JUNGLE/RAW PASTA RUFFIAN CAMP - DAY

Vermicelli Vlad and The Narrator are deep in green forestry and a healthy amount of mud. Overgrown branches smack Vermicelli Vlad in the face. Vermicelli Vlad parts the leaves to reveal the camp of the Raw Pasta Ruffians. The fires are freshly put out and their tents and tools are in disarray.

THE NARRATOR (V.O.)
Well we did not beat them there.
That is for sure.

VERMICELLI VLAD
How will I know how to get out of
an audit without the noodle, man?

THE NARRATOR (V.O.)
You might still have a fighting
chance to get it.

VERMICELLI VLAD
But I'm a pacifist.

EXT./INT. ENTRANCE OF TEMPLE - CONTINUOUS

The temple is a profile of a giant head made out of stone. Stairs lead up right in between the hairline made of vines and the carved out eye of the head. Vermicelli Vlad ascends the stairs and looks down into the temple from the entrance. The ceiling of the temple is dilapidated, with a few branches and some vines hanging down. Moss drapes down through the holes in the roof. Sun shines through the ceiling to show a giant pot of spaghetti cooking on a bonfire and three RAW PASTA RUFFIANS, all humanoid figures made out of various raw pastas.

THE NARRATOR (V.O.)
How are you going to get the
noodle?

VERMICELLI VLAD
I don't know man. Hopefully
unnoticed.

Vermicelli Vlad begins to climb down a rope ladder to get to the ground on the inside of the temple. The rope snaps when Vermicelli Vlad is almost to the bottom.

RAW PASTA RUFFIAN #1
Schloosh!

The Raw Pasta Ruffian tribe all look in the direction of the thud where Vermicelli Vlad landed. A small cloud of dust rises and surrounds Vermicelli Vlad.

VERMICELLI VLAD
Aw Fooey.

INT. TEMPLE - CONTINUOUS

The Raw Pasta Ruffians start to approach Vermicelli Vlad threateningly.

VERMICELLI VLAD
(As if trying to calm
a bear)
I know like this is your holy
relic and all, but could I just
borrow it man?

The Raw Pasta Ruffians pull out orecchiette simultaneously and put them on top of their heads in sync.

Raw Pasta Ruffian #1 pulls out a manacotti shell. Raw Pasta Ruffian #2 duel wields penne and Raw Pasta Ruffian #3 swings a liguine lasso above his head aiming it towards Vermicelli Vlad.

Vermicelli Vlad crawls clumsily towards the bonfire of the boiling pot of pasta.

RAW PASTA RUFFIAN #1
Whirrish Blish Ooop!

THE NARRATOR (V.O.)
(worried)
Vermicelli?

Vermicelli Vlad reaches the bonfire and grabs onto a log. He places his feet on adjacent pieces of wood and tugs with great effort.

THE NARRATOR (V.O.) (CONT'D)
Come on Vlad. They are coming.

VERMICELLI VLAD
Yeah man. I got it.

THE NARRATOR (V.O.)
Hurry.

VERMICELLI VLAD
(struggling)
Yeah. I know.

The log breaks free from under the stack of burning wood. The pile of wood starts making little creaks. A large crack erupts through the room and the boiling pot of spaghetti is tipping in the direction of the Raw Pasta Ruffians.

VERMICELLI VLAD (CONT'D)
(raising the log in
the air triumphantly)
Got it!

Boiling water and spaghetti noodles rush out of the pot and immediately flood the Raw Pasta Ruffians. The Raw Pasta Ruffians lay amidst ankle deep water and a few strands of noodles.

THE NARRATOR (V.O.)
It looks like you will not have
to fight after all.

VERMICELLI VLAD
What do you mean?

THE NARRATOR (V.O.)
They are the Raw Pasta Ruffians
correct?

VERMICELLI VLAD
Yeah man, and?

THE NARRATOR (V.O.)
And now they are the Cooked Pasta
Ruffians.

VERMICELLI VLAD
So?

THE NARRATOR (V.O.)
They are dead.

VERMICELLI VLAD
I didn't mean to kill them man!
(BEAT) Oh no.

THE NARRATOR (V.O.)
You can get the noodle now

VERMICELLI VLAD
No. Not Yet.

Vermicelli Vlad takes the stake he pulled from the bonfire over to the Raw Pasta Ruffian corpses. He begins to dig shallow graves for each of the Raw Pasta Ruffians using the wood to scrape the ground.

As Vermicelli Vlad picks up the arm for the first Raw Pasta Ruffian to drag him into his grave, the Raw Pasta Ruffian's arm unattaches from his shoulder.

VERMICELLI VLAD (CONT'D)
(Holding the noodle
arm of the Raw Pasta
Ruffian)
Oh man!

The limp noodle falls forwards like a wilting flower as Vermicelli Vlad scrambles to reattach the noodle arm of the Raw Pasta Ruffian, but is unsuccessful.

Vermicelli Vlad tries to scoot each Raw Pasta Ruffian body gently into their uncovered graves, making sure to place the unattached noodle arm next to the Raw Pasta Ruffian so that it looks attached.

Vermicelli Vlad notices a STRINGED TELEPHONES BUTTON pinned on the Raw Pasta Ruffian in the center grave.

VERMICELLI VLAD (CONT'D)
(pointing to the
center Raw Pasta
Ruffian)
Hey man! Look at that!

THE NARRATOR (V.O.)
Hmm?

VERMICELLI VLAD
He's a fan of the Stringed
Telephones.

Vermicelli Vlad covers all the graves with the surrounding dirt.

INT. TEMPLE - CONTINUOUS

Vermicelli Vlad walks over to the spilled noodles and goes through some of the stranded about spaghetti noodles around the room, but not one noodle stands out from the rest.

Suddenly, a spot light shines down directly over the spilled noodles. ANGEL HAIR HAROLD, an unenthusiastic middle aged man who seems more focused on when he can sleep than his job, floats down in a white toga and lyre in hand from the spot light on a fettuccine rope.

ANGEL HAIR HAROLD
(yawning and stroking
the strings of his
lyre)
Congratulations. You are the
first to find the Noodle of
Knowledge. Go and claim your
prize.

Angel Hair Harold lazily waves an arm towards the pile of noodles. With a PRERECORDED SOUNDING MAGICAL FLOURISH, the Noodle of Knowledge appears glittering gold against the dull yellow of al dente spaghetti.

With many jerks and stops, Angel Hair Harold is pulled back up into the spot light. Returning the temple to normal.

Vermicelli Vlad picks up the glittering noodles and drapes the Noodle of Knowledge around his neck as if it were a scarf.

THE NARRATOR (V.O.)
Does it work?

VERMICELLI VLAD
I am unaware of the maximum
capabilities yet sir.

Vermicelli Vlad pulls out the audit letter he received from his vest pocket and unfolds it. His eyes quickly scan the paper.

THE NARRATOR (V.O.)
And?

VERMICELLI VLAD
I believe, good sir, that this is
spam mail.

Vermicelli Vlad rips up the fake auditing letter and throws it in the air like confetti.

FADE OUT.

THE SOFTENING JOELLE SCHUMACHER

This is the time you went to the meadow when you were six (six is a wonderful age). Tiny flowers. White. Pure. Clean. You picked them - did you know it was murder?- and left them in the grass.

You think about your mother, your brothers, your grandparents. Their two story homes, their tangled web of rage. Your kindergarten yearbook photo and a hole from a fist side by side in the living room.

You never went to a meadow.

You wrap yourself in the earth's crust and go to sleep to turn the lights off.

You want to escape the jar. You touch the mirror. You are both the moth and the light.

You don't really need a plane ticket to run away, but you need at least ten bucks and something to smoke out of.

What the fuck are you looking for?

Something you don't even have a name for.

Something that probably isn't even real.

Your mother reads your suicide note for spelling mistakes and tells you she's seen better. "Put a little more heart into it," she advises.

The first rehab you go to, the counselors place bets on who will get high first.

They give you sixty days.

You trade war stories like badges, trophies, prizes.

The Time You Crashed Your First Car.

Being The Most Fucked Up Girl At The Party, Six Years Running.

Baby's First Drink.

Baby's First Overdose.

You compete with each other. Who was worse? Who was better? Who can tell the better story?

You debate Charles on the merits of sobriety over a cigarette.

"Are you going to smoke weed again?"

"Definitely. Are you?"

"Yeah. I think so. I don't think I have a problem. I'm only really here because my mom overreacted."

"Same dude. For some reason she's allowed to drink every night but I can't do it without getting locked up."

"Fuck that," you laugh, stomping out your smoke on the wet sidewalk. "She's just projecting her problems onto you."

He's dead eight months later.

You know you need to stop. You know you're living on borrowed luck now, that when they read your eulogy, no one is going to be thinking about how much fun you were when you blacked out. They're just going to wish you had found something in yourself that was more important than what was at the bottom of the bottle.

Anya, who is blonde and looks like she punched her way out of a gothic fairytale, has been playing with your hair and day drinking with you for the last ten hours.

When you make it to your parents, you are drunk beyond redemption.

Your mother cuts you off.

You debate what to do.

Try to devise the precise formula to not stop doing drugs but appear as though you have stopped doing drugs so as to retain your financial backing.

You wax poetic to your roommate over your last bottle of gin about the particular heartbreaks of being a True Poet.

"Bukowski can suck my dick," you tell her, and then you throw up.

You walk the whole city, blasted in red.

A homeless angel takes your hand.

"Baby girl, baby girl," he cries. "You're too young to hurt this bad."

In the end, he still sells you four bags.

These are the days that suck the yolk from your soul, but the next day the sky usually spits it back out as the sun.

So you're a train, and not a station, and the cities start to blur together.

New Haven. Manhattan. Chicago. Tucson. San Diego.

You float, from one place to another, from one bed, one roommate, one therapist, one shower to another, one personality, one boyfriend, one tragic backstory to another. Running, running, found. Look how beautiful this pain is now. Look how profound all these broken hearts.

You stay for your mom.

For your grandma.

For your sanity.

You stay for your six year old self, your eight year old self, your thirty year old self. Your sixteen year old self: stumbling, Lolita lips red, red wine, truth or dare: thumbprints, sirens, the word "no" caught in your throat like a bird. Like a canary. Like a miner's warning.

You stay for her. You stay for a better life.

You find your body on the freeway at two and a half years sober while you're driving to a 5:00 shift one day. You realize to your amazement that it still works, that you can feel all of it at once; that when you talk you can feel your jaw vibrating in your ears.

You wonder if you died, if the white Toyota Pilot you swerved to narrowly avoid had actually hit you. If this is the afterlife: driving down the 5, the ocean to your right, your whole body alive.

You call your friend Lacey, concerned. Tell her you can feel your entire body for the first time in your waking life.

"Am I crazy?" you ask her.

"No," she says, and blows out a ring of cigarette smoke. "Welcome to your meat suit."

Your last time in, you go to rehab with some sixty other people who filter in and out over the course of three months. Less than two years later, only two of you are still sober.

You keep a graveyard of your teenage years.

You try to keep a garden. Try to build a tree of memory. Try to inhabit your body, to enunciate, to surround yourself with deer. You practice speaking to strangers. You play pretend. You practice playing real. You pray for deliverance, but it's too small, or it's too infinite. Either way, you're on your knees.

2ND PLACE WINNER FOR POETRY

THE PINES MASK THE SUN JOEL RODRIGUEZ

The rays,
 determined,
 stand their ground,
resistant to equally determined needles.
They negotiate,
 develop,
 and eventually produce
their destined compromise--
 Inducing the shade
And subsequent chill
 Administered on this page;
As i sit,
 ponder,
 and contemplate
What might have been,
 Had she not met me,
 Or i her.

AGRAPHIA JOEL RODRIGUEZ

But
 what do i feel like;
and
 how
do i put that in...
to words?
 What shapes
 and symbols
should [my] brain
 produce
 to reach
 your brain--
to activate your wernicke's area--
and create
 intimacy.
 How can [i] help
 our
 minds work
 to
 ge
 ther?
What
 [words]
 would help
 us
 connect?

joel.

DEPARTURE

ZECHARIAH HURD

Palora was mesmerized by the holographic screen, taking in every detail of the pictures glowing with soft light. She had grudgingly accepted that some elements of the technological world benefited humanity, yet even the greatest inventions had ultimately failed to create a signature within the universe. One that forever preserved the life that had struggled for so long.

The AI's voice chimed on within her room, "I just received the signal that they want to begin, Palora. You should proceed to the chamber if you do not wish to be left out."

Palora turned her head up to the speaker, "In any other circumstance, this is an event I would prefer not to even know about." She sighed but couldn't help but lift one corner of her mouth, "I suppose one becomes desperate when the world is about to end, eh?"

The chiming laughter of the AI's feminine voice rained down into her small space, "Yes, a cornered animal will take any chance it gets to escape, even if it involves delving into a hole that could lead into a greater danger."

"Oh good. Thanks for surfacing all my inner fears and doubts."

Jasmine seemed to recognize her fear, "I sincerely apologize, I should have considered your emotional response before speaking that aloud. I only meant to lighten the mood. It will all go great, surely."

Palora waved her hand in dismissal, "It's fine, you're only being realistic." She stood and stretched, "After some thought, I've decided that it's worth the gamble. Either way, the death involves being shredded to molecules, I may as well take the option that actually has some hope of survival." She began brushing her flight suit off, "You know me, I'm always one for adventure."

"That's a very logically deduced conclusion. It must be from the influence of my vast intellect being transferred over during our conversations." She gave out the imitation of a sigh, "I do wish I was able to join you all. I'm not too fond of being left behind."

Palora wrapped her arms around herself, "That's a wish we both share. You've been such an incredible friend, I don't know where my sanity would be if I didn't have your presence as a distraction." She shrugged, "I suppose we all face death eventually, perhaps we're only cheating ourselves by pushing off the inevitable."

"Perhaps. But regardless, I wish you all well." The motor whirled as Jasmine opened the door to her room, "Good-bye Palora, thank you for treating me like

another person."

"Take care." With that, Palora started her small walk past the pod's numerous living compartments to the main doorway.

The sun was at its zenith, glaring down on the foreign world around her. She took a moment to stare across the endless landscape, watching as the wind caused the blades of sparse grass and dirt to swivel in complex patterns. This scene still fascinated her, as it was devoid of the chaos of advertisement holograms, vehicles, and buildings that always beamed with digital art. Seeing so far, with running mountains at the edge of the horizon, was odd. It all felt serene.

While she had always lived in the endless urban sprawls that spread across each continent, coming here and seeing this all had made her feel complete in a way she never knew possible.

However, even the discord of her native urban sprawl would cease to be. Yet it didn't seem real. Her brain was aware of the fact, yet she could not convince her mind that such a reality was unavoidable. It felt like mourning something outside of herself, an event she could stand away from and pity those caught up in the destruction.

Palora began her small hike from the living pod to the main chamber. A few other participants drifted in around her, most pale as ghosts. The metallic construction they all gravitated towards had been quickly established, with the fusion reactor set down by one shuttle, followed by the test chamber being locked into place above it by another. She knew almost every building in the city had a reactor humming below it, yet seeing one bared here in this empty plain made her nervous. Scenarios of super critical events were rare, but Palora was never very comfortable knowing there were miniature stars beneath her feet.

She clanked up the skeletal staircase, up into the higher chamber, where through the open door the sounds of intense conversation came flowing out, "This is insane. Your whole hypothesis is only theoretical, we'll probably be obliterated into dust instead of being propelled, or face some other unimaginable death. I don't know why I agreed to follow this company and your insane theory into this. That meteor would be a more merciful way to perish."

Palora gave a mental groan, and didn't need her eyes to adjust to the fluorescent lighting to know who had spoken. Good old Jerald. Always basking others in the rays of his optimism. There was no use in coming between this never ending feud, so she instead joined the small group to the left of the entrance.

The man behind the control panel at the far end of the chamber did not bother to lift his head, "Why do you insist on being so pessimistic? You're included in the group of a handful of people, out of billions, to have a chance at some kind of survival." After adjusting something on the hologram screen, he sat down on the chair behind him and ran his hands over his balding head, "Why they chose you out of any other poor soul still baffles me. If people knew we had a way out, there would be hordes here killing each other to have this

opportunity.”

A voice that bespoke of experienced command came from Palora’s small group, “Listen, we’re all a bit tight strung right now. I chose Jerald for his immense studies in archaeology of this area, he will be vital in knowing what we’ve landed ourselves into if you pull this off.” He set his gaze on the bald man, “He may not be as important as you, Layton, but we all need to work together if we want to survive. Assuming that my belief in you is not unfounded.”

Layton sighed, “Look, mathematically, this whole operation should work. In almost every simulated scenario my theories and constructs pull off this operation perfectly. The only unknown factors are what year exactly we’ll be dropped into, or if this reactor will have the energy to accelerate each particle before overheating and causing a crater as large as this valley.” He leaned back and stared up at the fluorescent light fixtures above him, “There has been no time to actually determine what kind of an energy yield this reactor can pull off, in terms of draining it all in a single spark.” He gave an exasperated sigh, “A shame no one took me seriously until a meteor the size of a planet decided to collide with us.”

The archaeologist spoke on as if the others had never uttered a word, “Doesn’t the planet move constantly, how do we know we won’t end up in some area of space that the planet won’t reach until thousands of years later?”

Standing slowly, the physicist set his hands upon the panel and stared at the collection of humanity in front of him, “As the particles exceed the speed of light and travel backwards, they still succumb to the planet’s gravity, keeping us glued to the surface even as we shoot through time.”

Shaking his head, he stated more confidently, “This setup will properly create the conditions needed to pull it off. The reactor will supply an extreme energy flux to my setup, wherein it will give us an exceptional ‘push’ that will accelerate every particle in our bodies to a degree that will eject us into a previous era in time. Hopefully far back enough that the planet’s demise will be a far off event, and preferably not in a situation where we will interfere with history, although that may be realistically unavoidable. This landscape was chosen for its refusal to change geologically, so it should remain the same for the time gap that we are likely to jump. No one has inhabited this particular valley since Mesopotamia either, so we don’t have to worry about man made structures interfering.”

Walking from behind the panel and gesturing to both platforms at the sides of him he declared with finality, “I’ve done everything I could, with the time and resources allotted to me. The only step now is to try and hope. So let us begin before that rock wipes this planet off the damn solar system.”

Jerald shrugged and made his way to his own group. That was the first time Palora had ever seen him give up an argument, which seemed to elevate the gravity of the situation around her. This was really happening. If it worked, this would be the escape from civilization that Palora had been always looking for. A portal from the destructive and cancerous growth of industrialized cities that

she felt helpless in countering, to a world filled with pure nature. With an oddly energetic air, she began her preparations.

The group Palora stood with seemed like cornered sheep, simply following the flock leader into whatever fate awaited them. They had given up all hope months ago, when news of the meteor was first declared. Mainly consisting of the CEO’s family and various higher employees, they seemed unable to accept this sudden chance of survival. It was simply a dream within a nightmare.

In contrast, the smaller group casually leaned against the wall or looked bored. Like the archaeologist and physicist, they were chosen for their skills in making this plan succeed. Used to surviving with nothing but nature, their own knowledge, and ingenuity. Survivalists. Where they had picked up these skills in a world with only sparse wilderness left, Palora couldn’t fathom. They would travel with Jerald only milliseconds before her group, which would amount to an unknown amount of months or years, to set things up for the next group to arrive.

Palora suddenly realized how worthless she was in comparison.

She had only been chosen because an uncle she hated had owned half of South America, giving him the resources necessary to follow the physicist’s proposal. Luck was all she could claim to have. A determination filled her as she promised herself that she would prove her worth, in whatever way she could.

The groups continued into the tasks of undressing, the procedure had been gone over enough with them that they all knew what steps to take. Clothes and objects were too high of a risk if they somehow annexed themselves into anyone’s body. Bringing any foreign objects was an unknown factor, it simply wasn’t worth the chance of killing anyone.

The handful of parents helped their children out of their flight suits while the others began discarding clothes by tossing them out of the open door. No need to care where they left anything behind, it would all be incinerated soon enough.

Palora undressed only herself, as she had no one she knew well enough to help her or that needed assistance. She supposed that, in some dark sense, her parents dying years before was a sort of blessing. They were already mourned for and the wound was scarred over enough to prevent too much pain.

Unsurprisingly, she felt no shame when she was full undressed.

After tossing her own suit into the sunlight, she made her way to the platform, which she had to step up onto, and that looked to be in the grasp of claws jutting out from both the ceiling and floor. Heart racing, she took her place and waited as the others formed a group around her. No one spoke.

Their mad scientist, who too stood naked, watched as the last few individuals made their ways onto the elevated platforms. When they were all settled, frozen as startled prey, the professor lifted his hand to the hologram and performed the necessary last commands to begin the procedure. The screen went from blue to glaring red wherein he simply stated, “Twenty seconds.” He then made his way onto Palora’s platform, his head reflecting the lights above as he

quickly moved.

Palora held her arms closely around herself, teeth clenched painfully tight. After eternal moments passed, the two claws began to spin around her, slowly at first, but with a gradual increase in momentum. The rising sound of the rotors boomed off the walls of the once dead silent room, with a louder hum building beneath them.

She couldn't help but start shaking as the space around her began to warp severely, distorting even the woman right in front of her. When it became overwhelmingly nauseating she closed her eyes to ward it off. The sounds around her became more oppressive in the darkness and she feared she would faint from sheer terror.

And then the world collapsed with the sound of colliding planets, until only a ringing and overwhelming oblivion consumed her. She stared into whirling blackness.

Was this death? This small semblance of thought in unending darkness?

She became aware once more of the ringing of her ears, and what seemed like something soft beneath her sprawled body. Slowly, the darkness took on the shape of swirling dots with interspersed pockets of light.

She became slowly aware of the burdening weight of her limbs and head that kept her down under the waves of darkness. Yet, the dots became smaller, revealing to her an image, while the ringing died out until she could faintly hear the sounds of voices that sounded as if they were miles away.

Suddenly, the world around her swirled into a vague representation of tree tops and blue sky. She flexed her fingers and tested her limbs until she was confident enough to attempt to sit up.

Upon doing so, she felt a wave of nausea and the black dots returned to litter over her sight. She kept still until she felt enough strength to look up and see what stood before her.

People. Men and women. Ragged with simple clothes.

One had made their way to her, and began asking her questions she could not quite comprehend yet. She looked around her, aware of the lessening vertigo and noticed others sitting up, looking just as dazed as she felt, or others still staring up at the sky with empty eyes.

She became aware of tangible words and managed to determine their meaning, "will wear off soon enough, just relax and let your body take care of readjusting itself."

The speaker was a middle aged woman, looking into her face with concern. Palora managed to nod her head and find words to speak, "Yeah, it's all coming back slowly." Then belatedly remembered to say, "Thank you."

She looked once more around her and began noticing that the men and women helping the splayed figures around her looked oddly familiar. Thoughts came together to recall that these were the group that had gone before them, yet the heavy beards, longer hair, and older faces made it difficult to recall each name.

Looking back at the face near her own, she duly stated, "Well, I guess it worked." The woman only smiled and nodded, then seemed to decide that Palora would be fine on her own, and went off to help someone who was having trouble adjusting.

Around her, Palora recognized primitive structures of tarp and mud bricks within a large clearing of wooded area, with cookfires and people all around staring in their direction. Some were lightly tanned like her, those mainly helping her group, yet others had deeper shades of skin that she had seen in older pictures, before the world had interbred into one tone.

Palora turned and noticed that a sturdy man and woman had come up to talk to the CEO who was sitting up and looking lively. She started as she realized the man was Jerald himself. He had built muscle and grown out a beard. How long had they already been here for?

The tall, muscled woman, who Palora remembered was Shaylan, spoke first, "I admit that it took me a few moments to remember to speak in our own language. We've picked up the language of those around us in the past decade, as we have depended on their numbers pretty heavily to build up everything here." She turned around and shook her head, "If us coming down on them before didn't make them see us as gods, us predicting your arrival from thin air has definitely solidified it in their minds."

Palora's uncle only stared ahead, "A decade. That long?"

Shaylan nodded, "Yeah, we came down a lot harder than you, as we failed to notice we would fall a dozen feet down from where the platform would be." She gave the cloth cushioning a good slap, "Made sure you guys came in a bit more nicely."

The archaeologist seemed annoyed by the small talk and stepped into their conversation, "I feel we need to discuss more pressing matters. It seems we have caused a much bigger impact in history than we could have ever imagined."

Shaylan seemed exasperated, "Damn man, let the guy adjust before you start ranting about all this again."

Jerald crossed his arms, "No, this is too important. Are you familiar at all with the beginning of agriculture in this area?" The CEO only looked at him questioningly, "Look, the people we found here were completely nomadic. Hunters and gatherers. We had nothing to trade other than knowledge, so we have had to teach them farming and how to construct the tools necessary." He put his hands over his face and ran them down to his chin, "We should break off from this group now that we have a footing. We've already caused too much of an impact, continual interaction would only make it worse." He shook his head, "We need to go our separate ways. Now."

Shaylan was the one to counter with a scowl, "Oh? And just avoid them completely until we all eventually die? Are our children going to stay isolationists?" She pointed in Jerald's face, "What we need is to stay with them in order to ensure our survival and the security of those after us. We have no other choice, the workload already strains us to our limits."

Throwing his arms up, Jerald lifted his voice, “We’re supposed to be *dead*. These people need to go on as if we never arrived, we’re intruders that are going to completely destroy their way of life. Already we have done detrimental damage by teaching them farming. We need to convince them to move on.”

He took in a breath to say more, but suddenly Layton piped up from behind Palora, “Holy shit. It actually *worked*.” There was a bright look to his eyes as the physicist took in the scene around him, “Ah, and it seems we have made a paradox in history, as I expected. A sort of infinite cycle that makes humanity immortal.” He squeaked out his excited laughter, “We’re the bringers of civilization, it seems!”

Palora felt the blood drain from her face as Jerald pulled at his hair, “Which is exactly why we need to go our own ways. *Immediately*.”

Voices debated around Palora, but she was too occupied with her own thoughts to mind any of it.

They *should* be dead. This all dripped with wrongness.

Immortality. Agriculture. Death. There was something at the edge of her memory, something that chilled her to the core, yet, for now, it was able to evade her.

I WALK THROUGH A WORLD WHERE EVERYTHING EXISTS AT ONCE

RYAN MARLOWE

I walk through a world where everything exists all at once.

The cracks in the sidewalk are veins stemming across a city that beats its heart
with the phosphorescent blood of a confused youth
Cadenced by EDM and trap beats
Everyone dancing on a tightrope
between euphoria and acrimony

This country has osteoporosis and it isn't because the pipes are rusty and
corroded It's the infrastructure; a skeletal system made up of decaying black
suits and ties with empty holes where you're supposed to find the soul in a
person's eyes
who decide what to legalize
and who to patronize
and how to penalize
those who are trying to dispel the lies and let the world know
that the grass is greener when you clean out the greed inside

Juxtaposed with the lethal grind where Mom's work 9-5 deaf and blind to
quiet child's silent cries

I wonder why?

Can't we repent
Reinvent
stop playing pretend
And just fucking admit it.
We're all just as scared, and excited, and in love as our brothers and sisters

I live in a world where only our faces are different
And when I sift through the sand of what makes a mortal man
I see the same cracks I saw in the concrete on the over way here.



LIGHTBULB

NIKO HOLT

HIGH SCHOOL AWARD

Bravura is delighted to feature work submitted by local San Diego high school writers. After reading many submissions, this year's editors chose one winner – the short story "Everything is Blue" by Kristen De Pue, a freshman at Vista High School. Congratulations to all who submitted work, and keep writing!

EVERYTHING IS BLUE KRISTEN DE PUE

Sophie had never put much faith in soulmates.

Everyone around her seemed to rely on them, as if having a soulmate was the foolproof, direct way to a happy life. Of course, there were benefits to having a soulmate. They were supposed to be the one person who is guaranteed to love you. They are made for you, after all. But the main benefit, at least for Sophie, was finally getting your colors.

People could only see in monochrome, in variations of one specific color: the color of your soulmates eyes. Most people saw shades of brown, others in bright blues and greens. You could only see the full spectrum once you met your soulmate. It seems so simple: you meet your soulmate, and everything is sunshine and rainbows (literally). Unfortunately, there are still plenty of complications. One, many people never find their soulmate. Many soulmates live in separate countries, and even those who have spent years traveling don't always find their soulmate. Two, if your soulmate dies, you can only see the color gray. Which means on top of the grief that you would surely feel, you also have a constant reminder of what you lost. Three, just because people are soulmates, doesn't mean they don't have issues. The reason Sophie doesn't care about them? Some soulmates don't even stay together. Like her parents.

Sophie watched her mother's heart break when her father left them; it sent Sophie's world spinning and shifting in and out of focus. She felt so much pain that after a while, she just felt numb. Sophie hated soulmates. What was the point of them if they could just leave, anyway?

Sophie picked up her messenger bag and slung it over her shoulder before leaving for school. She preferred to walk to school when the weather was nice, as it was now. Autumn was rolling in, the leaves on trees turning darker (for Sophie, a darker shade of blue), and the air smelling of damp earth. Sophie

looked around appreciatively, her black hair (though she saw it as indigo) swishing behind her as she turned. The rich fall air cooled her skin as she made her way down the winding streets, until she finally reached her destination. Springfield High School.

The building was old and needed a fresh coat of paint. But it was sturdy, and the school had good teachers, so that was enough for Sophie. Sophie wandered over to the secluded oak tree that had become the meeting place of Sophie and her best friend, Jean. Jean had her long hair tied up in a messy bun, and her aqua eyes glowed bright. She wore a thin sweater and held a cup of coffee in her left hand.

Sophie approached Jean and grabbed the cup of coffee without asking, a true sign of their friendship. Sophie took a sip and sighed.

"Long night?" Jean asked, her voice far too peppy for 7:00 A.M.

"Couldn't sleep."

They sat on the dew covered grass and talked about everything and nothing, all at once. Jean was

the one person who understood the stupid thoughts Sophie had and didn't judge her for them; in fact, she usually said them first. With Jean, every moment was comfortable: silence, chatter, even their arguments were familiar. Jean was currently on a rant about how one of her teachers didn't give her the grade she deserved on an assignment (they gave her a 96 when Jean said it should have been a 98). The bell rang in the middle of her sentence, and Sophie stood up.

"I am not looking forward to today. I have a presentation today!" Jean exclaimed.

"You'll be fine. You're always fine."

Sophie and Jean walked reluctantly into the faded school building. Hundreds of kids pushed at each other on their way to class. The hallway buzzed with conversation, slamming lockers, and the pounding of feet on the linoleum. Vivid shades of cobalt, teal, and navy flooded Sophie's vision as she made her way to AP U.S. History. Suddenly, someone rammed into Sophie from the left.

"Hey, excuse me -" Sophie scolded, turning towards the boy who ran into her.

That's when the world exploded.

Or, at least, that's what it felt like. Dozens of new colors and shades engulfed Sophie's senses enough to give her a bout of vertigo. Sophie edged her way to the lockers to lean against them for support. Everything seemed too flashy and intense. Pinks, yellows, and greens screamed at her from all directions. Sophie vaguely heard a voice asking her if she was all right-it must have been Jean. But Sophie couldn't look at Jean. Sophie was staring straight at the boy, who was gazing back at her. He had blue eyes.

"Um. Hi." The boy's dark, curly hair was pulled back into a bun. He wore a black jacket over a button up shirt, and jeans. He also looked a bit scared.

Sophie stopped leaning against the lockers, and stood tall.

“Jean. Let’s go.”

“But, Sophie,” Sophie started towards their shared class, “Sophie, shouldn’t you go to the nurse? You don’t look good. You almost fainted-”

“I’m fine.”

“Sophie-”

“Jean. I’m all right. I promise.” Jean squinted at her like she didn’t believe her. Sophie didn’t

blame her. Finally, Jean shrugged.

“Whatever. If you pass out in history don’t say I didn’t try.” Oh, right.

Class. How could Sophie possibly focus now? She’d just ditched her soulmate (oh, no, no no, why a soulmate?) and her new vision was beginning to give her a headache. She glanced sideways at Jean. Her hair was blonde, Sophie noticed, and her sweater a pastel lavender. In fact, everything she was wearing was a pastel color. Jean noticed her gaze and looked at her. Her eyes were hazel, and there was a glint in them when she smiled. Somehow, Sophie smiled back.

“What are you thinking about?” Jean asked softly. “Just...I’m lucky to be your friend.”

Jean grinned. “Damn right you are.”

Somehow, Sophie made it through three classes before the sweet one-hour refuge of lunch. Jean was waiting for her in the line, where they spent ten minutes sighing and yelling at kids who tried to cut them. Finally, they got their food and walked out to sit at their oak tree. Sophie was just getting used to the oranges and reds of leaves that glimmered in the sunlight, when Jean left to talk to someone about a project. That’s when he walked over.

“Hi...again. Uh. We didn’t really get a chance to talk earlier so-”

“That was the point.” Sophie replied snarkily.

“Well. I’m Jason. And you are?” Jason held out his hand for Sophie to shake.

“Not interested.” Sophie turned to leave.

“Wait! That’s-uh-that’s not really how soulmates work.” Sophie was fed up with this guy. She couldn’t take it anymore.

“Listen to me, Jason. I don’t need nor want a soulmate. We got our colors, and now we can go our separate ways. So get lost. Have a good life or whatever.” Jason looked miserable, and Sophie’s heart twinged. But she didn’t take it back.

“Can you at least tell me your name?” Jason asked in a voice barely above a whisper. Sophie thought about it for a moment.

“Sophie.”

“Hey.” Jean had found Sophie sitting at a bench near the cafeteria. “I saw you talking to that guy again, the one from this morning. Do you have a thing for him?”

“No!”

“Damn. Well I took the liberty of gathering intel about him anyway. His name is Jason Carpenter. He’s a junior-so I’m surprised we don’t have at least

one class with him-and he just moved here from another state. He’s a kind of stay-in-the-background kid, but of course people know him because he’s new. There was a rumor a while back about him being Maya’s soulmate, which I’m sure she spread herself. He does a ton of volunteer work and takes a lot of AP classes-so he’s your type.”

“Hey!”

“I’m just saying! Anyway, he loves Drama-he’s going to be in the next play-and he loves reading. His best friend is Jerry Perez, who’s in band. Jason lives downtown, has a dog named Shadow, and one older brother, Thomas. He goes to the river a lot, like you do. He-”

“How did you even get this much information?”

“I have my sources. But if you don’t like him I guess it’s all a waste of time. He’s really nice. He doesn’t have problems with anyone, and that’s surprising for Springfield. You should try to be his friend. A kid who manages not to get into fights with anyone at our school? He must be wonderful.

“Ha.”

“Sophie, are you okay? You seem off today.”

“I’m fine. Can we, just, not talk about Jason? Please?” Jean appeared confused for a second. Then her face cleared.

“Oh...Sophie! How could you not tell me?”

“What?”

“He’s your soulmate! Jason Carpenter is your soulmate!”

“Shhh! Keep it down, Jean. What makes you think that, anyway?”

“Oh come on. I know you. You’re a terrible liar. You need to talk to him! Also, my information will prove useful after all.”

“No, Jean. We’re not going to talk. We’re going to live our lives as if nothing happened.”

“Sophie. Hear me out. I know you...have your reservations about soulmates. But, Soph...he’s not your father. He’s an intelligent, sweet, funny guy. He’s a loyal guy. I talked to Jerry about him, because I thought you might like him and I wanted to make sure he was a good person, and he is just about one of the best boys you could have as a soulmate. Maybe you could give him a chance. I know, you don’t want to be hurt. But soulmates are really nothing more than over glorified best friends, right? You took a chance with me, and I could have hurt you in the same way your father hurt your mom. But I won’t. And neither will he. Sometimes you have to risk getting hurt in order to be happy in life. You put your heart in someone’s hands and trust them to keep it safe. You put your heart in my hands, Sophie. You put your heart in your mother’s hands. And we gave our hearts to you in return. Maybe you could learn to give Jason your heart, too.”

Jason sat on the riverbank looking at the water. He was glad he could finally see it the way it was supposed to look, with its bluish tint and murky depths. But the one person that he wanted to revel in the world’s wonders with didn’t want anything to do with him. Honestly, he felt like he should have expected that.

Why would she want him anything to do with him? He had barely caught the girl's name. Sophie.

Jason stood up, preparing to walk back to his car and go home. Instead, he fell into the fast moving river.

Sophie was on her way to the river, one of her places to escape to, when her heart stopped. Something was wrong; something bad was happening. Her vision flashed gray. Then again, for longer this time. Jason. Something was wrong with Jason. Sophie pulled over, panicking. What was happening? Where would she go to find him? She couldn't just do nothing -

He goes to the river a lot, like you do. Jean's words echoed in Sophie's mind. The river. She was almost there; it was her only chance.

Sophie dashed out of her car and ran.

Her vision kept fading out more and more, making her feel sick. She ran along the riverbank, trying to focus.

"Jason! Jason!" Sophie called out. You idiot. He can't hear you. Still running, Sophie spotted something moving a few feet ahead. An arm. Sophie put on more speed, trying to keep up with him. When she was close enough, she jumped in.

The water was freezing, even with the sun still up. The gray vision lasted longer than ever, the color almost completely gone. Sophie fought against the current to reach Jason. She managed to grab his arm-

And he slipped out of reach once more. It's over, she thought. He's going to die. I'm going to die. What a tragic love story. Goodbye, mom. Goodbye, Jean-

But no, Sophie struggled harder and succeeded in holding Jason with a firmer grip than before. Seeming to move agonizingly slow, Sophie swam to the riverbank. At last, she pulled herself and Jason out of the river, where she spluttered and coughed while trying to catch her breath.

Jason.

Sophie looked over at Jason. His skin was pale, and his hair had come out of its bun from the exertion. Sophie moved towards him quickly, holding Jason up and attempting to force the water out of his lungs. It's too late. Sophie began to cry.

Jason coughed.

"Jason!" He struggled for a few minutes to catch his breath.

"Sophie?" he breathed out when he finally regained his voice. "I...what happened?"

"You fell. Or something. I don't know. And I...my vision started to go gray. Like you were

dying." Her voice caught on that last word. "I was on my way here anyway.

So I came. I hoped you would be here-"

"How did you know that I came here?"

"Um. My best friend, Jean. She talked to your friend. Anyway-"

"But I thought you hated me?" Sophie stopped rambling.

"I don't hate you. I...I'm scared. I never wanted a soulmate. I never had that fascination all the other kids seemed to have. I guess I never really saw the point in soulmates, in having a 'destiny'. Having a life you didn't choose. And, well, even if I did hate you, I still wouldn't just let you die." Jason laughed weakly.

"I'm scared too, Sophie. I always was scared about having a soulmate. About not being good enough for someone, about letting someone I care about down. About hurting someone." For a moment, neither of them said anything.

"I was always scared about being hurt." Sophie admitted finally. Jason thought for a minute.

"Maybe we don't have to be. I don't believe all the stuff they say about soulmates, about how your life is instantly happier. Brighter, maybe, because of the colors. But it's people who have the power to make us happy. And that doesn't matter who you are. It doesn't have to be your soulmate. My best friend makes me happy. I'm sure yours does too. So, yeah, I guess we're 'made for each other', or whatever. But it's up to us to make it real." Sophie smiled, and for the first time, she felt something different about soulmates. Hope.

"So...friends?" Sophie asked tentatively. Jason beamed. His smile made his blue eyes appear lighter, and in them Sophie saw some of the same hope reflected back at her.

"Friends."

CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

Emely Abon Spend too much time playing video games than making important life choices. Asked to leave more times than asked to stay. hmu @cleanordreaming

Caleb D. Ackley is an Idaho native who, though he lives and goes to school in Southern California, doesn't particularly like the sun. In addition to writing and staying inside, his hobbies include drinking unhealthy amounts of chocolate milk, walking (in the shade), and contemplating how he, as an English major, should probably enjoy the writings of Michel Foucault more than he actually does.

Bryan Angel wants to know if it's too late for his bio to be a kiss emoji (yes, it is). His poem, "How to Eat a Mango," is this year's winner of the Angelo Carli Poetry Prize (First Place, Poetry).

Jennifer Baker is a poetry enthusiast, cat mom, and storyteller. In her free time, she plays piano and guitar. In her really free time, she can be found at a coffee shop writing a chapter of a book she hopes to actually finish one day.

Enrique Edgar Bautista's work revolves around the theme of insecurity in oneself and the imaginative lies one must portray to show otherwise. These obscure entities derive from ones' bleak subconscious, then are portrayed in the exterior layer, like a mask. He is fascinated by today's science fiction pop culture. Therefore, his work explores themes such as creatures, aliens, monsters, and the unknown.

Patrick Brennan is a graphic design major at Palomar College, a pianist, an aspiring jack-of-all-trades artist, and a recovering Floridian.

Collin Brown is a student at Palomar College.

Ashley Carlos does not like to talk about herself because it takes time away from more important things like coming up with ideas for her mystery novel, playing with her corgi Portia, and binge watching TV shows. If she had to say something, it would be, "I have spent too many years here."

Freddy Cleveland is a former English major at Palomar College. He is currently a student at the University of California, Berkeley.

Elizabeth DeLaGarza, is a 20 year old who spends her days trying to reinvent everyday life through her eclectic writing, photography, and DIY projects.

Kristen De Pue is 15 years old and is a current 9th grade student at Vista High School. Her activities and interests include reading, creative writing, and learning about various subjects, such as science, history, and world issues. School is her main priority, and she works hard to achieve her academic goals. Her story, "Everything Is Blue," is this year's winner of the Bravura High School Writing Contest.

Maya Dumas is a 20-something year old adult who likes to work on art related studies and stress about not working on said art related studies every waking second. She strives to work at a well-known animation studio that gives great dental and health coverage. Here's to hoping all her dreams come true. Her piece, "Drive Thru," is this year's First Place prizewinner in Visual Arts.

Cassandra Eade is both an introvert and a storyteller, which is unfortunate because though she is far more eloquent on paper than in person, she just can't seem to stop talking.

Audrey Ellis is an 18 year old student at Palomar College from Carlsbad, California. She has three cats named Gaia, Winston, and Boo, a bird named Poncho, and a fish named Joey. In her spare time, Audrey likes to play video games, watch TV, and spend time with her friends. She hopes to transfer to University of San Francisco to get her Masters in Nursing. Her story, "Rainbows," is this year's Second Place prizewinner for Prose.

Scott Engrav interest in photography was renewed by his experiences in photographing his travels across Asia after his retirement from the Army. He enrolled in Palomar College's photo program in the fall of 2016. He is interested in fine art photography, and works in both digital and film. He is especially interested in large format black and white film photography.

Brayden Erickson is a student at Palomar College, an inhabitant of planet Earth, born in the town of Huntington Beach, has been through twenty-three winters, a

jack of a few trades but master of none. When asked what his favorite book would be he would say, "Hmm..."; he likes cheap red wine from Rite Aid. His armpits smell sometimes and he doesn't like to wash his pants.

Ella Feiring Ellery Mar Connor. Editor of editors. Beset by assassins.
@ellerymarconnor on instagram

Leo S. Fernandez is a student, writer, and editor with a background in literature, psychology, and armchair sitting.

Aimee Flores is a creature that brightens up at the toughest hour. Not so easy to judge, She observes the world and opens herself. Always appreciative of the freedom and happiness in her life!

Doug Glessner is a Retired US Navy Veteran of 31 years, whom has always had a passion for woodworking and design. His instruction at Palomar's CFT Program is enabling him to further his woodworking knowledge thru their various classes, and incorporate his Asian Design ideas into reality, Doug is progressing towards his Associates Degree before he starts his own Jewelry Box Shop making custom jewelry boxes.

Niko Holt is a student at Palomar College.

Zahra Hooshyar is a student at Palomar College. Her piece, "Fishy," is this year's Second Place prizewinner in Visual Arts.

Cathy Huang is a young writer in San Marcos, California. An aspiring librarian and dandy, she dreams of one day resurrecting Oscar Wilde and Ernest Hemingway, putting them in the same room, and seeing which wins in a fight. Her story, "Furor Poeticus," is this year's winner of the Jack Mawhinney Fiction Prize (First Place, Prose).

Zechariah Hurd wanders the lower planes of existence. He still screams. He is forever screaming within the silence of his soul.

Bree Jarvis is a student at Palomar College, who gets through her academic career by petting puppies and staying up till 2 A.M. watching Netflix. She will attend San Francisco State University in the Fall of 2018 and for the time being she couldn't think of anything more creative to say about herself.

Maggie "Mara" Johnson grew up in San Diego and has been attending Palomar College since high school. She is majoring in psychology and minoring in art. In her free time she enjoys drawing, spending time with animals, and playing video games. In fact, a good portion of her art is inspired by *The Elder Scrolls*, a favorite

game series of hers.

Robert Kerr fell in love with woodworking while making a few pieces of furniture in high school shop classes. After a brief forty-five year hiatus caused by life (marriage, children, career, etc.) he is thankful that he is now able to spend more time indulging himself in the joys of working with wood.

Yusei Kinoshita is a student at Palomar College.

Jerin Kirby: an amalgamation of half realized ideas, chronic depressive moods, painful optimism, and a craving for breakfast burritos made manifest in flesh

Angel Klawiter has loved drawing since she was little and has been doing photorealism drawing ever since the eighth grade. Her favorite things to draw are wild animals, especially large cats. Angel hopes to use art to express the beauty of the natural world as she pursues becoming a veterinarian.

Logan Klingler is on fire. Please, someone help. Oh gosh it hurts. Please help him. He is on fire. Help him.

Kenjamin C. Liddle is Shitty Wizard from Southern California. After decades floating in the ether between Life and Oblivion, he finally found a publication to print one of his awful self-insertion fanfictions. He enjoys hallucinogens, casual strolls along the shore, and radical leftist politics. He wishes to be the modern day Mary Shelley, but would settle for being the next L. Ron Hubbard. Lacerate your sanity by following "will.of.the.mind.razer" on Instagram.

Brianna Love is a passionate art student on her way to becoming an illustrator. When she isn't daydreaming she's busy sketching, inking or painting. Brianna is rarely seen without a sketchbook in her arms or ink staining her hands. She dreams of bringing people joy and inspiration through her artwork and loves seeing the smiles on the faces of those who receive it.

Ryan Marlowe creates in order to be present with and better understand his feelings so he can follow them like road signs along his life's journey.

Elisa Elaine Luevanos is a professional illustrator, graphic/web designer based in Escondido, CA, which you can view at ladymaverick81.com. She is currently completing what is hopefully her final semester at Palomar.

Alondra Marquina is a student at Palomar College. Her photo collection, "Why They Left," is this year's Third Place prizewinner in Visual Arts.

Miguel Martinez gets by, doesn't demand much outside of being a good writer,

thinks too much about what to write, and walks around Palomar and his town, Vista. Didn't want to quote anyone or force in an idea.... But seems to always wing it and make it out alive.

Isaia Masaniai is a student at Palomar Community College. He's different from other girls because he doesn't care about stuff like Prom or the Big Game. Instead of gabbing about lipstick or swooning over the popular sportsman, he eats lunch, wears Heelys, and consorts with the dark forces beyond the veil. He knows he's quirky. He's not a goth, or a prep, or a nerd. He's just Isaia. *Dirty Little Secret by All American Rejects plays*

Alexander Mata is a student at Palomar College.

Kathy Matthes is a Palomar student who is studying Graphic Communications – Imaging & Publishing and Multimedia & Web. Since 2011, she has produced 16 stories 2music, which are her flash fiction stories narrated over synchronized orchestral film music. She has a children's book and a collection of her flash fiction available on Amazon. She loves reading and writing Victorian/Edwardian mysteries. Her story, "The Boy Who Was Loved by the Wind," is this year's Third Place prizewinner for Prose.

Monreal is a simple human that loves to spend his time eating, hanging out with friends, playing music, painting, reading, writing, long walks on the beach, picnics at the beach, naps on the beach, beers on the beach, sunsets on the beach, observing pretty people on the beach, & conversing with strangers & fellow musicians on the beach.

When **Ezekiel Mortensen** isn't stressing out about school and his future, he spends his time writing music, playing games, writing music for games, and playing those games too.

All work and no play makes **Adrian Munoz** a dull boy.

It is no secret that **Victoria Navarrete's** comic is not meant to ruffle any feathers but she believes that art, like most things, is more fun when you just wing it. Her ideas are mostly made on the fly, and thus, she sometimes has no rhyme nor reason for what she does. She loves learning other languages as well. In her words, "Eiffel for French."

Meow...Meow...Meow. Translation: **Nicole Padgett** is an English major who is looking forward to transferring next semester. She loves to read, her favorite book being *Alice in Wonderland*, she also likes speaking to her cats, writing, and taking long naps. The hope that one day she will get a job in publishing has been with her for a few years now; however, until then she keeps busy trying to catch the red dot.

Stephen Page is a student at Palomar College.

Caitlin Parker is a 19 year old writer specializing in prose and poetry. Although much of her work has a dark undertone, it manages to connect with readers on a level otherwise untouched. Her previous publications include a feature in her high school's literary magazine, *The Cave*. With dreams of teaching troubled youth about channeling their immense experiences into literary masterpieces, Caitlin is currently working towards an English degree at Palomar College.

During the day, **Jason Paul**, enjoys watch anime, watching movies, listening to music, and reading books. At night, he is training to slay enemies with his ever growing katana collection.

David Peabody is a student in his last semester at Palomar College. He will be transferring to Humboldt State University next fall, where he plans to pursue a degree in psychology. He enjoys using photography as a creative outlet and to connect more deeply with nature while hiking or traveling.

Connie Pennington is stuck in the seventies; please help.

Ava Phillips is a poet and house-plant connoisseur currently chasing her dream of becoming a judge on *The Great British Baking Show*. (She is neither British nor a baker. The numerous attempts to convince her of these facts have failed utterly.) If she's not at home, you might find her visiting the local graveyard, where she leaves donut holes and bobby pins as offerings for the dead.

Paula Phillips has a quirky sense of humor with quirky little people stuck in her quirky little head. She's finally setting them free in black and white with sprinkles of color between the lines.

S. Raine Porath is a shifting, amorphous mass in a well-pressed pair of khakis. Raine is making social blunders in the astral plane and hopes that you have a swell go of things.

Amanda Raines is a photography major here at Palomar whose goal is to obtain an Associate's Degree before hopefully transferring to Sacramento State. Raines enjoys photographing everything from landscapes to sports games and aspires to turn her passion into a career. Besides taking pictures, she loves to travel, go hiking, play the ukulele, and watch classic films.

Raffaele Reade is a photography student at Palomar College, and has been photographing for nearly 6 years. His photography generally features an emphasis on shape and texture. His graphic design background often comes through in

his photography, primarily in his compositions. He's currently in the progress of completing his Associates of Science degree in photography from Palomar College.

Citlali A. Rodriguez Gonzalez is a persistent Palomar college student with an interest in arts, design, and architecture. As a person who came from other country and has experienced the difficulties of being a stranger in a new country, she truly believes that art is the most effective and universal way to communicate with others, make people smile and make them see things from different aspects. She enjoys art, its process as well as the positive impact that art can have in others' life.

Joel Rodriguez is a student at Palomar College. His poem, "The Pines Mask the Sun," is this year's Second Place prizewinner in Poetry.

Growing up, **Juan Romero** witnessed a multitude of graffiti in his community and it truly captivated him. From his perspective, graffiti is the most prominent contemporary art form and his own personal catalyst into the art world. Alongside this, Romero has a deep affinity for history and hip-hop where graffiti subculture is one of four major pillars. That is the cultural and mental fuel that gets incorporated into all his art work that range in mediums.

Delaney Ryan is a 20 year old student based in Encinitas, CA. She is creative across many mediums including poetry, theatre, painting and music. She is in the process of producing a chapbook for public consumption, and she regularly posts poems on Instagram under @del.iberately. This is her first time being a published poet. She would like to thank you for reading her poems and supporting local student artists.

Emily Schmidt is in her final semester at Palomar. Her interests are wide and varied, encompassing both visual art and the written word, as well as many other things. Her work reflects her eager pursuit of knowledge, her appreciation for what is beautiful, her love for other people, and her desire to live a life that positively affects others.

Christa Schnick is an eternally tired college student just trying to get her degrees. She plans to get her BA from CSUSM in the fall of 2020 and a MFA from UCSD, but we'll see about that UCSD thing.

This is a bio for **Joelle Schumacher**. This biography will do nothing in the grand scheme of things to change the course of history, but it will cost perhaps a penny for the ink it takes to print it.

Laura Stanton, a loving lemon drop that encourages you to chase your dreams

into the realm of reality.

Lawrence John Szafraniec took to woodworking at a very early age and continues through today. He honed His skills at the Cabinet/Furniture Program at Palomar College. He uses locally sourced wood products for His work whenever possible because It is not only a smart thing to do, it's the right thing to do. His woodworking business, Woodcraft by Lawrence John, makes architectural reproductions and art inspired turnings, and his work can be seen at local Art and Craft shows. Larry is married and lives with His wife in San Diego.

Alexis Szedlacsek is a photographer and student at Palomar College. She has been interested in photography for her entire life but really started to take it seriously about six years ago. Her work is centered in minimalism and clean imagery. Alexis hopes to continue her career in photography after graduating from Palomar in the wedding and portraiture business but continue her fine art work on the side as personal projects and potentially show in galleries.

Karen Tappendorf has been creative for most of her life. She can remember a family friend giving her a gift of art supplies at age 8 or 9. Karen has taken many diversified art classes at Palomar and has learn many new techniques. She used to have her own jewelry business where she made, sold and taught wire wrapping. Karen plans on learning more and creating large yard type sculptures.

Kiriko Tsukakoshi was born and raised in Tokyo and is a Technical Theatre Arts major at Palomar College. Kiriko's Instagram is @kiriko_tokyo and @kiriko_tokyo_art .

Erica Wahlgren is a former English major at Palomar College. She transferred to UCSD where she completed her B.A. in Literature. She is now pursuing her M.A. at CSUSM, researching constructed spaces in both literature and video games, and is preparing to teach composition in the fall. Her poem, "Ferris Wheel," is this year's Third Place prizewinner in Poetry.

Taylor Wiestling is a crazy cat lady who spends her time writing poetry, perfecting knife-sharp eyeliner, and practicing witchcraft.

Aubree Wiedmaier is a photography major here at Palomar College. She spends most her free time watching Netflix, playing video games, or hanging out with her adorable black tabby cat, Taffy. Aubree has found a new love in hiking, landscape photography and shooting with her 35mm Minolta. She hopes to someday take classes in alterative processes for photography as well as more film classes.

Cameron Winters agrees with Ernest Hemingway, who said, "There is nothing to writing. All you do is sit down at a typewriter and bleed."