

Enjambes
2020 & 2021



Enjambéd

Spring 2020 & 2021

2020 Edition

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Note from the English Graduate Association

I remember the day, Wednesday, March 11th, 2020. I was chatting with then EGA President, Percy Thomas. We had just finished a conversation about the *Enjambed* 2020 launch event - trying to decide what food we should serve. By then, the news of COVID-19 had started to storm the country, with a few cases popping up here and there. Mayor Eric Garcetti then announced a shelter-in-place for the next two weeks. Government officials then extended those two weeks into a month. That turned into the remainder of 2020. We were left with no printed editions, no launch party, unsure if we were able to see anyone safely.

To make up for it, we decided to release the edition electronically – utilizing our brand-new website to publish the 2020 edition. The event went well –our artist showcased their beautiful works of art. We felt that this alternative was best for that moment. Still, we were left wondering if we a printed edition would be possible while simultaneously putting together the 2021 edition.

Uncertain about the future of a printed version, we got the green light from Dr. Randy Cauthen to do so. We felt the need to combine both the 2020 & 2021 editions of *Enjambed* in this double anthology. The theme of 2020's "Crisis" directly inspired 2021's "Rebuilding" theme – so it was only natural to print these in one paper-bound edition. At last, we finally have the physical copy of all the creative works from current, or now, alumni students of Cal State Dominguez Hills. We hope this printed copy finds you well. Thank you for waiting patiently. Enjoy!

- Chris Pigao: EGA Vice-President (20) / President ('21)

SPRING 2020: “Crisis”

A crisis is surprising, creates uncertainty, threatens our ability to reach our goals, and most importantly, demands we act. In a time of innumerable crises, from the environmental to the personal, “it is better to speak” than remain silent (Audre Lorde).

POETRY

To Whomever - Ashley Smith

I hope that you, dear reader,
are not swayed with fear to the collapsing world around you.
I hope you aren't collapsing with it.
I hope you are standing on something firm –
something that extends you yet is connected to the empowered
pieces of you.
I hope you find comfort,
even if you happen to find a slither of it in this.
I hope you give your energy to something
someplace
someone
that's capable of giving it back.
I hope you know your beauty
extends any external blemish you feel concerns you.
I hope you love, fully, even to those who've hurt you.
It will take time, and it may seem impossible, but one day give it a
try.
I hope your tears are provoked from laughter,
laughter that comes back, randomly, in the midst of your silence.
I hope you forgive others to give yourself ease.
I promise you won't have to ever talk to them again, or if it's
directed towards yourself –
understand that you both are worth a second
third
tenth
a lifetime
supply of chances.
I hope I've encouraged you,
and remember that this is to whomever
so you don't feel left out.

minutes after he's asked what's on your mind-
Ashley Smith

she paced her breathing as her grasp tightened by the second.
the blanket was wrinkled, her eyes beginning to water.
the room begins to spin
her mind was levitating, drifting, floating to the ceiling –
she gasps and catches herself.
she realizes that she hasn't actually lifted from the bed.
her knees buckled, a ride she didn't know she was taking.
her lips were shivering, yet she felt
the warmth of her cheeks.
her brown eyes met his, and her smile was distracting enough
to allude his attention from the small tears making their escape.
"Nothing."

PsychoBabel - Rachelle Delle

We are wanderers from the four corners
Carrying our mother-tongue like a sweet burden
The inevitable winds of time twisting us together,
Stirring our hearts to pour out our mouths.
Our languages coil upon themselves like serpents.
A writhing clamor of knots.

We begin to mix orthography with our tongues.
We build brick words with our lips.
The edges of our teeth cutting them to fit.
Walls of sentences stretch ceaselessly skywards,
Casting shadows over the mountain's blunted crown
Slicing the slumbering clouds,
Stabbing the widow's veil of the heavens.

One elastic language binds the world together
Gripping her face tightly like a muzzle.
We are her voice now.
We spend our lives, our children's' lives, numberless generations
Building upon our scaffolding of syntax.
All our stories, her stories, his stories, histories, surmounting
nonsense,
But we work incessantly into the years.
Just for a chance to touch the face of God.

So, when the last generation clambers up our skeletal tower
Perching proudly on its swaying zenith
Full of exhausted defiance and
Stretching out his beggar's hand—
Where shall we go from here?
Will we collapse into imminent inertia?
Or might we toil on
Until the whole world is buried beneath our industry,
Blackened like oil by our weapons of words?

Natural Disasters - Melissa Figueroa

What does one do when
They've gotten so used to the storms?
The frequency of strong
Ocean waves and winds
Moved in sync with one another.
And then suddenly,
The earthquakes came to an end,
Tornadoes stopped spinning,
And hurricane winds have calmed.
All of Earth's vibrations ceased.
And when all was left in silence,
One could stop and listen to her
As she caught her breath.
Her cries to God had been answered,
And the universe was in her favor.
The Earth was finally free
From her countless storms
That had no mercy on her.
If she could speak,
She'd say she is at peace.

Titles - Zachary Aquino

To feel like you're a destined disaster
For events you can't remember
Is the most frustrating joke one could live;
I'm left with piecing together a home
Video in my head, and I settle
And watch like some scared child that's crying
Too close to all the horrors on TV.
Although I have no memory of it,
I see you with my mother, and while she
Weeps under the roof meant to protect her
I vividly watch you leave us behind.
It is like having a bad trip without
The high as I must live as your spitting
Image knowing I carry your vile curse.
But like the baby I was I will grow
To shatter what you had written in stone
With my teeth for I have my mother's love
To break this cycle for my future child.

Familia - Felipe De La Rosa

Sitting edge side of the handicap walkway,
he holds a bottle of Familiar.
His broad fingers frantically run through each
pocket of his clothes,
looking for his life companion, a bottle opener.
Instead a torn photo is solely taken out of his breast pocket
from the search for his life companion.
A clear line marking its way flush with his cheeks
can only tell the pain he recollects.
The sadness blooms within his heart and the lines turn
into a stream, a stream of lost faces.
Like everyone else, I can only see
anguish pouring out in torrents.
Esposa, Mamá, Hijo, Hija, Papá.
Wife, Mom, Son, Daughter, Dad.
The torn photo can only be to us the one we would lose
our breaths for.
The photo makes its way back into his breast close to home,
then places his face amongst his torn jacket.
Tenderly he places the bottle onto his molars
and with a downward motion opens his salvation.
The bottle of Familiar steadily flows into him,
nourishing his sadness. Attempting to bring back
those who stay close to home.

Illegal Fireworks - Felipe De La Rosa

Fireworks flew over our roofs that night
A symphony of lights illuminated our paths

A magical moment between the two of us
Long roof top nights; endless rambles

*What if they take me?
We settle down tomorrow mi amor*

Our fear grew immense like the night sky that surrounded us
The only hope of light were the fireworks

Resembling our love,
Passion raging between the two,

Burning illegally in the open sky
Leaving trails of our hot fiery love

A shriek of lights burst through our dream world
Badges thrown in our faces

My heart sank,
My fear became reality

One more day was needed
Before my life was turned to I.C.E

Jointless,
My future vanished before me

Her ride to Cal interrupted
Future family of four evaporated

Who ever said loving was illegal?

An Unstoppable Object - Anthony J. Velasco

The stars above shine bright
With promise of love
Though their distance marks them
Cold.

On an ancient beach
The Ocean smashes against the bluffs
Fierce. Strong.
The assault is endless
Though It slows at times, it never ends.

The Earth
Weathers each attack – impossibly,
Unerringly, stubborn and immovable.
But each attack takes away.
With each assault, the Ocean
Takes a part of the earthrock.

Under the cold, distant gaze
of a million fiery stars,
The Ocean wears down the Earth.

Under the cold, dead gaze of a billion years,
The Ocean swells,
The Earth swept away.

Nothing Changes - Anthony J. Velasco

A day like any other,
No ideation of clouds,
the wind breathless, uninspired.

The sun shines violently on the land
Spreading hands of heat and choking
Always choking
The life below, its anger swelling.

Unbearable, the giver's rage;
A cataclysm of energy bears down on every home.

The barren earth is a hardened veteran
To this woeful reality,
No longer the green earth of years forgotten.

There were daisies in the gardens
Once Upon a Time.

There were children in the driveways
Once Upon a Time.

There were stories in their ears
Joy in their faces
Love in their laughter

Breath in their lungs.

Once Upon a Time,
The clouds rolled in,
Gave life to the land,
Breath to the air.

Too many years; not enough miracles.
The promised rain falls.

Once, there were people
Upon the streets of this town
A clean world, with
Time for the living.

tree bark spiral - michelle roldan morales

In an alternative universe,
I am: a squirrel.
curiosity emerges from
my pitch-black eyes—
impulsively
galloping
parts of the
world around me.

The desire to disrupt spaces
and coexist as a whole
makes my heart rush
to the orchestra
Directed by the fury
of the rain;
droplets
that peck the grass;
beginning
to sprout new souls.

On the cloudiest days—
the shapes and faces
that emerge
from the hypnotizing
iris blue sky
take me on a
never-ending
tree bark spiral—
into the wildest realms
of the underground soil.

I stare at the ant army
that salutes my pursuit
to keep digging and
unleash my wonders to
the world —
a banana nut bread crumb.

Lunch Pale - Christopher Pigao

Blue thermos, silver lining
contains my 1 or 2 options:
krafted or home-made
plastic, color dyed
FDA approved junk
for the generation spazzing over the colorful characters
from a 4KIDZ generational
regurgitation from a land
where the sun shows up
east bound.

Mom reminds me the night before
“pack this and not that”
but she leaves at 6,
and at that time, I
shuffle the bits and pieces
in favor of the products
of the National Biscuit Corporation.

My comrades sit in unison.
nibbling at plastic containers
with white rice
or mashed potatoes
and a choice of meat sautéed
with handcrafted artisan
love.

It makes sense when they
rise to the fields
with an atypical propagandish smile.
All I'm left with is the
dissatisfaction
that my mom never

made the container parties
that my peers enjoyed.

But then again,
my greedy allegiance
to the mascots
who occupy my subconsciousness
overtook my freewill
and became a result of the product.

Bento - Christopher Pigao

You cook rice with
the 1st line of
your index finger.

The meat you
cook should be
brown, if you
see red then
make it brown
don't get sick.

Vegetables are
the most important
part of this
or else you'll
get sick
or won't grow up
and develop
properly.
Don't throw out.

Only water;
no soda
no juice
and please
take it easy
with the snacks
because manufacturing
won't make you
natural.

Cook on the stove
hot hot hot hot
lower the fire
so that smoke alarms
don't hear you.
and create a meal
that you eat
for our days here.
Got that?
"Huh?"

Buoyancy - Pamela Acosta

Drowning myself in fancy liquor,
eating junk so
my heart grows thicker

I wither away purposefully

to erase my steps walking backwards
and forwards
dilute my pain
with your pocket chemistry,
back alley medicine,
forged love
and pill prescriptions

I can no longer make distinctions between real
or fake
or am I
choosing to ignore the signs of an imminent fate?
am i doomed to fail
or rise above
this toxic hate?
of myself
mostly of you, but also of me and the way we think
the world should be,
night after night
my worlds end a little
I feel it as my heart
goes brittle
at twenty-two I am
already an old woman,
tired and teased
with only a glimpse of possibility of what life
could really be

winter '19 - Pamela Acosta

living
is so hard
when all you want is to be dead

everyday
theres a war
inside my head, my heart a revolutionary threat

your own worst enemy you sabotage alliances then play dead

because anything is easier than dealing with
your dread

CPR - Pamela Acosta

im choking on my pain
it sits in my throat
inside of my chest
it swallows my words
& asks
if im ok
im choking on vomit
(last night's Pacificos the words
that i said)
ham & eggs
im choking on
my feelings pumping out like a serpent
peeling out of its skin pumping out the gunk the lies the truth
the mess
you left
in my head
heart mind & soul

im pumping out the pain

Chemical Burns - Brenda Sanchez

You live in the walls of my brain and heart, your name etched in blood right across.

I try to scrub, erase your trace, and write other lovers' names in darker shades,

But you dug your nails in so deep, you've left a scar consisting of 6 goddamn letters.

Thought if I threw bleach at the wall, you'd bubble and burn and blister away, but with

every chemical added you just stained more, you seeped in, and spread your poison

further into my bones.

I'm just glad that I can wash the floor of blood you left behind with my bedsheets that

you were once entangled in. With the bedsheets that you once suffocated me in, so I

can hide the relationship you once suffocated me in.

And once I'm done, I'll hang you up. I'll let you soak and simmer and scorch in the sun,

much like how you left me waiting for you when you were done.

In time, I know you'll fade in the harsh rays, and I'll pretend I don't notice the chemical

burns you caused.

Don't Bring your Guns to School, Son. Leave Your Guns at Home - Kyle Bigham

Our Lady of Perpetual Sorrow watches over her students as
gunfire replaces class bells

And chaos sets in,

unstoppable fear

becoming unspeakable reality.

Recategorized as a factor of life

Terrifying, but not unexpected, like

Gum pain after dental work.

And the suffering ends,

And the suffering ends.

Only to begin again,

Prompted to begin again.

Praying for safety and

awaiting footsteps.

It's not the teacher,

Echoes more sinister.

The squeak of sneakers stop,

yelling, pleading

ended with seven punctuations

so loud your ears melt.

A laugh, and footsteps fade away.

Relief washes over you.

A horrifying

realization,

Jake died,

You lived.

**That's when your suffering begins
And our suffering begins,
As we mourn the death of the innocent
And as we bury our friends**

Then what's left?

Sifting through the wreckage?
There is more than just desks,
lying in room 321.

While the news cycle demeans the sacrifices
and heroics of everyday people,
for a 20 second sound bite.
"Take me instead!"

And now... a word from our sponsors.

As common-sense bills
sit on the blood-soaked desk
of those too compromised to lead.

**And the suffering never ends,
And the suffering never ends.
No need to begin again,
Because the news cycle knows, it'll happen again.**

The shouts of children,

"Oh god, please help"

Ignored, called **CRISIS ACTORS.**

As parents go home to empty bedrooms,
teeming with unrealized dreams.

In exchange for cash... and

votes

and built on greed.

A fair trade it would seem,
this American dream,
has always been built
on the back of suffering.

**But this suffering will eventually end,
But this suffering will eventually end.
When all the children are dead,
And all the money is spent.**

The Impact of an Athlete - Katie Colln

The greatest success is to impact a heart,
to live a life full of passion and generous love.
A man who does this well finds his art.

His art was sport and that gave him his start.
But since his reach was wide and far above,
his greatest success was impacting a heart.

As that mamba mentality set him apart,
no goal was too big when push came to shove.
A man who does this well finds his art.

By carving his own path but creating a chart,
laying the groundwork to follow and one to be in awe of,
his greatest success was impacting those hearts.

Retirement brought him a beautiful restart,
sharing with young Gigi his basketball love.
A man who does this well finds his art.

We break for so sudden they had to depart.
But we remember, as our tears follow the mourning dove,
his greatest success was impacting our hearts.
Kobe did this well and lived out his art.

It's Just a Prolonged Sleep - Willie Robert Heredia

Stitches in the shape of a horseshoe
with dry blood, on your left temple.

Two tubes spill out your mouth
and wires attached to your chest,
connected to a monitor.

The mountainous lines flicker
from left to right in a steady rhythm.

Your chest rises in a slight,
almost robotic-like manner
but just enough to give me hope.

I see a bag full of urine,
means you have not given up.

Your hands are cold but I can feel
a sense of life pulsing within, fighting.

I know you are there, wandering about
in a wilderness deeper than the ocean.

Maybe you're reliving the day you
officially became a mechanic.
Maybe you're talking to your mom
trying to justify the Mexican flag tattoo
on your back, or the dragon one on your leg.
Grandma always hated those tattoos.
Or maybe we're playing catch again,
with the football you bought me
just a month ago ... remember?

I know you can hear me.

I despise the bullet that invaded
the privacy of your skull.

Grandma told me to stay strong,
she said, "Siempre confía en Dios."

I guess she's right,
they say moms always are

so He must have a plan.

Please stay with us tío junior –
may these words keep you tethered to this world.

Stretched Hands - La Kierrea Jenkins

But that day was different
That day she was tired
That day she listened to the ancestors
When they told her to call God
To go after everything her heart desired
That day she became bold enough to stand against her fears
That day she made no excuses
Patted herself on the back for wiping her own tears
She let go of everything that disturbed her peace
Went searching for the open door that would finally set her free
She was no longer a shadow and wanted to let her light shine
She told the Lord she'd use this day as a testament of His Glory
She'd tell the world how much in shambles her life was in until
He changed her story
How she wanted to give up
How she was in a dark place
But because of Him she was saved by His Mercy and Grace

Thrive In the World - Maria De La Torre

Passion and Sympathy are alike.
Like two worlds underneath each other.
The colors of the rose,
Grow as fast as the road.
Two miles away, are like the feathers in the zone.

A new territory has grown.
No matter the size, it's as wise as the sky.
You can grow up high.
Like the mountain sky.

Tears and comfort are near.
The thrive begins, as the mountain roars.
Curiosity and Compassion are alike.

The sun can come up alive.
It's the heart that keeps it alive.
Never underestimate two worlds apart.

Mi Family - Maria De La Torre

My family is I all I got, it's me who asks a lot.

Do I know what I want?

The concha's in the night.

The family I always love.

It's the leader of the years that flies, but family's always around.

Cherish those to the side, left and right.

One mighty fly and it will elapse.

To papa and the lady, I say you can.

Like money can fly from the other side.

Never let go and never fail.

You have the power inside to look around.

Glaze the sides and know that people will always be by your side.

Affair of Time - Sydney Sonnier

There was a time, where everything was perfect
birds chirping, flowers growing
people smiling and the sky bluer than blue
a time of the unthinkable
there wasn't any drama nor jails to be found
everyone was who they were supposed to be

falling in love wasn't something unbelievable to happen
it was a part of the normality
it was unimaginable for someone not to be
children playing joyfully without any worries
and to those who'd stay inside would be questioned why
a time of the impeccable, unimaginable, superb society.

However, look at time currently
the time of the flawed, defective, substandard society
it's like we throw away time as if it was worthless,
but ask for it again when it's no longer available
what are we actually doing to our community?

Drama here, drama there, drama everywhere
people agitated, angry, and miserable on a daily basis
is this really what we became?
To a world that is apparently so perfect
it has a questionable way of showing it
why can't we go back to a time when it was actually complete?

It's like our mind wanting more, but our hearts saying no
a constant fight at war
that led our society to be what it is today,
but unusually time is the only one losing
the moments we could have shared,
the hours we could have been laughing,

the days we could have been exceeding
sadly, "we could" wasn't enough, so time began to vanish.

Second by second
minute by minute
hour by hour
day by day
where did the time go?

Just as humans, time also has feelings
it hates being taken advantage
it hates feeling less important
it hates knowing something is out there being treated better
so, it starts to disappear
quicker and faster as moments past
and one day it'll cease to even exist.

Verses - Daniel Mastache

Poetry soothes my wounds,
Wounds that won't heal
Overnight

Words that convey peace,
At a time the soul
Is not at ease

Loss - Justine Martins

I woke up one morning
Except it wasn't like any other morning
I woke up **the** morning
The morning my whole world would change

Everything around me seemed *normal*
Normal at the time
Then suddenly the phone rang
Then my whole world stood still

By the urgency I knew
Something profound was about to reveal
Moms voice shook
I thought it was my dad

I was wrong
It was *you*
You were gone
There was nothing I could do

Curiosity turned quickly into panic
Shock transformed into anger
I wanted someone to blame
I couldn't find the villain

I soon became the monster
The one that I was looking for
The morning that you died
A part of me was no more

The bottle couldn't numb
The smoke couldn't fill me
Music seemed dull

Life didn't seem worth living

I put the pain in a little box
Kept it deep within me
Then I became the pain
Then no one wanted to be near me

I hated everyone who spoke of you
Their condolences filled me with misery
I wanted someone to lock me away
And throw away the key

It hurts every single day
I can't remember what it feels like
To not think about you
It keeps me up some nights

I wasn't closest to you
So a part of me feels guilt
Not because I didn't love you
But I can't imagine how your family feels

I don't know how to deal with death
I wasn't wired this way
For now I guess I'll try my best
Just have to take it day by day

*In loving memory of
John Carlos Martins*

Wine - Belen Mercado

Lately I am drinking too much wine.
I am trying to remember who I am and who I was.
Trying to understand where I went wrong.
I had too many options to stay strong.
But I was tired of searching and waiting for someone amazing to come up.
I was lonely in this empty world.
My mind was predictable and perspicacious.
But my heart was easily trapped with fraudulent words that had no actions.
Sometimes I wonder if my love is insanely big for this world.
Other times I admit we live in a cynical world and everyone is lost.
Please don't point out my mistakes without experiencing the effects of an emotional rain.
Have you ever wished for something so badly, and when you almost got it, the opportunity left and you were constantly asking "por que."
If my heart could speak, ay Dios mío.
Diría más barbaridades y sin tomar ningún vino.
If I am honest, I don't even like the taste of wine.
All I want is a full glass of you while I am counting the stars.
There are many realities that I am trying to accept.
But right now I choose to sedate my pain.
I know it won't always be this way.
My beliefs in life request for me to live in dignity rather than in vices of vanity and disgrace.

Self - Samuel Meza

I write with a lethal wet pen; how can I stay dry when all I do is sweat. All the mind games which cause stress.

All the doubt that pours inside my head. I follow these roads, all alone and out of breath. Life is great is what I say outside as my soul torments.

It despises joy yet is convinced it needs it to survive, but when it feels a spark, all it wants to do is die. The light that shined once won't spark twice. Until then all I can do is curl up and lie.

Lie about how everything is alright, how I don't feel pain nor cry. How I suffocate just to stay alive, how I stay astray from all these eyes. How each and everyone one of them looks at me to despise, all I've done isn't good enough just to get by.

Through the crowd of people with a face like mine, the truth comes out only when we lie.

We lay in bed and think of all the times we were hurt, talking about how this is what we deserved. How a friend was an enemy and we won't amount to anything and all we do is hurt.

We cry ourselves to sleep just to wake up and go through this process feeling like we would rather be 6 feet under dirt. We don't value ourselves until someone sees our worth, we dictate our wellbeing by someone else's words.

We try so hard to please others by doing them favors while they walk out that door. The same one you opened and tried to keep closed. The same one with all the locks that were created by past friends who turned to foes.

The same ones who said you wouldn't make it at all because they couldn't see your growth. All I'm saying is keep at it and feel the flow. Reach your full potential and heights don't look below. Keep your head high never low, stay ahead and afloat. Better things are yet to come and you're about to glow.

Self, Part 2 - Samuel Meza

A lot of us want to be treated with respect, but those that try we neglect. We face our thoughts as we lay in bed, contemplating with them inside our head. We begin to go into the abyss, the darkness begins to swarm in. Anything they tell us we believe; we feel alive only when we bleed. It's hard to open up, we fear our friends will make fun of us. Most of the time we see the good in the bad but give in because you felt you've been had. Oh, "This person or that person said something that made me mad." You let them control you instead, you have potential to be great. Why let it slip away over what they say. Thing is beauty comes in many ways, all colors are beautiful and yes, I mean race. We are all trying to get somewhere at our own pace. Why bring others down for your personal gain? I get people won't change; they are so stubborn they would rather be astray. Talking about how they've been through so much and that's why they are that way. Yet we all have demons who seek freedom, but we find a way to keep them at bay. We all have them, don't try to deny it. We all have, in our head, a riot. Things will change for the better you'll see, all you got to do is dream. Dreaming allows for an altered reality, in which you can see many different outcomes of what you seek. Days are tough when you don't have the energy, but you got to wake up and make some good memories. I'd be lying if I said I haven't felt defeated, but I've gotten back up never retreated. We all have weaknesses and strengths; balance is what we all should try and achieve. Don't aim to be perfect for society, just be yourself and make you the priority. Smile because you have joy in your heart not to make other people stop, stop talking to you in asking what's wrong. They reach out because they care and I know its hard, but sometimes it's just good to talk. Let out your emotions to those you truly trust, not to those you've only talked to once. Your heart has room to hate, and well it has space to love. Appreciate those who actually try their hardest to keep in touch.

Young Tender Leaves - Christopher Raya

I am the snake
Who slithers in these grasses
Young tender leaves to rake
In search of an egg to take
Flicking my tongue to taste
Sweeter air; like molasses
Consumed by sumptuous duress
Upon this mound I rest
The Gods Eye, warms me
Melts me on this mound
Sight unseen, or so I think
You reach
But like a will-o'-the-wisp
Vanished
I am the snake

Quality Time with My Dad - Christopher Raya

As we sit by this river
the maw of time resonates
Between us
I have grown so much
Without you

Your reputation always preceded you
History, gossip
From people who love you
Hate you, or both
I search my mind
For something, anything
To tell you; it's been too long
I want to tell you good things
But at the same time, I want you to suffer

Your beatings
Gave me your violent disposition
To take out on some unlucky soul
Who cares about me
Yet at the same time
They made me timid and shy
I loathe these qualities
But now they are a part of who I am
Thank you

You don't deserve good stories
I want answers:
Could you explain your drug addled
Effacing of Mom's love
The pointless bursts of anger
Why was I even conceived?
Did the one sperm that made contact

Only do so because of the speed
Of Amphetamines?

Or do I owe you some credit?
For making me the genetic monstrosity
That could handle such
Obscene amounts of drugs
that kept me alive this long
Can I tell you how I mimic'd
Your behavior and almost turned into you
But broke the cycle?
Or so I think

But there are no answers
That would satisfy me
You've become so sloven and round
And you only want to talk about the good things
I could return your beatings now that I'm so much stronger
But instead, I smile and laugh
At the same stories I've heard
One thousand times before

Your jovial charismatic nature
Such a stark contrast to my own
I thought you were pathetic
But I'm actually impressed
How you made these racist people adore you
They'd hate you if they only knew
How you invaded their desert city.
Somehow, everyone here loves you
Even I still do

Iluso - Matthew Hernandez

The diaspora of your soul
is kite and string.
Connecting the lines,
the trails, the paths
that lead from our hearts
back to our bellybuttons
umbilical
and all the way home
to the shacks of our fathers.
Iluso you are both
the anchor
and the wings.
And perhaps, the dreams you have
for yourself
are of escape, of a flight to a place,
you can see just beyond
the mountains and the trees.
Or maybe your dreams
can be counted in American dollars
 in beds and baths
 and a backyard.
Or in digits,
 added to your name
the nine-symbol magic that says
 I am of legal right to
be paid fairly for my work
 not the BOP
eight-symbol curse that follows
you forever.
Or maybe your dreams are of
a family, loved ones sharing
in a meager meal scraped together
for your first daughter

– the first in your family –
to graduate from high school.

Iluso,

Your dreams are paper wings
floating just south of a sun
trying to burn you up.

Bold, against
blue skies.

Iluso,

Your dreams are here
waiting patiently
for you to touch ground.

Iluso. Iluso. Iluso.

Wake up.

And come.

Static - Christina Cullins

With static on my fingertips
My brain fires its synapses
The lightning in my body
Be careful not to get too close.

My body... my body
I think... sometimes I forget that it is my body
And not just some sort of payment or transaction
For an inadequate affection
Or to get someone else's attention
That it is mine and my own to give or keep

I think this generation has a certain proclivity for the sexualization
of everything
From movie to music to clothing to TV
The other day a carl's jr. commercial was playing
And there was a woman in a bikini eating a burger
Because burgers taste better when you're wearing a bikini

I get it.
Sex sells
So you sell your sex
But that makes you a prostitute
But you're not on the streets so then you are just a slut
Or vice versa a prude
And friendzone is a trap
And I think I lost my train of thought.

This idea, this social concept we have developed as a community
Suggest that one's value is dependent upon their sex appeal
Am I sexy? Are you sexy?
But I don't want to be sexy
That word has become tainted and jaded

Slipped of the tongue of too many young boys
Without understanding its meaning.

I am afraid of sexy
Became versed in the ways
Of diminishing my light as to not attract unwanted attention
Like attracting mosquitoes to the light.

I have learned to be gentle,
To tame my words even when I want to protest
For the sake of my safety
Have realized the danger of saying no
Have detained my tongue when told to smile
Have adopted the tactic of giving fake numbers
And wearing fake engagement rings
Because not being interested is not good enough a reason

I have comprehended how the abundance of sex is thrown in our
faces
And has spilled over in our manners
Coiled it's way around our habits
How it has made the body something to be taken
For the enjoyment of others
What's the point of beauty if it's not meant to please?

Sexy is no longer a compliment
The word implies that I am only worth my body
Only good for my body.
Tell me, are you sexy or are you intelligent?
Because you cannot be both
You must choose and choose well

But I am worth more than my body
And you are worth more than your body
And we are all just bodies...

But it seems as though sex appeal invalidates intellect
Attractiveness somehow negates knowledge
The new American dream: aspiring to be hot, young, sexy
I see it on our billboards, in our magazines and sadly in our
schools
Intelligence has lost its appeal
Reading isn't cool
Book fairs aren't fun
Everyone's aspiring to be young, to be attractive, everyone is
peacocking.

I am sick of sexy
Made numb and susceptible to its affects
Like cancer it has spread through the organs of our community
Has wasted away our intelligence
And Has atrophied our morals
Like cancer we are killing ourselves
Attacking ourselves

But with lightning firing through my body
I will become flames themselves
Let the parasites of the world be dazzled by my brilliance
And burn in my blaze

Let the community redefine sexy
But do not forget we are the community
We are the society
Let us make knowledge cool again
Because my brain is on fleek
And we should be basking in each others radiance
At the static on our fingertips

Be careful not to get too close.

If I Were To Write A Poem - Jean-Claudette Flores

If I were to write a poem at age 5,
it would have been about flowers.
Their smell, their colors, their debut in the spring time.
“Roses are red, violets are blue,
I could grow a garden full of them,
and so can you.”

If I were to write a poem at age 10,
it would have been about flowers.
Only this time, about how small and fragile they are,
and how easy it is for people to not just walk amongst them,
but also ignore the substantiality that every one of those flowers,
spent many long and treacherous seasons
trying to grow.

If I were to write a poem at age 15,
it would have been about flowers.
I'd then write about their petals.
How beautiful, different, and unique each one is,
and although plentiful, you could only pick out so much.
“He loves me, he loves me not, he loves me, he loves me not...”
How many petals must be picked off until you are satisfied?
Better yet,
Was the trail of abandoned stems and once vibrant petals worth
it?

If I were to write a poem at age 21,
it would have been about flowers.
How it only has its stem to carry the weight of seasonal loads,
and how its true heart is not in the hub that holds the petals,
but instead in its roots;
roots that people pull out when picking their flower,

sometimes without the intention to destroy it,
sometimes with.

If I were to write a poem at my age of 25,
it would be about flowers.

Again about its beauty, but more on how each is their own.

Even in a field of just daisies, not one is the same.

One with more or fewer marks of color.

One smaller, larger, thinner, curvier.

One missing a few pieces because of harsher weathers.

They are all different,

as we are all different.

None more beautiful than the next, but the same,

because it is in their contrast,

our contrast,

that makes us as beautiful as every other blooming field.

If I were to write a poem at my last age,
it would be about flowers.

That flowers, too, go through the cycle of life and eventually
wither away

after many winters, summers, springs, and falls.

But then they regrow,

regrow and start a new life growing through yet another series of
stormy winters,

windy autumns,

busy summers,

and blossoming springs,

all to bloom into the flower it is meant to be.

ART

We the People - Ashley Violet Hester



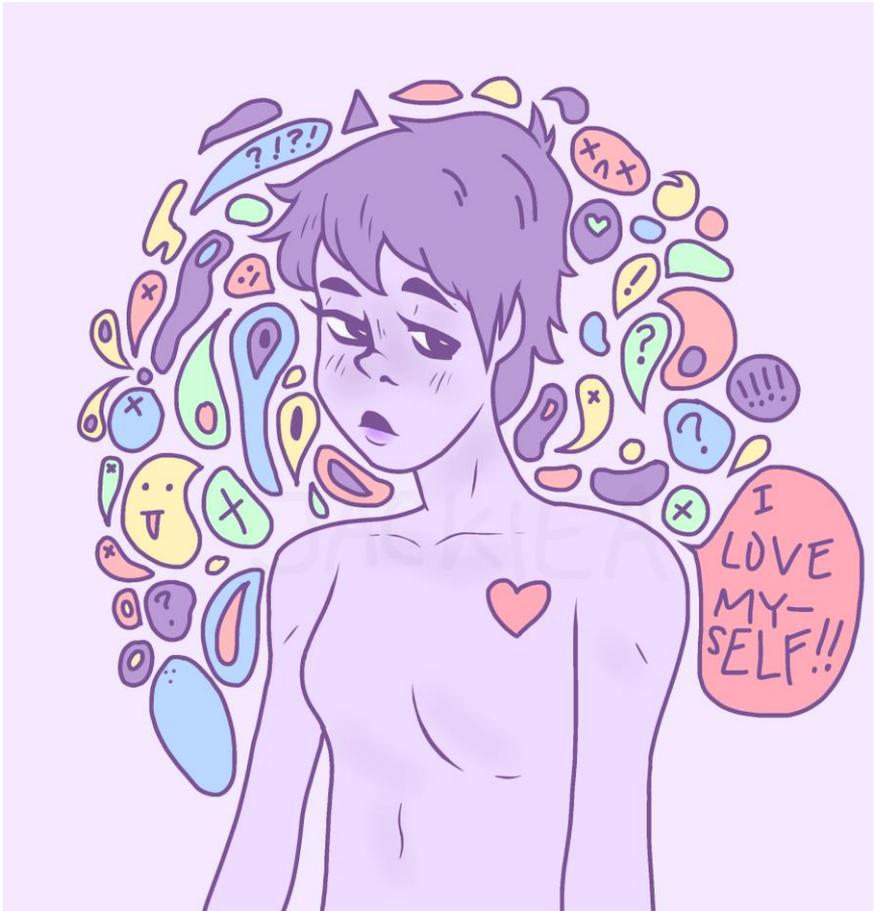
In·sti·tut·ion·al·ized - michelle roldan morales



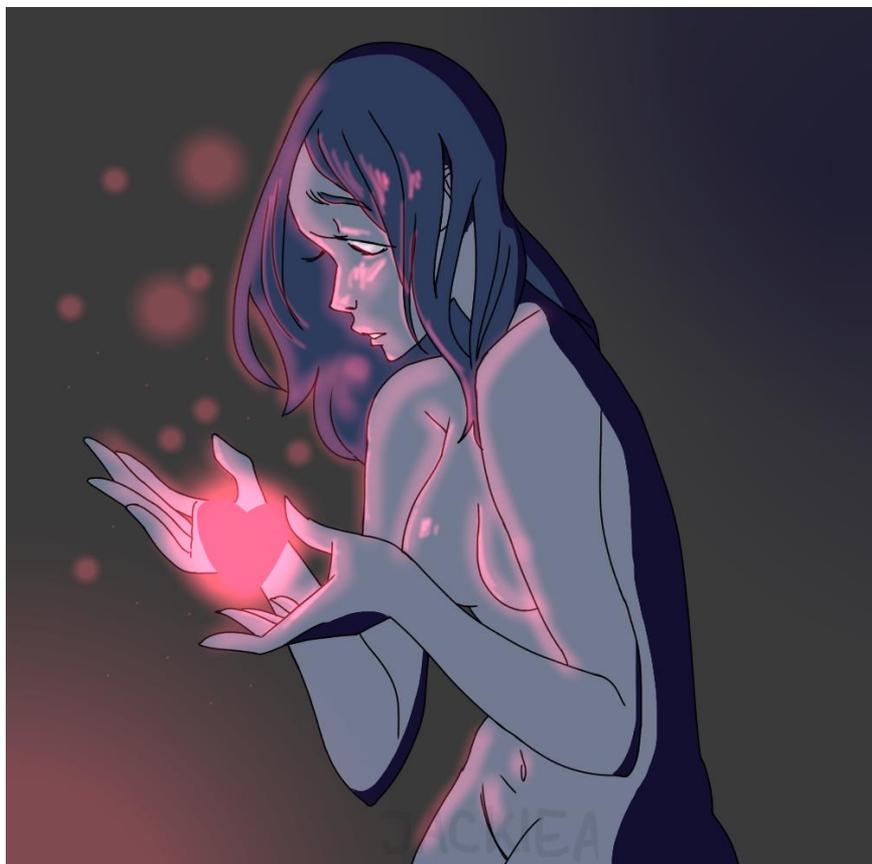
Glitchin Sheep - michelle roldan morales



Confusion in Self Love - Jacqueline Aguilar



Careful Now - Jacqueline Aguilar



Impatient - Jacqueline Aguilar



Uncomfortable Comfort - Jacqueline Aguilar



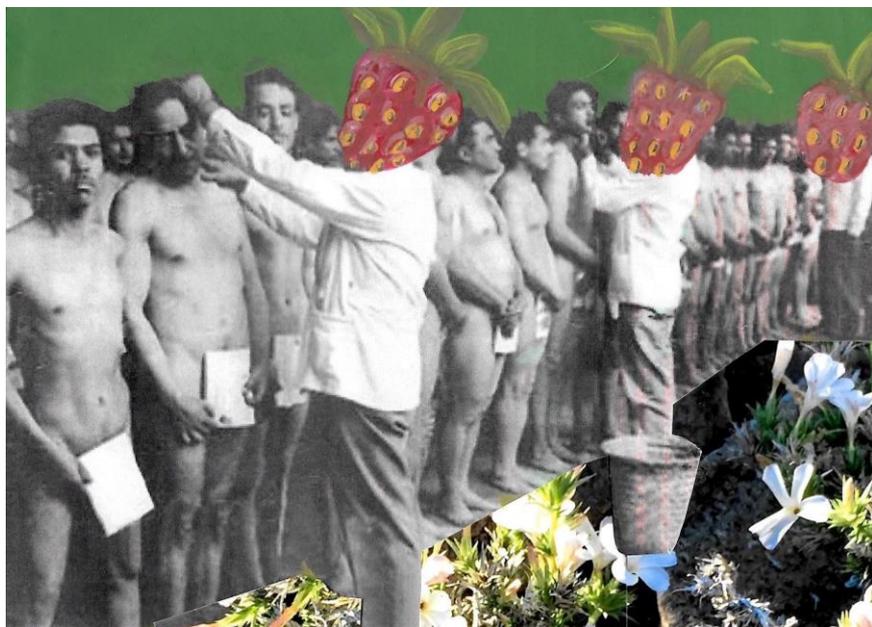
Untitled - Jeannette Garcia



Untitled - Jeannette Garcia



Untitled - Jeannette Garcia



Untitled - Jeannette Garcia



Untitled - Jeannette Garcia



CREATIVE
NON-FICTION

The Eyes and Smiles of Rodolfo Salinas - Paolo Catacutan

In many ways, Rodolfo Salinas is the seminal American. He was born to immigrants, in a major city. He supported himself and his family through odd jobs at his uncles' businesses, along with petty crime. He cleaned up his act to be a college student. And today, at only 23 years old, he's a hotshot intern at the Dangerfield Institute of Urban Problems and a Master's student with a 4.0 GPA. He's even a happy boyfriend. But the year isn't 1919. And he isn't European.

Sitting across an outdoor table on a Friday night, just a newspaper's length from a splatter of rain, it's a wonder his jacket does anything at all. For decorum's sake, he wears his zipper slightly down. But for health's sake he keeps his hood up and, with a swift but chill motion, drawn just against the wind. Yet whether he shelters in it or not, the thin, downy garment adds drama to his size. At six feet tall and an easy 200+ pounds, with shoulders as wide as his eyebrows are thick, he seems less like a kid keeping warm in the cold and more like a mountain cloaked in space-age silk.

But his eyes and smile sparkle, as he shows off his braces. Squat, crooked teeth gleam under a broad, silky grin. "I'm getting new ones on Tuesday. And I'm getting them hot pink 'cuz fuck machismo!" His laugh shows the shadows of fuzz. Apparently, as he says, he used to wear a mustache.

His face quiets down, as he begins to relate his past. "I was born in South Central, Los Angeles. Born and raised – still currently live there." He talks of his single mother, and her raising him. But his gaze becomes one of searching, as he pauses to speak on his father. "My father left us when I was born. So I didn't have a

father figure, I didn't have someone to really look up to. So I had to, like, validate myself, figure out a sense of validation and ownership. And understand my emotions and stuff outside of my circle, 'cuz I felt like my mom wouldn't understand and that she didn't know what it felt like to be a man in society." A tinge of guilt and regret colors his expression, as his words trail. "So... that led to the route of, like, drugs and gangs."

Though Salinas never took drugs, his forays into selling them started at 12 years old. Then, at 17, he branched into home robberies, though such jobs were few and far between. "Prior to starting college, during that vacation break, I needed money and I needed money fast, and I felt like that was the quickest way." He was paying out of pocket for remedial courses, but those expenses weren't what he was funding. "No, it was to fund household essentials – pay rent, get by, make sure that I'm gonna eat the next day, stuff like that." Though his mother was providing most of these essentials, as he relates, "There's only so much she can do. 'Til it's, like, you don't wanna eat beans and eggs every day... She wasn't able to make ends meet. I was working with the city part-time, at that time. Still – but it still wasn't enough, 'cuz they had a limit in hours you could work and it, it wasn't enough." He started city work at 13, for the City of Los Angeles Department of Parks and Recreation. He lied about his age. His job there would help him meet, in his words, "a lot of people. That connected me to people, and I was able to sell... I was able to make more money and do less work."

"I'd work at different parks. From 13 to 18 I was helping kids, afterschool programs, making events. And then, when I was 18 up until I stopped I was doing gardening work. Caretaker." He would resign at age 22, to free himself up for internships within his Master's program. But, as he relayed some days before, he also wasn't a fan of the new park manager.

Salinas was matter of fact, as he discussed the end of his criminal career. On the subject of his old crew, he relates: "We don't talk. We don't hang out. I cut them off when I was in college." This was around age 17. But the reasons weren't entirely personal. "I started college and I had less time. It was a time management thing. I had less time, so I couldn't hang out with anyone, talk to anyone, like that." He had grown up with them, until then. "You know, you get older, you outgrow some people. Some people outgrow you. Some people just stick to the same things while you move on."

Throughout all of this, on the clock and after, he was a voracious reader and a top-performing student, graduating in the top three of his high school with a 4.0 GPA. He would even read "The Communist Manifesto" at 13. "But I would ditch all the time. I was able to do all the work within minutes, and it was no problem for me. I'd ditch and – I had a passion for reading, I love a good book." As he says, that helped him learn what he was lacking in school, and continued to well into college. He was also not taking AP courses. "I tried, and I dropped it the first week, 'cuz it wasn't my style."

He would go on to apply to University of Southern California, University of California: Los Angeles, California State University Los Angeles, and so on. But while he would get into every school he applied to, he would ultimately choose California State University Dominguez Hills. "My teacher told me, 'If you're really considering this based on your grades, you can do anything.' And she's like, 'But I don't want you to be in debt for the rest of your life.' So I thought about it and, like, 'I'm already poor, I'm already in this shit-hole, why would I jump in a bigger hole?' So I just said, 'Fuck it, I'm going with whatever I already know. And my only who I met was George, and I met him at the park, he graduated from Dominguez Hills and he told me about it... and lo and behold, I started going there."

Some years into his college career, at age 18, Rodolfo would be shot. This would be nearly a decade after his first encounter with shootings, at age 10, when a stray bullet would take his best friend's life. That friend would die in Rodolfo's arms, as they took shelter from the gunfire. "That was always in my mind, and I feel that plays a big role in why I went the way I went." Asked about why he kept up the criminal life, after his friend was killed by it, he replied: "'Cuz it felt like it was right. Like I was paying respect to him. But I really wasn't, I was just harming myself and harming people I was selling to." Then, at 19, he would be shot a second time while on a job during finals week, "In the same left leg, the same calf, the only difference is that one is one inch from the other." It would catalyze his retirement at 22. As he would put it, "I got older and I got tired and I got shot."

He would come into, or, rather, upon social work in his senior year. "My professor just instilled to me that that was the best role I could take. I felt like that would be a good position to put myself in to relate to people who have similar experiences to me and want to make a difference." He would apply to graduate school, get in, and gain a stipend. Too many people in his program and his field, as he finds, are mostly about boasting what they know and getting paid. "But it's not about that, it's about the people and the work. And [sic] just being authentic to your story. Being authentic to your cultural roots and how you relate that to other people. And helping them find their own spiritual connections. And it's, like, I was always learned – I was always taught – 'it's not necessarily about helping people, but helping them find their own jewels so they can shine by themselves.'"

For Salinas, not having to sell to make people feel better was, in all but gospel, a life-saving moment. He screens and processes potential parents at the DUIP, in the adoption center. He is on track to take a retiring clerk's job, and graduate with honors. And he is becoming more open about his criminal history, with his

employer's, mentors, and girlfriends being told of it, firsthand, by himself. And he wears a set of gold chains, owned since his days as a petty crook, just over his work shirt. Perhaps it was glinting not from the streetlight, but from that long spark in his coffee-black eyes. Those bright lines inside his smile.

FICTION

A Lament for the Child of Euna - Konysha Wade

In the year 1792, in a small Scottish town, Euna lay in her bed with no recollection of her past actions that now shaped the existence of a child unborn; actions that proved fatal. As she drifted in and out of consciousness, she could feel the nurturing of her mother's hands, rubbing her face and her head, comforting her. Her mother, who seemed immovably faithful in alleviating Euna's pain, making every effort to nurse her back to health, was unaware of what Euna had gone through; had done. In the soft light, her mother's shadow portrayed her as the epitome of motherhood, dedicated to the life of her child. Time seemed to create this image also, as she remained at her daughter's side from the moment she found her unresponsive in her bed, to, and during the time in which the doctor arrived and performed the examination. As she looked at Euna, then back at the doctor, she sat with immense anticipation, yearning for the moment in which the doctor would assure her that her daughter would be fine. Then, with the most disagreeable countenance, a countenance that would be permanently painted on the faces of those residing in their town, he presented a question he had already known the answer to. He asked, with repugnance and contempt, "Is she married?" Without hesitancy, knowing that Euna had given herself away, Euna's mother rose to her feet, provided her most civil thanks, and bid the doctor goodbye, aggressively helping him out the door. In the soft light, she no longer looked like the image of an exemplary mother figure. She now looked like a blob of darkness that never had any connection or relation to Euna. Looking at Euna, she said in the most shrilling tone, "Doaty Nighean." She repeated herself, and the third time, she held her teeth together, as if Euna was intolerable. She then turned and abruptly left the room. Euna would never see her again.

Euna lay with no strength. She was unable to get out of the cycle of momentary mental awareness and then the complete

incognizance that entrapped her. She could not come out of this state. She lay, her body sinking into the bed, cradling her, claiming her. She felt that her bed was a symbol of her grave. She wished it was her grave. She tightened her eyes, and lay without moving. After a few hours passed, she opened her eyes, and staring out into the room, she noticed the walls encompassing her. They seemed to be trying desperately to suffocate her. She looked at the light emitting from the candle. The candle, that she felt was a representation of herself, created an ominous atmosphere. She thought about the similarities between her and the candle. She, and the candle, were alone, in a dark place, perishing. She breathed deeply. Her spirit heavy.

Suddenly, Euna began to have fragmented flashbacks. These flashbacks consumed her, snatching her spirit for the sole purpose of torment. Looking out at the shadow that the candle produced, she saw herself vividly. She tried to rub her eyes, with the intention of rubbing away this horrific sight, but she was not able to lift her arms to her face. Tears began to stroll from her eyes, down to her cheeks. As she looked at herself, in a long black hooded dress, walking up to a thick wooden door on a cold wintery night, she began to shake with trepidation. As the door opened, out stepped the apothecary. Its face was mysteriously obscure. Its hand reached forth, and in a deep diabolic voice, instructed her to drink just two ounces. It informed her that taking any more than the two prescribed would not only kill the being growing inside her, but would also end her life. As Euna accepted the medicine, and headed in the opposite direction of the door, she questioned why the apothecary would provide her with two and three-fourth ounces if more than two would kill her. She did not dwell on this thought, but instead physically shook it out of her mind, and continued her journey home.

When Euna arrived at her house, she fought her tears. Her face began to swell, her throat grew a lump, her head pounded, but

she was determined not to cry. A result of a sexual encounter with a young man she thought loved her, but soon proved to be untrustworthy, unreliable, and untrue, this baby was doomed to death. She justified her actions of taking the poison by saying that the baby would only bring ignominy to her and her family; that it would be viewed as a curse, an other. Rumors would flow through her town like a breeze passing through a city. She thought about the type of things people would say about her. "She is promiscuous, a harlot, a husband tempter."

She heard the voices of the people talking about her baby. Witch-like voices. "He is a living curse, detestable, fatherless." She thought about the looks she would receive, the pouting and stepping back that people would do when she passed by... She drank.

As Euna looked out into the room, watching herself drink the poison, she snapped back into reality and cried without ceasing. She no longer drifted, she stayed in her current state, and was overcome with sadness. She tried with persistence to lift herself up and get out of bed, and after several efforts, she succeeded. She rose to her feet and began to stumble through the room. When she was able to tighten her muscles, and obtain balance, she grabbed the long black hooded coat that lay next to her bed, put on her slippers, and proceeded through the back door. Into the forest she disappeared.

She ran, tripping over rocks, and tree branches, then getting up again. She sobbed, her saliva dripping down her chin. She cried how her unborn child would have cried in infancy. She thought of her baby, but she thought of her mother too. "How could she leave?" she thought. "How could you abandon me?" She asked the question as if her mom was at a distance, standing in front of her.

She soon realized that what her mother had done to her, she had done to her own child. Had she done worse? She didn't even allow the child an opportunity to come into the world. Euna could not believe the similarities shared between her and her mother. They angered her, fueled her. After running for as long as she was able, she came to a fallen tree. She threw down her body on the log, succumbing to the guilt, grief, and anguish stricken in her mind; her body. She wailed loudly, her voice disturbing the creatures inhabiting the forest. Her voice echoing, sending the birds of the trees in a frenzy, up into the sky. Her cry vibrated the trees and the ground. "What have I done?" she yelled. Euna wrapped her arms around the log, holding it as if it was her unborn child. She cried, "MY BABY, MY BABY, MY SWEET ANGEL BABY!!!!!"

She felt pain in the deepest, innermost part of her being. She wished she had not killed her child. She thought of ways in which her and the child could have survived together. She thought about how she could have fled the town. She could have worked as handmaiden in a town far away. She even thought about the fabricated story of how her husband had died, leaving her with absolutely nothing, that she could have told to her employer. Her thoughts pained her even more.

She came to the conclusion that nothing could bring back her child. As she lay on the log, she heard the piobaireachd tune. She felt it building up inside her, trying desperately to force its way out. Internally, the tune was thunderous, deafening. She felt the notes moving through her body. She reminisced about the moment in which she stood at the door of the apothecary. How she felt the tune within her, but more calmly, more distant. The tune and her baby existed together in that moment. They seemed to be stitched together. It was as if the baby knew his inevitable outcome, and in the womb, created the tune which he would send through his mother's body as a reminder of his existence;

as a way in which he could live.

When she was no longer able to keep the tune inside, she slid off the log onto the ground. As it played inside her, she started to write the notes in the dirt. Her tears dried up. As she wrote, relief accompanied her pain. It was as if she was giving birth to her child. It felt to her, like the instance in which a baby has just arrived into the world, and in her pain, the mom feels a sense of relief.

As she wrote her last note, everything grew oddly calm. Silence filled the forest. The birds ceased to chirp, the snow no longer crunched as the creatures moved through it, and the trees stood still. When her last note was written in the dirt, she laid down next to the tune no longer existing in her. She felt free. She did not care about how her mom had left her with no intentions of returning. She did not think about the man she loved forcing her into her current position; how he could have married her and changed everything. She thought of nothing but her child. She thought of how the pain of her decision would never leave, but how she was content because the birth of the tune (her baby) provided a sense of relief. She lay under the sky and wished for the moment when she would see her baby. She closed her eyes a final time.

That night, she was reconciled with her child.

In the Wood - Anthony J. Velasco

Young and spry, Pagothas hopped across the Eupelutes River at its narrowest run. Reaching the bank, she briefly considered the day's adventure and her present course.

She looked up and down the river. Seeing nothing of great interest as the river meandered on South, the adventurer turned to look at the dark trees of the forest and a whisper of a memory spoke to her. It was mother – “Stray not past the River Eu, little one, the Aet wood is beautiful, but dangerous.”

Yet, no sooner had Mother's voice spoken than Pagothas dove into the first sparse, then rapidly thick undergrowth – an adventurer without fear.

The Aethean Forest is a land of magic, mystery, and indisputable beauty. At the peak of the Sun's powers, the canopy could only partially block the golden rays, illuminating the woodland wonders better, even, than Pagothas' home in the village and the budding adventurer found herself enthralled by the forest's intrigue. The light played wistfully on the Aet trees of varying twists and turns, sizes and thicknesses so that in the corner of what Pagothas could know, ever there were things fleeting just out of view. She saw here a bird and there a fox, or other times shapes of children and old faces in the mystifying trees.

Pregnant with the expectation of greater adventures in the deep woods, she hurried along. The forest's quiet symphony played in the background while the sunlight continued playing its tricks. A hidden insect chirped somewhere and a bird pecked at the wood while the leaves rustled against her faded white dress, imparting streaks of green and brown on the otherwise blank canvas.

Soon the trees thinned and grew apart in a sudden way and the green adventurer found herself at the foot of a wide, but almost entirely dried up river. A trickle of water snaked along the middle, weaving past the baked rocks and earth where the peaceful Eupelutes River once flowed with immense ferocity. Eager to return to the woodland adventure, Pagothas stepped into the wide ditch and moved toward the opposite bank.

A roar startled her midway across and, looking up river, she despaired to see a wall of clear blue water rushing along the embankment. The water reflected the clear blue skies above as it crashed upon Pagothas; it twisted her this way and that with a terrifying violence like none she'd experienced before.

With her last breath she recovered and broke the surface, shouting thus, "Lord, I beg you, save me from this cruel fate! How my mother would mourn and her heart wither away in loneliness were I not to return home!"

No sooner, it seemed, had she voiced her sincere petition but the turbulent waters calmed and bore her to the river's edge. With immeasurable gratitude in her heart, she crawled up the bank as though afraid that the river would change its mind, and lay on her back, sucking in fast lungfuls of air.

Not more than a moment had passed but she then heard a great commotion in the otherwise calming river. Looking over, she saw in the shallower end opposite herself that an old man was locked in fatal combat with the river, struggling with desperation to keep his head clear of the water.

Without consideration to her own exhaustion or personal safety, Pagothas leapt into the freshly spawned river and found the strength to swim quickly back across.

Arriving at the struggling old man, she dove underwater and took note that the man's leg had become trapped under a log and a few rocks. Acting swiftly, and invoking the power that only the youthful have, she pushed enough rocks aside to free the man.

The man struggled to escape the water, his body heavy with exhaustion, but here as well Pagothas was of great and unrelenting help. Together they found the riverside safely and happily, but spent by their enormous effort, and lay one next to the other to recover what they spent escaping the river.

At great length, the nigh defeated man gave his thanks as follows.

"Young one, you have saved me when I most expected that no man could. Praise be to you, daughter! Tell me your name that I may say to all that will listen, and all that will not, of the young woman who rescued me from a desperate death!"

Pagothas, being quick of wit at her age, said thus, "Pagothas, Sir, is my name. Though I expect that anyone seeing the danger to your life would have moved to your aid! Thank me not, but the Lord above that saw fit to have someone near!" And the man sat quietly for a moment, not having expected such a reply.

"Oh, Pagothas were it only true that Lord and man are as you say." and, now holding her gaze, "I have little to my name, but I feel greatly indebted to you. Ask me any question, that my years might grant me some small wisdom to share and find my debt in better pay."

Her first instinct was to reject the man's offer, but her curiosity and compassion bade her take the man's offer so she instead set upon thinking of a worthy question. The request well-considered, Pagothas at length asked the man.

“Sir, had I died in the river, what would become of me and my soul?”

The old man sighed deeply before replying, “Young lady, your question is one all of mankind could debate until the sun dies and the world goes cold, but I will do my best to share what I know. Why, if I had died in the river, my old bones would have washed away to the Great Sea and fed a school of fish or the crabs on the seafloor or one other of the many beautiful creatures of the Sea. I have no family and few people to call friend; I have not been a good neighbor, only lived a quiet life in service of myself. The way today began would have been the way tomorrow begins – in truth, that has not changed.” Pagothas sat startled by the response, but the man continued heedless of the effect his words might have. “You see, I was few a season further in age than you are now when my village sent me to Orristi by the Green Sea – what you now call the Plainsland – and I found myself in a fierce thunderstorm.

“Confident in my strength as a young man, I walked in the rain with little care for danger when I should have sought shelter. I suppose I have always been a foolish man,” he said with a hoarse chuckle. “Well, my foolhardiness was well rewarded. The heavens smote me with an intense and immediate fire, as though I’d offended the lord of lightning himself! When I woke, the meal I had packed was turned to mold and a tremendous hunger and thirst seized my entrails. I smelled of fire and all around me the earth had been scorched as well as the ends of my hair which, mind you, had grown a half inch!

“As I came to the City Hoarth, on the way to Orristi, I found by way of the merchants that a week of my time had vanished... I can find no other truth in it all than that I was gone that week. Out on the vast Green Sea, I was alive. Then I was not, and nothing more.”

The Man's words struck like ice-water overhead. "If there is nothing but death after life, we should spread the truth and put an end to the lie of false-hope!" she exclaimed.

Looking drawn and weary now, the Old Man rebuked her, "No, I don't believe that to be best."

"But how can I suffer my mother to live a lie? If what you say is truth, is my father gone entirely from this world? I will never know him then!"

"Ah, the problem in accruing knowledge is that it comes with great weight. You can either suffer your Mother to live a lie or live without hope."

She looked then upon the Hopeless, Wise, Old Man and saw a man aged past his years emaciated and defeated. His rags in a similar state of disrepair and Pagothas could not be certain that he was barefoot as a result of his misadventures in the river.

"Young one," said the Old Man's shell, finally struggling to his feet, "there is no God and no Afterlife, but everyone I know thinks both exist and for that promise have grown prosperous together and built magnificent cities at Hoarth and across all other lands. Providence was not responsible for their creative genius, only for the willingness to cooperate. The only God that is in our world is the Wild, un-understandable Chaos of life."

"I ask you now," he said, pausing just inside the darkening forest, "Would humanity live as they do now – struggling to move the world forward despite the agonies of life – if there were nothing at the end of it all? Or if they knew this to be so?"

Stunned to uncharacteristic silence anew, Pagothas stared at the space in the trees the Man had disappeared into. Finally, she reacted and shouted, "Yes!" but the Man was gone.

She rushed into the Aethean woods in search for him and to give her answer. She searched frantically for many an hour and found nothing until the trees once again drifted apart. She ran forward, her vitality renewed, and stumbled out of the wood onto the Eupelutes River's sun-warmed riverbank.

She looked at the Aethean Forest and not even the warmth of the noon sun, or even her mother's embrace, could stay the twinge of fear that grew deep in her heart.

Looking away from the mystical forest, Pagothas stepped onto the first stone, ready to cross the calmly murmuring waters of the Eupelutes River and said to herself or the woods or the world, but more quietly than a whisper so that not even the river underfoot ever really heard her:

"Would they?"

The Poor Fatmagool - Everth Sotelo

This winter has been very cold and wet, it has been raining for the past few days. My furniture are stacks of books and the decorations are scattered old papers. There is barely enough room to walk, just enough to breathe. The smell of mold permeates this place, it enters my nostrils and gives me a light headache, I sleep among humidity, but I am thankful for a roof over my head. My arms shiver from the coldness of this crowded room. I stare at the drops of rain as they fall to the ground but then I can't control my rapid shiver, I feel as if my body is to collapse. I just inhale with my nose and exhale with my mouth. There is nobody to keep me company, nobody to tell me how pale my skin looks from malnutrition or even how horrible my writing is. What is the real purpose of life? Why am I here? What have I done to deserve this? My fiancée passed away from pneumonia two months before our marriage. My parents and sister live in Turkey and my older brother has his own delightful family in Canada. I love being alone, my imagination is my refuge. Gabriel Garcia Marquez and William Faulkner are my friends because they have taught me more about human relationships than anyone else.

As a child, graphic novels were the only way I could teach myself to read and write. My only dream is to become a Nobel prize winner. Who am I fooling? My mind says it's impossible, yet my heart feels as if the dream may come true. Which one should I trust? I do not give up on writing. I hate working at my office, the work is repetitive, and it is the thing that stands between my aspirations as a writer. Mario the office manager is such a disgusting nuisance. He has the habit of placing a stack of papers on my desk and expects to me finish at precise moments of the day. While I take my lunch in the kitchen, he attempts to seduce by serving me coffee and caressing my hand. It is not the first time I reject his advances; he threatens to fire me if I don't accept him. I allow him to touch me but only because I need this job. My rent

has been late for the past two months. One more late month and I am evicted. Nevertheless, creativity fills me with hope of one day changing this poor life. Without any interruption I and bleed. The world does not exist for me for I am a separate being. My fingers move across the keyboard 70 words per minute. My thoughts flow like a river; too much fantasy causes us to suffer from the horrors of life and too much reality damages our will to do things.

It is now four in the morning and I must be at work at eight. I write so much my will is to write more. Darkness covers my eyes as I shut them, northern lights that change into the rays of the sun. Lighting and the ends of space. The cosmos, the mind takes me to the origins of life. The mind is the ultimate reality for without it life does not exist. Will I ever reach that place? My head falls on top of my books.

Mario drops another stack of papers on my desk. I snap out of my sleep. The two ladies that work in payables across my desk stare at me with deception. I turn behind me and notice Jane and Charlotte mock me as they glance at me. Mario looks at with a disgusting grin on his face. He walks away with a boastful attitude. My head hurts from the lack of sleep.

I walk over to the kitchen to pour myself coffee with three espresso shots. Mario walks in and pretends to wait for the coffee machine. I ignore him. Suddenly, he moves towards me and tries to rub his hands on my testicles. With his other hand, he grabs me from the back of my head and forces a kiss. I freeze and resist, I grab him by his shirt and slam him on a nearby table. The food and drinks spill all over the floor. But I can't punch him! What have I done?! I injured the pretty butterfly! Gradually my hands detach from his chest, my rage dies. Everyone comes to stare at the aftermath of this violent scene. I catch my breath and walk over to balcony by my sister's old office. I look down, cars rush on the street and the wind pushes me to the edge. My body shivers,

my stomach is nauseous. Throw myself! A little boy looks up towards me as he walks with his mother. I don't know if he is looking at me. Maybe. I would not want him to witness the reality of death at such an age.

"You are fired, Fatmagool!!," yells Mario.

His words resonate in the walls and bounce in my ears.

The streets are wet and the ambiance humid, not one soul is present. I am alone in this world and only my stomach controls me now. I have not eaten in the past two days, most of my check goes into my high rent and my bills. My body is feeble and my loneliness binding to hunger. Any food or alcohol is nothing but an escape from sadness. The sadness of having to lose my job to do what I love. My legs do not respond. I might collapse but my will is to reach that place. A shade covers my eyesight again; will I ever reach that place? What is happening to me? Why does the world seem darker and darker?

I walk by an old bookstore, it's the only light in this dark street. An old man sits at a table in front of the store. He has a modest tweed sweater with the most well-pressed slacks I have ever seen in an elder man. His neat white beard and his glasses intact and clean. I can't help but admire him. His eyes clash with mine.

"Are you really happy?" he asks.

I dissimulate.

"Do you like books?" he asks.

I look back at him with a confused expression.

"I do."

“There is a café on the corner of Welsh and 11th street, they have book readings.”

“Who are you?”

“I work in the bookstore.”

I am bewildered.

He stares at me with a serious expression, but I sense gentleness in his demeanor. He is immobile, like a striking painting he elicits a cascade of emotions that make me think if I am happy with my existence. I feel like I must touch his face and kiss him. My body feels as light as a feather. Is this how unbearable the lightness of existence is? It's beautiful.

“Be a candle, for by consuming yourself you light others,” he says.

I open my eyes and thunder rolls. He smiles and goes back into the store. What did he mean? Where is this coffee shop? My answers could be there.

There is the coffee shop the old man mentioned. The strong smell of brewed coffee penetrates my nostrils. A cozy and bohemian room filled with college students. The barista asks me what I would like to drink.

“Do you read books here?”, I asked.

“Talk to Dale the owner.” He points to him.

Dale sits at a corner; he types with diligence without any desire to be disturbed. There is a desire to share something important within me. Perhaps my imagination shall solve the mystery my reality has struggled in vain. His eyes look up to me, but he does

not stop typing.

“How can I help you?” he asks.

“I was told that you read books every night – is that true?”

“Yes, we support aspiring writers.”

“How can I read something for tomorrow night?”

“Just take the stage when it is available, and we shall listen.”

The crowd gathers around. People drink their coffee as they direct their attention towards me. I fix the microphone and look at my story. A hot flash runs through my body and sweat begins to drip from my head. I take a deep breath.

In a land now long forgotten and a long time ago there lived a king named Atef who lived with unimaginable riches. From the Iberian Peninsula to the Balkans, to the Sahara Desert, and to the orient king Atef would strike fear into the hearts of men. He had a beautiful daughter who was the apple of his eyes, Mahidebran. She was taught math, history, sculpture, hunting, and rhetoric. Although intelligent, Mahidebran was depressed. She would be knowing there was emptiness in her life. Atef became very worried about her emotional state. He consulted his advisors, his prophets, and her educators. The prophets foresaw her death if she did not recover her happiness, but they could not foresee what would make her happy. Atef and his advisors consulted for three days. On the third day they discovered a young man who had been rumored to gather crowds of people just to listen to his lyrical rhymes. He was brought before Atef and questioned by his court. Who are you son? What is this thing that you speak of that makes people listen to you for hours? What demon have you invoked? The young man stated that he was a poet and that the

people would gather to listen to something called poetry. The king and his court were very confused. They had never heard of poetry before. They asked him to demonstrate a piece of his delightful poetry. The young man sang of the Nile river, praised Minerva, honored Jupiter, exalted Atef, and he finalized with a lyrical ballad for Mahidebran. The king and his court were completely astonished. Atef requested that he teach Mahidebran to recite poetry. If poetry can bring happiness to his daughter, he would promise part of his kingdom to him. The young poet was honored, but he instead he asked the king for such a humble request; food for his family. The king agreed. That day, the young poet sang and sang to Mahidebran, and from the sound of his voice and his light skin in contrast with his dark hair and beard, she fell in love. The king was very pleased to see happiness return to his daughter, but her educators were not happy. Mahidebran no longer had an interest in math, astronomy, philosophy, history, and hunting. All she wanted to do is write poetry and recite it to the common people. Poetry made her happy. The educators and advisors suggested that the king hang the young poet for enchanting Mahidebran.

The king disagreed for he was delighted to see happiness in his daughter. The educators then planned to poison the young poet so that Mahidebran would forget about poetry. The king had arranged a large banquet with the court and other small kingdoms to celebrate her daughter's happiness. That night, the math educator served Atef a glass of wine and the philosophy educator poured a sleep potion into it. The food and wine were so abundant that everyone was guilty of gluttony; Atef was no exception for he fell asleep. The young poet drank the poison and waited outside the palace gates for a bit of food as promised. But the king was asleep, and his promise now broken, the young poet could no longer withstand the snow that gathered in his head. Tragically he passed away. The next morning Atef woke and could not find his daughter. His advisors and assistants searched

until they found her crying over the young poet's body. The king could not believe it. His daughter's happiness had now vanished and her only true love was no more. The educators claimed that if they instruct her, she will forget poetry. The king agreed thus Mahidebran returned to her studies in the other subjects. The king however realized that poetry could warm the heart. Inspired by his daughter's happiness he began to write poetry himself, but little did he know that his reign would come to an end because of the lack of poetry.

Everybody claps and cries. My story touches many hearts. I get off the stage and a group of people gather to shake my hand and congratulate me. The owner discretely approaches me and hands me a large cup.

"Please keep coming back with more of those," he says.

I take the cup and notice that there is no liquid inside. I pay for my coffee and head outside. The cup is filled with money, there are several fives and ones. Goodness this must have been the tips the writers get from the audience. It seems to be enough to make up the rest of my rent.

Suddenly I see this woman and her child in the alley behind the coffee shop. They are homeless. She tears my heart. Her face is languid, her skin wrinkled and chapped. Her clothes seem wet and her child is asleep next to her. The child is dirty and debilitated and their smell is abhorrent. Her child moves to hug her and his cry makes me cringe. The woman stares at me with her blue eyes and I am frozen in fear. If I walk away now I could never live with myself, knowing that I can help the poor woman. But how will I take care of me? No! Who cares about me?! My life is poetry! The woman smiles at me, the warmest smile I have ever seen, even more beautiful than my beloved Lydia. She hugs her child and falls asleep. My eyes become filled with tears.

I approach her and hand her all the money in the cup.

“For you mother, poets are god’s gift to mankind,” I say in a soft tone.

Her hand shivers as she takes the money. I take her hand and gently caress it; I close her fist with the money in it.

“Thank you so much. Who are you?” she says.

“I am the poor Fatmagool.”

The rain droplets tickle my face and moisten my eyes. The water refreshes my stiff skin and my muscles shiver. I walk away feeling happy with a certainty that I will never die. I close my eyes.

The Night I Slept with the Devil – Jean-Claudette Flores

I met the Devil. I danced with him. We slowly swayed in a harmonious waltz to a whimsical melody only we knew; hand in hand, chest to chest, lights dimmed low. Our gaze locked as he traced the sensitive lining of my back and I became breathless; drowning in the pool of his deep, onyx orbs and melting at the heat of his touch on my bare skin. As our song gently faded away into its final note, our heartbeats became the only sound in our bewitching, little world; beating in perfect unison to intensify the burning desire brought upon our togetherness as we masked divinely in each other's presence. He spun me again; this time with my back against his heart, his hungry mouth at the nape of my neck. I felt his breath; each one tantalizing my body with a delicious sensation lascivious enough to make even the holiest of saints blush. And I was no saint. He knew that all too well. I walked through the gates of Hell and he was the one who opened.

"Do you want me?" he breathed hoarsely onto my skin, holding me close.

I whispered yes without a chance to think; as if I could. I was long gone. My mind, and every sense of rationale it had, withered away into delighted oblivion the moment I felt his warmth when we slow danced to our heart's song. He placed a finger under my chin, and gently moved my face to meet his. His mouth was an inch shy of my slightly parted lips, teasing me. I tasted his breath on my tongue with each ravished pant, and I hastily grew an intense craving for something much more savory, much more...stimulating. He looked into my eyes and I became frozen under the severity of his covetous stares. Flames of intimate desire danced fervently in his eyes as he kept me spellbound with his touch. His lips rested upon mine at last, satisfying the craving I

sought, and the endowment it had over me was stronger than his tight grip that locked me within his rapturous hold. And in that moment, I knew I was his.

But he was not mine.

I didn't touch him. I couldn't touch him. I couldn't move. I was in a complete trance of sensual euphoria, hopelessly mesmerized by the soothing feels of his delicate touch, the aromatic aura that fumed deliriously over our heated bodies, and the sparkling arousal that rose from our kiss. Oh God, our kiss adorned me. His lips caressed mine passionately, spelling out a thousand words that have already been said, and leaving me disarmingly numb to the captivating impacts of our salacious deed. He bit my lip. My body was on fire. My skin blushed and abruptly, I was lost. A sudden ache pulled at my heart and I knew not what it mourned, but it did not compare to the twisted, hollow pain that drove me into this dark world in the first place. I dared not return. I carried on, a slave to his touch, paralyzed in his hold. He poured his lust like liquor onto my tongue, and I was drunk. Our faces grew redder. A million candles burned inside me. He then pulled away, eyes still sinking into my own as I gasped for air with no prevail of calming down. His presence alone kept me breathless, and his sly smirk that grew on his lips revealed that he knew well of his power. He was the Devil, after all. He embodied all of the deadly sins and wrapped them around me like a silk robe — lust was a given, but it was his greed that kept me warm. Possessive was what he was. I felt him biting into my skin to leave reminders that I was his and his only. He laid me down and that cursed ache pulled once again at my heart, as though to warn me of something malicious that lies ahead. But I thought to myself, "I'm already in Hell laying in bed with the Devil. How much more malicious can this get?"

He hovered over me and undressed me slowly; lingering longer at my ubiety and scoping every inch of my body with his feasting eyes. I laid naked beneath his seducing gaze and I felt his desire brood over me like a starving wolf over its prey. His rasping jaw and roaming lips drifted lazily toward my writhing hips. A stroking tongue soon followed, leaving behind a hot, teasing, wet trail of pure ecstasy that roused out my tortured breaths begging for more. I longed for him to take all of me, for I no longer wanted any of it. I cared not of my value. I was already an empty shell of a being when I entered this inferno. I had nothing left to lose, nor anymore to give. So I gave the Devil the little of what was left of my sanity and braced myself for the soul suppressing fate that awaited me.

As wicked as it was, it felt so damn good. Beguiled by the tenderness of his lips exploring my skin, I drew a blank. My mind comprehended nothing but the feeling of his hands and kisses over my body moving to a rhythm only he controlled. My legs opened as his whispers sunk deeper in my florescence. Lower and lower the trail of his kisses went, and suddenly my body tensed to an intoxicating sensation that bloomed from the flower of my womanhood and had me shaking shamelessly into his mouth. He wrote poetry between my legs with his tongue and I am consumed by him. An euphoric rush traveled through my blood and I burst into sheer bliss as he savored my last drop. He crawled back with his hands holding himself up over me. He licked his lips. I looked into his eyes, and then I froze. It was different. The sweetness in his gaze was gone. I swore I glimpsed death; an eerie and hostile death that appeared mapped out in his vision like a careful plan. Shivers radiated through me, but this time, it was cold. Cold, odious shivers. My heart was now screaming in manic; raging over and over of what it tried to warn me of — and save me from — earlier. But before I could acknowledge the hypocrisy of my emotions, he covered my mouth with his and entered inside me slowly, distracting me from any thoughts that could defy him.

Not like I could, anyways.

I felt him surround me like waters of a lake; ebbing, flowing, and filling me up with his pleasures through every thrust, every wave. We were panting heavily against each other; lips refusing to break apart. My heated moans mingled with his husky dark grunts as we aligned. Our passions built from a feather touch to a firebrand fanning out the flames of our desperate beings. Our nakedness is exposed in the red shadows of our lust, and we melted together in a shuddering embrace. I tasted the burns of amber flesh as we panted and trembled in rhythmic thrusts and throbs, skin sliding against skin in the depths of our open bliss. We heaved with muffled breaths until a burst of lightning broke the madness, and we emerged in an orchid hazed enveloped by the night.

But just like a cloudy night, the overcast of darkness that had ached me returned to shadow over my heart and mind. I became numb again as he glided in and out of my sex, but the calming pleasure that once came with the appeasing numbness disappeared. I didn't understand what was happening. I closed my eyes, and I entered into a whole new world of conflicted intuitions. I wanted him. Fuck, I wanted him so badly to ease me from my troubled reality of lonesomeness and drunken dusks-to-dawns. But now he was in me, and I wanted nothing more but for him to get out. All of a sudden, I felt pain. Deep, deep pain and it was not from his loaded member that filled up the depths of my libidinous void, but instead from the obsessed look in his eyes that held me prisoner to his nefarious ardor. I may have felt like a sorry, desolated excuse of a human life when I enter his fiery realm, but as I laid naked under his degrading stare, I found myself to be...nothing. I was not dead. I was never even alive. In that life and through his eyes, I did not exist. He didn't feel my warmth, my craving, my passion; nor was it his concern for as long as I satisfied his. I was just a commodity. And that was a

misery that surpassed them all.

“You’re mine,” the Devil growled ravenously, pulling me back to face my regret.

“Yours,” I still moaned into his mouth, neglecting the cold tears that ran down my face, “Yours, yours, yours.”

He was a destruction of mass weaponry and he used his most fatal ones to destroy me. He left my walls and pulled me back onto my feet, only to push down to my knees and it was when he cupped my face roughly in his hands that I knew he was only seconds away of finishing me off. He put his gun to my lips and I tasted our sin. It was cold. Bitter. It reeked of filth. He released the trigger. I swallowed the poison of his bullet, but I did not bleed. How can I bleed if I am empty? After, we laid on salted sheets and barren minds in silence. I finally let go of the locks that held my fevered thoughts so tenderly and allowed back in the voices of reason that elaborated the harsh truths of the chaos I not only had just endured, but ignited myself. He kissed me one last time, and something stuck in between our tangled tongues; a combination of goodbye and an apology. An apologetic Devil? He had already walked away; left me shriveled up bare in the cold to repulse at my own company while soaked in our musky iniquity — who knew it was possible to shiver in Hell? So no, not him. I was the one apologizing. I apologized to myself for caving in to the deadly temptation of lust and greed to the extent of murdering the lively, hopeful girl I was once was. Suicide’s a sin, too, and I’ve killed myself a million times before. Touching him should have made me feel whole. Loving him should have made me feel real. But our act of meaningless intimacy only made me feel the need to escape again and again, and what obviated me from truly gaining that sense of realness was the fact alone that I was not loving him, he was not loving me, and above all, I was not loving myself. I did not know how. Neither did he. Neither did they. No one has loved me for more than just the night.

The Chance of Rain - Matthew Hernandez

Sunny and 74°. Just as it was yesterday. And the day before that, and for a million days before that, stretching all the way back to the dark times before the Age of Sufficiency. Back to when humanity had almost doomed itself burning fossil fuels, poisoning the ground and water.

Layton looked up from the control panel's touch screen on the Weather Creator and found that everything was in its place; blue skies, sunshine, and not a cloud in sight.

Essa walked back around the great machine to see Layton staring off again and felt a strange urge begin to rise up in her. It caught her so off guard that for a moment she was frozen, locked in place by the sheer peculiarity of it. Just as her mind began to return to the situation before her, a young voice called out to Layton. The monotone droll that she had heard every day of active duty since she received this assignment. Odd that it was always children who were assigned as overseers. She was told once during training that it was because they could still feel the trace of some ancient barbarity in the human psyche, some trace of pre-sustainable civilization.

"Layton-what-are-you-doing? Is-there-a-problem-with-the-WC?" the monotone pierced through the sameness of the world and Essa felt a different urge, but stronger this time. She saw a flash in her mind, too quick to make out. What was it? Were her hands balled up? Why?

"No, the world is adequate, same as always." Layton's response snapped Essa back to the present. She noticed that Layton had a strange accent when he spoke, why had she never heard that before? She'd been working this assignment with him for almost two cycles now.

“Good. Please-make-sure-the-necessary-reports-are-logged-and-archived.” The boy’s drone caused that event again in Essa’s mind and she found that her left hand had bunched itself into a fist. She stared at her hand for a moment before Layton interrupted her. “C’mon Essa, work’s done for the day.” His voice seemed to cause an opposite reaction in her body. She felt her fingers relax and breathed more deeply. Packing up her small tools to go, Essa turned back to see Layton staring out at the fields of wheat as the WC began to generate a soft breeze in order to scatter the seeds to the upturned plot to the north. “Layton, do you require assistance to the Hove?” She said softly, beginning to walk over to him. “No, thank you Essa. My boot just caught a rock is all.” Essa knew that Layton was hiding another of his episodes. Lately he’d been having more and more of them, no doubt he’d soon receive his final assignment. Essa had another unsettling feeling, this time it made her eyes twitch and her throat went dry. She attributed it to the growing winds emanating from the WC and made her way up the path and back to the Hove.

When they reached the Hove, the living quarters for WC maintenance workers, Layton and Essa typed in their reports and uploaded them to the relevant archive files. There were two maintenance workers assigned to every machine across the globe, all uploading these same reports every day, and to each team and there was a child overseer, whose sole job was to report on the workers.

The Hove itself had everything a human needed for survival and was attached to the WC’s central processor and power source so the team could always upload reports and remotely check each other’s work from anywhere in the world.

Layton’s episodes grew worse and worse as the weeks passed. He stared more and more into the sky every day they went to the WC. Until, one afternoon he abruptly stopped staring off and

turned his gaze directly to Essa. Something about him was wrong, his eyes had a faraway quality. His forehead was sweating, and he was twitching slightly.

“Essa, did you know that once, long ago, huge amounts of water would fall out of the sky? Before the WC pumped water directly to the roots of the crops, even before the WC, the sky would darken, clouds would gather, and then it would open up and water would fall. They called it rain.” He was rambling, speaking faster and faster until he lighted on the last word, “rain.” He held that word apart from everything else and a seed of thought suddenly bloomed in Essa’s mind: “Reverence,” she thought. Layton feels reverence for rain.

“Layton-you-have-had-an-unacceptable-episode. You-will-be-taken-now-to-final-assignment.” Essa hadn’t even noticed the overseer, perched atop his floating chair, hovering just over their heads. Layton looked up as two men descended from the sky, small packs strapped to their shoulders, allowing them flight. Layton was seized by both arms and as his eyes met Essa’s, a new word blossomed in her mind: “Fear,” she mouthed.

Before they could ascend with him, Layton yelled out, “The WC can make it! The WC can make rain! Essa, it’s an archived program...” If he said anything else it was lost in the air as he rose up into the sky, up and away from her forever.

“Essa-you-have-heard-a-thing-that-is-forbidden. It-has-caused-you-to-recall-emotion. You-must-submit-to-a-cleanse-to-continue-in-your-current-assignment-at-the-WC.” Essa heard this through what felt like miles of thickening air. A small voice from some far distant place, only vaguely remembered. It wasn’t until she felt a small hand on her arm that she stopped staring into the sky after Layton and came back to herself.

She looked down, saw the overseer's large clear eyes, saw the way the gentle breeze moved his straw-colored hair back and forth on his small head. She realized that her arms were locked to her sides, both her fists clenched so tightly her knuckles had gone white. "Anger, Rage, Hate, Sorrow" – all came to her at once and she mouthed their names rapidly. The full flood of emotion hit her like a blow to the head. Essa felt her stomach twist, felt all her muscles go taught at the same time. She lashed out at the overseer, swept him up easily in one arm and carried him over to the WC. Somewhere in the back of her mind she was aware of the overseer's emotionless protests, but she couldn't make them out. Even now, she thought, "He doesn't know what it means to feel fear... or hope, or joy." The words, and the emotions they were attached to, came faster and faster now, spiraling beyond her control.

She held the overseer with in one arm and walked to the WC's control panel. She typed in her access code and pulled up the program archives. She searched for, and found, the folder marked [Rain], looked through the list of programs there. Essa's finger lighted on the one titled [Summer_Storm.exe]. She pushed it, pressed her index finger gently onto the screen, and then quickly pressed the [Execute] button.

"Essa-you-have-violated-too-many-commands-now-to-remain-at-your-post. You-will-be-taken-for-final-assignment-as-soon-as-the-retrieval-team-returns-from-depositing-Layton." This time the overseer's monotone didn't bother her. She felt, grief for him. Essa just pulled him to her chest instead. Even now, he didn't struggle – he couldn't even conceive of fear. She held him tightly and waded through the wheat fields until she reached the patch of new growth at the north edge of the plot.

There she laid down and turned the overseer around, so his back rested on her chest, so they could both look up into the sky.

Together, they felt the breeze become wind. They watched the world darken and cloud over. Felt the first, cold, wet drops alight on their skin.

When the first flash of lightning scorched across the sky Essa felt the overseer tense for the first time. The succeeding clap of thunder made them both jump. Then suddenly, the sky cleared – all the clouds retreating towards the WC.

Two men walked over to Essa. They removed the overseer from her grip and placed him gently back onto his feet behind them. Next, they lifted her from the ground. Essa didn't struggle, had no thoughts other than how the water felt on her skin.

Giving herself up to the retrieval team she glanced back over her shoulder at the overseer and saw that his eyes were puffy and rimmed in red. He had been crying. She hadn't even noticed with the rain falling on them and she wondered if she had cried too. She touched her cheek and her fingers came away wet. "Beautiful," she thought. "The rain is beautiful." She smiled back at him as the two men carried her into the now cloudless blue sky.

The overseer watched them go, something tugging at his small chest. His breath came ragged now as the thing worked its way up from his belly and into his throat.

All at once it erupted from him – from his eyes, and his lungs, and his mouth all at the same time. A single word flashed through his mind as it did: "Sad." And he cried out with the voice of the small child he was – hoarse through his tears, just one word, long and loud and pleading.

"Essa!"

Ice Cream and Revolutions - Matthew Hernandez

When Connie and Rene left for their date Connie was still beside herself – shocked that Rene convinced her parents to let them go out without a chaperone. The thought was still rattling around her mind as they were walking toward El Capitolio. “May I get you anything?” Rene said interrupting her thoughts. “Are you hungry? We have some time before the movie. Anything you want.” “Um, yes please” She replied. “OK, well I know a place with the best fish in Havana, it’s on the way to the theater.” Connie barely noticed the neighborhood as they walked through it. Here was Rene, the Rene. The brother of revolutionaries, son of dissenters, from a family with influence. His European ancestry still shone through in his pale skin and pale green eyes. Cuban but only for the last three generations. Not like her family, Havana by way of Havana for God knows how long. She had seen the pictures, heard Rene’s stories of Fidel popping over for dinner, playing dominoes, sharing rum and cigars. Until then Connie was unaware that Fidel Castro had the ability to “pop” over anywhere. After his first failed attempt at overthrowing that bastard Batista no one thought he would ever come back. Now he is here and more and more people, like Rene’s family and her own were giving him their support.

“So, the guerrillas sent a message to my mother that Lou had been killed in a raid,” Rene spoke, continuing a story he had obviously started before suggesting the restaurant. Connie hadn’t heard the opening but could guess how it began. Rene was always honest with her about his family’s involvement with the revolution, after all, he trusted her; they had plans to marry one day, after the revolution was over and they had the freedom to start a family of their own. “My God, that’s terrible, I’m so sorry Rene.” His revelation was too casually given but Connie understood her role in his story telling. “Ha, you know my family, we never die.” He retorted with an arrogance fitting his attitude. “So, my mother

looks right into this poor kid's face and says 'Mijo, did you bring his body?' and he doesn't even know what to say, he's by himself, he obviously walked down from the hills to deliver this news on his own, of course he doesn't have a body! So, he answers her 'No Señora,' and I'll be damned if she didn't slap him across the face right there on the door step. 'Unless you bring me my son's body then don't you ever say to me that he's dead! My sons don't die just because you think they do!' 'Si, Señora.' That's all this poor kid can say, 'Si, Señora.' So, my mother says 'Ok mijo ok. I'm sorry to get so angry with you, let's get you fed and then you and I will be on our way.' He has no idea what she's talking about, where are they going? 'Um, Señora?' 'What, do I need to hit you again to restart that brain of yours?' my mother snaps back at him, although you can tell her anger was waning at that point. 'You said Lou went missing after the last raid and that you only found about half his unit, right? Well that means my first-born son is hiding in the hills somewhere, probably hungry, and you lot don't know how to find him, so you're going to take me as close as you can and I'll find him, and when I do, he's going to get what you got but worse.'"

"So, your mother is wandering the hills?! Rene! That's terrible!" To which Rene smiled his most mischievous smile and gave her a little wink, both infuriating her and pulling her further in to his romance. "You bastard, just tell me that your mother's alright, she scares me but I don't want her dead." "She got back yesterday," he added pausing casually to order some food from the waiter. "Before you curse me again, she's fine. She went up into the hills for three days before she found the stragglers of Lou's unit. When she first got there a sergeant tried to show her a body and tell her it was Lou, she took one look and..." "And let me guess, she slapped him" interrupted Connie, still annoyed that Rene would dangle both his brother's and mother's deaths on a string for the sake of a story. "... Well yes, directly in front of the entire staff" Rene added launching back into his tale. "She said only one thing

to them 'what direction did you find the rest of his unit?' The sergeant piped up and said 'They were in the hills just to the northeast.' To which she glared at him tensing her arm and readying another blow for the man's ear. 'Señora.' He added quickly. 'That's better, it's good to have respect for your elders mijo.' And she walked off, by herself, into the fighting.

"Well, after three days she found him and a few others and in another day she led them back to the main unit. The other soldiers said that Lou looked like a pomegranate he was so red from the beating. He said it was from the fight, but everyone knew that my mother was the only reason he looked that way. Then she came home, escorted by a few soldiers and with Fidel's compliments." "Your mother scares me," added Connie. "She scares me too," echoed Rene.

"What's that you've been carrying?" asked Connie as she noticed for the first time that Rene had a small parcel under his arm. "Oh, nothing. Just something I need to drop off later. Let's head to the movie, and after how about an ice cream?" "Oh, yes, that would be wonderful," Connie answered.

In the decades to come Connie would never remember the movie but the ice cream would rattle back into her mind even 50 years later.

The vanilla ice cream Rene brought back to their table by the window was already starting to melt in the Havana summer sun. Its sweetness was decadent in the heat. Connie began to lose herself in it and in Rene's soft stare. "I have to run around the corner real quick," Rene suddenly interjected. "You enjoy the ice cream and I'll be right back." His smile made the interruption to their date seem fine. "Sure," Connie answered.

As she sat in the window staring off, seeing the people pass by, not so much noticing anything except the sweet cold feeling in her mouth. She thought of what life might be like if she married Rene, where she would work – if she would work or stay home and raise a family. “After all, it’s 1958 I should have the choice to stay home or work, to have kids or not. Of course, I do want kids, at least a few.” Her mind must have wandered for quite some time, she didn’t realize it had been almost half an hour before Rene turned back up. “All finished up?” He asked as he reentered the ice cream shop. “Yes. You were gone awhile.” “Sorry about that, I’m back now. Let’s get you home.”

The walk home was lovely. The sun beginning to set. The Havana summer heat starting to abate. The conversation taking turns here and there and no place in particular. As they strode up the walk Rene kissed her goodnight and left her at the door turning to go. He glanced back at her as he walked away, strolling without a care in the world, and his look filled her with warmth.

The next morning when Connie awoke, still glowing from the night before, her father was sitting in the living room. “You’re not going to work today?” she inquired. “No Conchita, the city is shut down for the day. One of the buildings near El Capitolio was bombed last night. Castro’s guerrillas are growing bolder. I wonder if Bautista is getting worried.”

Connie turned and walked back to her room, thinking about Rene’s story, his brothers, the package he was carrying, and how close the ice cream parlor was to El Capitolio. The revolution had hit Havana.

A life time later when Connie would tell this story to their grandchildren, she wouldn’t mention that Rene would grow to be the most calculated man she ever knew and that the life he led

after that day would be far more nefarious than the one she dreamed of, sitting in that ice cream shop, staring absentmindedly out the window.

Spring 2021: “Rebuilding”

What do we do after those moments happen?

Whether it is the culmination of one’s success, a pitfall along the journey, or most commonly, overcoming adversity. What lies ahead after these experiences? Every single moment leaves an impression in our lives. We take these into account and build upon them. We are learning, growing, and living.

POETRY

“Mis Colores” - Andrew A. Leung

Mis colores son
Fuertes, felices, tristes
Dame la vida

Amputation – Armanda Saldana

Click-clack, click-clack.

A haunting sound, shivers down the spine.

The crutches strike the wooden floor.

A bang.

The crutch strikes the bathroom wall

As he tries to urinate.

Click-clack, click-clack.

A big sigh, a groan

As he struggles to sit on the couch.

Plop, plop, the crutches rest on the couch.

“Time to change the bandages!”

He says to his wife.

A wince, another, as the bandages unravel.

A striking white.

The bone...at the end of the stump.

A nail piercing your foot.

“Ha ha..aahh...”

He tries to hide the pain, to no avail.

A wince, another, as new bandages are wrapped.

The wife grimaces as if she felt the pain too.

For the site of a missing leg, pain for her as well.

I shake my head.

Machismo.

Why did you not go to a doctor immediately?

“It’s cuz I thought it’d go away on its own.”

Black, black, up to the knee your leg was already.

Diabetes speeding the spread.

It hurt bad enough for you to miss work.

You, who didn't miss work for illness.
Tu puto machismo.
And mine.
I saw you stay home for a week straight.
A strange smell.
"Have you not showered?"
I asked you not.
Men deal with their pain alone.
Show weakness to no one.
But the wife...
She too...
Home all day, with you.
And she couldn't...wouldn't...
A blame game.
As we sit at Dennys the day of the surgery.
"Mom, did you not notice something was wrong?!"
"Me?! What about you?! He's your father!"
"...He's your husband. I work. I go to school. I'm barely home.
But you..."
Excuses. A simple conversation and..
"Enough! It's your father's fault for not saying anything."
Machismo. Stupidity. Strained relationships.
Click-clack, click-clack.
The haunting sound, a reminder of...not showing weakness.
Stupidity.
He goes for a smoke.
A sigh, from three different spots.

warmth & blankets – Ashley Smith

she sat across her fireplace,
a chiseled wine glass in one hand
and the remote in the other.
she paused for a second,
and slowly closed her eyes.
the pops
and snaps
of the fire
began to marinate
and liven the stillness
of the moment.
She indulged in a few more sips,
slowly pulled away and
let her lips rest on the rim.
She smiled
and softly snuggled deeper
more intimately
into the couch.
Her feet felt incredibly warm under the
blanket
her heart full
and with the tv now on,
her favorite movie coming on at 8.

2 am rain on a Monday – Ashley Smith

the fan on low
two blankets cuddling my body
the uproar from everyone in the house has now
become quick interludes of
sporadic snoring
the room is engulfed in black as I gaze at this
bright screen
the ignored apartment buildings now have
purpose as instruments while the rain plops,
falls, and spins onto them
the pipes carrying special tunes
this is why rain is music to my ears
the night is lively, nature having its own
concert
you had to have been awake to be there
a smile creeping on my face as this poem is
coming to an end

Turn Off and On – Belen Mercado

I need courage to trust again.

My mind is always anticipating pain.

I been hurt all my life and my algorithm of senses learned to be intelligent.

They were exploited and betrayed by many.

Some people say my fear is lack of self-worth.

But fear is primarily processed with sensation.

The gut-knowing feeling has no rational analyzation and foundation.

It is a soft-seducing voice with no insecurity or imagination.

It is the alarm of a damaged heart advising me to proceed with a lot of precaution.

Fear is a physiologically loud emotion of vulnerable-based experience.

An emotion so strong that secludes any power of sanity by exhausting my feelings.

I have no fear of vulnerability. Maybe is fear of trusting again by deciding to ignore red flags that cause so much pain.. I have the tendency to not see things for what they are. Making a deliberate choice to be wrong another time.

Maybe is true that my heart can't think, but my blood speeds fast every time I think people are going to damage my heart.

I feel the intuitive awkward snap.

Telling me there is a close enemy ready to cause harm. I am ready to build up my walls of protection. Leaving me in solitude and frustration.

I turn my trust off and on. Enjoying the power of numbing myself to be strong.

Rebuilding my trust is my goal, even when people want to see me collapse in the floor.

There is no guarantee that being a woman with good intentions will prevent me from experiencing pain.

But I won't be in peace unless I learn to trust again.

**“sincerely yours, your daughter” – Brenda
Sanchez-Barrera**

I can't call you without crying, so I don't call you at all.

One day, I'll regret never showing my face when you come around.

I hate myself for avoiding you,

I know I can't outrun my past but avoiding you is as close as I'll ever get.

I'm sorry you're the face I associate with my pain, but can you blame me?

I'm holding onto memories that run through my hands like water, never staying long enough for me to capture in one snapshot.

A snapshot of you and I, when I saw the world in your eyes and you were everything I needed to feel safe.

You'll never read this,

but I'll write this for you, anyway,

and spill my tears onto a page once again, to someone from my past who holds my darkest secrets and earliest memories.

I won't speak your name —it goes hand-in-hand with a voice crack and some tears.

I won't say your title because you never lived up to that, and as much as it hurts me to say, you don't deserve that title.

Still, I don't resent you,

I don't blame you,

I still miss you,

I still love you,

and god, I—

I wish I could call you.. it's been so long since I've heard your voice.

But as always, I'll make an excuse.

“Call you soon,” I promise. We both know I lie.

– sincerely yours, your daughter.

Ken Malloy Harbor Park – Chris Pigao

As a 15-year-old girl
I sat and watched
the ducks,
birds,
people minding their
own business
while my brother
who worked a triple shift
making means ends
is sleeping
cause we hit the occupancy
at our apartment.
and if Miguel or Constance
finds out
that's the end
and we have to move the corner
vacancies
like we always did.

I walked up the
hills on rainy
days and still if it wasn't
I walked them
anyways.
Such poor concrete
but at least it was
better than back
home.

There was nothing like
this and even so,
we were born

into the ground
that was hallow and
voided.

Until then, I watched
the water from that
pond and it still reminded
me that water
regardless of where it's at
is still just water.
and I just sat there
patiently
until 4 o' clock.

Flores – Daisy Aguirre

As the sun rises all I see is you at my side.
You get me through the night.
Are you the way? Are you the light?
With you I set aside all my pride.
All that you need I promise to provide.
Because of you, my sins are no longer scarlet but white.
I'll always remember meeting you for our first kiss at midnight.
I will forever be your guide.
In distance we may be apart
But I cannot wait to be in your arms
I'll keep you out of harm.
When I have doubt, feeling your love clears the way.
Till the end of time, my beating heart;
Will belong to you and never breakaway.

Vacancy - Jon Sebastian

I let the room out—
to world-weary wanderers.
Some stayed
for a while then
some prayed
to be a child again.
But I let the room out—
For a time, it was nice.
Some came from out West,
with palm trees,
some came from down South,
with saddles blazing,
some came from far East
with wonders I've never seen before,
and some came from up North.
For a time, it was nice.
They checked in and checked out.
Then one day
a bad, very bad one checked in
and burned the inn down.
I've rebuilt since, but
now thoughts don't come round here
no more.
I let the room out—
but there's still a vacancy.

No Limitation - Karin Guerra

With pain in the heart and a lock on the lips
A person feels trapped with no way of expression
It is their confidence that strips
As they endure all this oppression
When has there been a limitation to the voice of the nation?
Where is the acknowledgment of those who are neglected?
It is time now to face this discrimination
It is time now to address this indifference
So together we, the future both elderly and young, stand against
those who show hatred
And be a voice with no limitation

Ties to Another – Katie Colln

That feeling when you just know,
the one when your demeanor changes.
It affects your flow.
Your purpose in the world is no longer your own.
You've shifted and you've twirled.
You've found a new tie
to a
new you,
to a
new land,
to a
new hand
through a bond that cannot be shaken
cannot be ripped, torn, or lost.
A choice to be awakened,
we determine this ourselves.

We discover who we are.
We scour the inner bookshelves
of our minds and our hearts and more.
We dust off our curiosity.
We float.
We glide.
We soar,
tied only to the earth
by this new love and hope,
full of wonder, full of mirth,
singing a new tune with joy unbounded,
a new song with love unbounded
by the doubt and uncertainty of this world,
secure in the fact that our hands are now curled.

To Exist is to Grow – Katie Colln

What does it mean to live?
What does it mean to be?
How can I truly thrive,
exist outside of a dream?

To live is to grow. To find
and to know that you're here,
that you matter, that you change,
that you're more than before.

To live is to change. To be
willing to rearrange your
comfort and embrace new,
an existence that is true.

We're given only one life.
We're here only one time.
Without struggle, how do we grow?
Without pain, how do we know?

Be All - Rachelle Delle

We exert ourselves to what end?
Fighting against the very nature we tend
Inventing a civil war of confusion
An unknown genesis, no promise of conclusion
It began simply as self-preservation
A spark for heat, tools, killing to prevent starvation.
We tasted the potential of invention
Self-improvement became our new intention
We built our fortress of civilization
Where busyness displaces rest and relaxation
We tasted money and personal gain
Our metropolis spreading outward like a stain
Washing out the map, its edges filled to burst
We tapped every known resource, but still we thirst
With nowhere left to spread, we begin to mound
Crusting over like an inflamed scab, no cure to be found
Our fat bellies descended with greed
And still we feed beyond basic need
The land, sea, and sky are cut like a jigsaw
Arbitrary divisions according to invented law
With no regard to the advantage of unity
We write our name on each piece with impunity
The vital reality of interdependence
Lost in time, swallowed by the distance
Every time you are cut, we bleed.
A violent labor to succeed
No sense of place—insolated in boxes of concrete and steel
No sense of self—an existential interrogation of what's real
An empty legacy of designations, titles, and brands
Ah! But look what we can achieve with our own hands

TREADMILL – Ryan Ritchie

you had a girl and an apartment and cats and
all that stuff. now you've got you. this is
what you asked for, what kept you awake
those nights when all you wanted was
to run. it's two a.m. and you're drenched
in sweat. this is not the marathon you desired.

Caricature – Sylvia Martinez

I don't recognize
the curves of my face
when I look in the mirror

The slope of my jaw trembles
under the hands of disillusion;
The red in my lips
is an imprint of a sinner's thumb,
scarring amongst my cheeks
is evidence of a pain that echoes still.

The face that gazes back at me -
her chin upturned to the ceiling
as if asking for a challenge,
only to receive no answer.

She's a caricature I despise
a girl framed in pictures
I refuse to recognize.

Mango – Sylvia Martinez

I am watching Mami cut a mango
bought from la esquina
its yellow juices drip like the sun
on the counter and raw

She cuts steadily and with intent:
down in half, away from the core
Knife down the orange insides
blade halfway in, her hands sore

“My mom taught me this way,”
she’ll say, eyebrows furrowed
I want to press my finger there,
relearn the traits she has sowed

I have never met my grandma.
The absence of warm hands
a constant fixture; mi abuela
falling through cracks like sand -

But I have gleaned her, know her
through teachings like these,
can feel her hands atop of mine
guiding me and steering me

So when I open a mango and cut
it in half, away from the core -
down the lines and push the skin
from inside out, I feel secure

I take a bite, wonder if she bit
into it like I do, stitching
the quilt piece by piece
listening and gaining.

ART

Jacqueline Aguilar



"Comfort Seeker"

Jacqueline Aguilar



"Unwavering Balance"

Jacqueline Aguilar



"Outside"

Jeannette Garcia



The Fruits of Labor

Jeannette Garcia



Clearing Ground

Jeannette Garcia



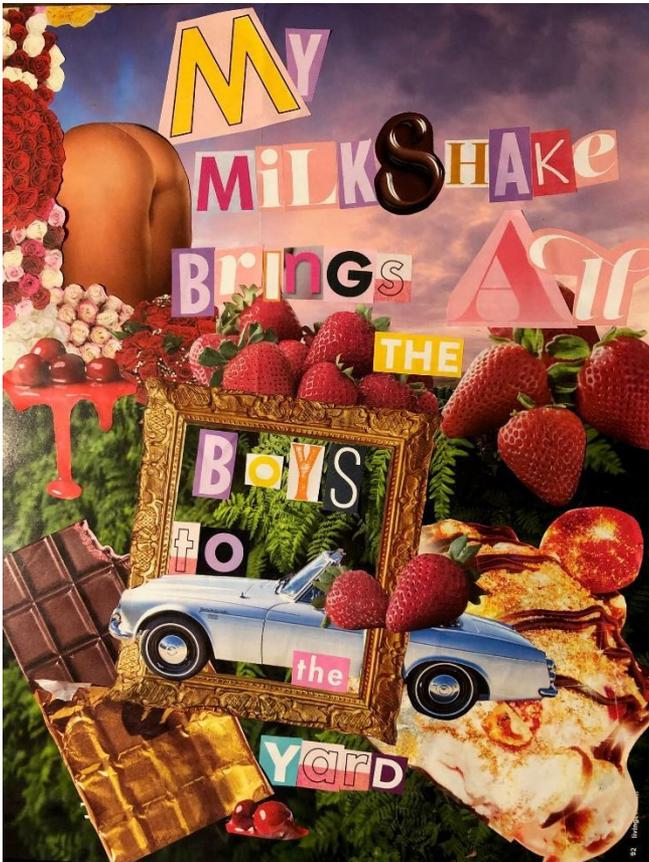
Self-Supporting

Kali-Victoria Donovan



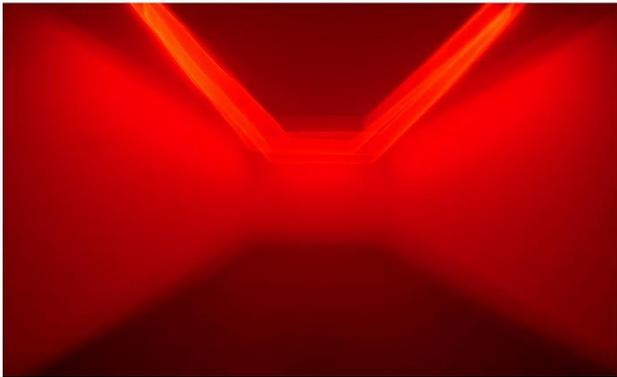
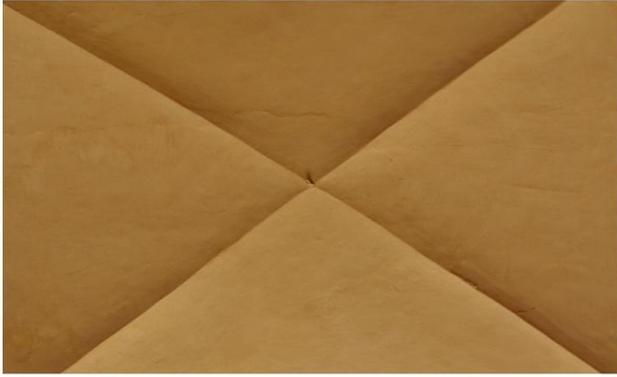
“Racist B*s Get Hexed by Witches”

Kali-Victoria Donovan



"My Milkshake Brings all the Boys to the Yard."

Nate Hertweck



Spanish Triptych:
"Klein Blue" / "Alcázar Gold" / "Tàpies Red"

CREATIVE
NON-FICTION

Cindy Elizabeth (Mama) – Anisa D. Delgado

She radiates from the inside, out. Her laugh has always been the loudest in the room and it's contagious, shameless. She enjoys the holidays because it brings her family together with making tamales and going to see the Christmas lights at candy cane lane, but the summer is still her favorite. And on these warm days, and every day, you can always find her with a Diet Coke and chips in hand.

New Mexico is rooted in her, but California is her heart. Her golden-brown waves, hoop earrings, and red nails to match her lips are a signature of her that's a vivid picture in my mind. The second youngest of five, one of the apples of William and Jenny's eye. Her grandmother, her hero, always told her "beauty is, as beauty does" and this does not escape her.

There's a weight of compassion that she's carried since her youth. She holds her head high but does not use her strengths as a way to belittle others. The ability to find some kind of sunshine in her darker days is admirable. She doesn't enjoy confrontation; she thrives on togetherness. I hate to see her cry, especially if it's my fault. Her eyes are bright and sky blue, much like her outlook on one's possibilities.

Her favorite color is purple, the color of royalty, though she is the humblest queen I know.

As a mother, selfless. There isn't a thing she wouldn't do for

us: Raymond, Katrina, Angel, April, Isaiah, me. Dad was drawn to her immediately, “she glowed, and was always the prettiest and warmest in the room.”

She had a whole life before I came into her world: daughter, sister, friend, mother. How I wish I could’ve been there in her younger years, to watch her ride her bike down the block, play with her siblings and their many dogs, or belt out her favorite records like the Jackson 5 or The Bee Gees.

I asked her what she wants for Christmas: for everyone to have a good day. What she wants for her birthday: just a card. That’s the kind of answers you’ll get. If you ask her how she does it, what keeps her so cheerful? So hopeful for the best outcome? She’ll say it’s the Jesus in her, so I’ll say that I’m blessed.

She was always there: every school performance, teacher-parent conference, graduations, and she’s the loudest one in the crowd without a doubt. Your biggest cheerleader when you have none, or there with a tissue and some M&M’s when you need to vent again over a boy.

I’m not her but I try to listen to what’s important in her eyes: family, kindness, God. I would hope that my future daughter inherits her unconditional love or ability to make everyone feel important, and if not that then maybe her eyes or her laugh. Just a piece of her to have here when she’s gone.

I've kept her notes she leaves in my lunch pail, or the gifts she gives me every Valentine's Day, whether I'm single or not. I can go on about her qualities or the daily things she does to make them easier or brighter, but simply, she is love.

¿Cómo se dice, “White Mexican”? Check all that apply. – Anisa D. Delgado

Delgado, pero no acento.

It's being darker than your fair mom, but lighter than your olive-skinned dad.

Not having the blue eyes from the less than 10% German blood, but the bright and brown “Delgado eyes”, but no they don't make a difference here.

People have claimed to say that you “could pass” for ethnicities such as Italian, Persian, Filipino, just never Mexican. It's very rare that they guess Mexican. Your first name isn't even Hispanic, it's Arabic. Odd how some are quick to tell you what you aren't without being given permission to.

¿Cómo se dice, “White Mexican”?

It's going to your Nane's house every week in elementary school and reading all the subtitles during telenovelas or having her translate for you. It's not being to carry a fluent conversation with the Elote man who passes your apartment on Wilmington boulevard after school. Not knowing how to dance to the Latin club music they played at homecoming, even though high school was about 86% Latino and statistically you fall into that category.

The first tattoo that imprints your upper left ribcage translates to “goddess” in Spanish, but your parents don't approve of tattoos in the first place, should've kept that to yourself.

¿Cómo se dice, “White Mexican”?

It means being left out from work conversations amongst the García, Martínez, Ramírez, because your Spanish falls flat or is choppy, even though they could talk to you in English if they wanted. “¿Cuál es tu nombre?” they proceed to ask, already knowing the answer. “Delgado...yeah I know” you respond, as they look you up and down, eyebrow raised. You don’t have to say anything, you both silently nod, and they simply decide you don’t “look” your last name. It was a long year trying to order food from the kitchen.

It’s feeling stuck between several places, sometimes wishing you could just fall completely into one checkbox. The ones that you find on applications or surveys to determine your ethnicity or background. What’s your ethnicity? Check all that apply. But you’re a mutt, so it’s a little grey.

¿Cómo se dice, “White Mexican”?

It’s making tamales every year for the holidays and knowing Mom makes the spiciest guacamole that beats La Cocina Mexicana hands down. It’s not having to use subtitles while watching Jane the Virgin by your early 20’s and feeling, unfortunately, impressed that you hung on to the little of Spanish 2 from junior year.

It’s knowing that you aren’t full Mexican but understanding that every other part that makes up those checked boxes is just as important. Native American. Spanish. German. Etc. You’re more than your last name and that’s okay.

“Julio³” - Anonymous

I: Abuelo Julio

Do you remember when you told me about the time you came to the U.S.? Like all your stories, it started off in El Salvador. With the war. You said you couldn't live in El Salvador anymore - not with the way things were. You wanted your little family to have a better life, a safer life. Only then, your little family was just your new wife, Tio Julito, and Tia Julia. This did not include my dad. You didn't say that though.

You said you weren't sure where dad and Tio Carlos were. Dad was still somewhere in Guatemala; Tio Carlos was with Abuela Rosa.

Maybe.
Probably.

Though, you had no idea where Abuela Rosa was anyway. It had been a while since you had last seen her. And it had been even longer since you last spoke with her. You told us you came here separately from your wife – only to get here and have a door slammed in your face.

You said you were homeless for a while. You ate food off trash cans. You spoke no English and weren't sure of where you were. You got into contact with old friends - or rather, you met men who used to buy your shoes. The shoes you made in El Salvador. M***z shoes. I wondered aloud why you chose a last name that wasn't ours for your company

and you said it was to hide your real identity.

You told me that connections were the most important thing. You never know when you'll need to know a janitor. Or a plumber. It's good to know a lot of people. You never know when the guy who used to buy your shoes in El Salvador would be giving you room to stay in los estados.

You never complained. You never expressed a longing for your life back home. Back with the soles that had M***z printed on them. The name that I still censor out of fear. And it always made me wonder: how I would have felt to leave that all behind?

II: Dad

Julio. A name I'd never say in front of you because it sounds too awkward spilling from my mouth. It feels foreign and disrespectful. I don't think I've ever said 'Julio' in my life. Out loud. Until now. To me, you're just dad.

To your mom you're an estranged figure. She left you in El Salvador when you were in your teens. But even before she left Santa Ana, she had left you as a baby at Mama Carmen's. She met you again when you crossed. She knows you had three kids. She hasn't seen them in almost a decade. She knows you're okay though. And I suppose that's all she needs to know anyway.

To grandpa, you're the eldest. You're the son he's had the privilege of getting to know over the years; the son he has repaired his relationship with. The son he also left with Mama Carmen. To grandpa, you're chato and you're the son who visits him during a pandemic to make sure he's okay. You're the son that drives him to his cancer treatments.

To Mom, you're the man who refuses to get to places on time. You're the man she met out in Guatemala and the father of her three kids. You're the one she lived in Mexico with. You're the man who still hasn't learned English and the man she has to defend when you're getting into trouble. You're the man she still hasn't married in a church, but that's perfectly fine because she doesn't need to anyway.

To me, Mel, and Len – you're the dad who tells us to study and stuffs us into a car at 6am in the summer to take

spontaneous trips. To Vegas, where we slept in cars and had our eyes sparkle at pretty water shows. You're the dad who years ago drove us on May 1st to Pico and Olympic Blvd. We walked for hours and used my cheerleading pompoms to adorn the stroller. You're the dad who brushes off the traumas of war, the traumas of hearing people scream and getting killed. You're the dad that never lets us forget where we come from.

To the rest of the world, you're Don Julio. Tio. Primo. Mister joo-lee-oh. To the rest of the world, you're a happy man who speaks broken English.

They say: Hi, how are you?

You say: I'm good and you?

They say: Can you clean the toilets better this time?

You say: Oh, sure! No Problem.

III: Tio Julio, I'm Sorry

I'm sorry for your fifth-grade graduation. I was in a stroller and waving at you as you walked. I know you laughed at seeing my pregnant Mom in the crowd - and I'm sorry it wasn't your parents out there looking proud. I hope they won't be mad I said so.

I'm sorry for getting mad at you for stealing my juice boxes and for bringing home girls who put too much chile in their popcorn. I know you felt bad because you would bring home happy meal toys to make up for it. I'm sorry to say we still grow silent when your name gets brought up.

I'm sorry I didn't understand at a young age why they deported you. I didn't grasp the idea of not seeing you. I didn't know why we had to pay for cards to call you - or why you only had a few minutes to talk. I was foolish enough to end my phone calls with hurry back and see you soon.

I'm sorry I didn't understand deported meant permanent. My last words to you were: I got a scholarship award. Your last words to me were: I've gotten more than that, try harder.

For years I failed to understand why they took you away or why no one seemed to care that you were in danger. They say people like us should go back to where we came from; but, god, doesn't everyone say that? What if we tell them, you deported my Tio and they killed him a month after?

I never said goodbye. I was 2,821 miles apart from the guy who was like my big brother.

Tio Julio, I'm sorry.

I'm sorry they failed to understand you.

IV: I am not Julia

I think I was supposed to be. I was supposed to be many names before Mom settled for a name that was easy to understand in English. She failed to realize, then, that so many people would not know how to pronounce it anyway. It's fine, though. Once I say it the English way, there's a sigh of relief from the audience. Thank goodness we don't have to say it the other way!

Mom wanted me to be Coco - and dad told her she might as well name me Piña.

Years later, they talk about how I narrowly escaped the line of Julios and Julias. And I wonder how life could have been. I wonder if Julia was more outgoing. I wonder if she would have been disappointed in me and glad, I didn't steal her name. I wonder if I would have lived up to it.

On other days, I'm thankful for my strong-headed Mother, who refused to make me the eighth Julia in our family. But, I'm also glad she never named me Coco. I don't think I would have lived up to that name either. But perhaps I could have sported Mom's name pretty well. Margarita. Or if not that, then the name she used during her stay in Mexico, after she ran away from Guate and headed out into the unknown world. Karina. People call me a carbon-copy. Of Mom. I wonder, in fear, if I'm becoming the woman who raised me. I wonder if I have her temper. I probably do. I wonder, sadly, if I have her resilience. Her motivation. Her power. And I think to myself - I wouldn't have lived up to her name either.

There are nights where I think about Mom's unborn son. How I wish he would have been born so he would be that next Julio. I often wish so dearly that he would have been the first child. That he would have taught me everything I needed to know, because I don't think I can be that for my siblings. I don't think I can be the namesake I want to be. I wish he was there to pave the way for them and let me cross over. But he's not here and I'm not Julia.

The tricky thing about names is – they're supposed to mean something. Carmen in our family means a nurse from El Salvador who raised so many and loved them unconditionally. Juana means the most stubborn woman on the planet - yet the only woman de corte left in our family. Melany means an artist and a strong young woman, ready to tackle the world. Lenin means a smart young boy, who still has so much to learn but will get through it. Pj and Kisha mean the most loved beings on this planet. The apple to our eyes.

Maybe names aren't important at all. Maybe it's what you do with your name and what you set out to do. Maybe these names are just scribbled and scratched all throughout my notebooks - begging and pleading me to never forget. Maybe I don't want anyone to forget them either.

Bunnyman: An Inside Look on Oshawa, ON – Chris Pigao

Setting:

Oshawa, Ontario, Canada. A little town 45 minutes away from Downtown Toronto. Small, yet very industrial. There were parts that were very urbanized. The Oshawa Center comes to mind. The huge shopping center that usually was the dubbed “the OC”. There were big chains like HMV, Hudson’s Bay, Old Navy, etc. The food choices have popular fast food chains such as Tim Hortons and McDonalds right across from each other. Shoppers Drug Mart’s demographic had the elderly people. The 18-35 range stood in the middle, right where all of the imported big chain clothing stores lingered. There used to be a Cineplex Odeon at the entranceway and a Zellers. They closed down both and made them into a parking garage.

If people got tired of the OC and wanted to get away, there were paths right by the River that span across the city. The trails often led people to other parts of the city. You can take the Simone Road entrance path to the Harmony creek and somehow end up near Whitby or Courtice. People often took the path towards the Ontario Lake. It would be filled during the July 1st, Canada Day festivals. The trails were beautiful and somehow, people ran into each other during their trecks. The town had a good mix of nature and urbanized areas. Surprisingly, there is not that much litter on the ground. This town actually got the environment right. Ethnically, it has a variety of races. There’s a good mix of white, black, and Indian races with a small Korean and Chinese population. There are Filipinos there as well, since

they do hold the Durham Annual Filipino Fest every spring or so. Most Filipinos live in Scarborough, even opening the first Jolibee restaurant in Canada. Unbeknownst, there are barely any Hispanic or Latino populating the area. There is a Mexican restaurant, however, that would not justify if there were any Hispanic or Latinos in Oshawa. For example, "New Hong Kong Express" should be under the assumption that it would be owned and operated by Chinese. In this case, they were Thai. The owners of the local sushi joint would be assumed Japanese; however, they were Korean. Regardless of stereotypes, Oshawa has a diverse cast of ethnicities.

Money:

Although urbanized, the primary source of income was agricultural and factory-based work. There were huge greenhouses and various home improvement stores off the freeway. A little bit before the Square Boy Pizzeria was the General Motors of Canada factory. People can barely see the smoke from the factory. Needless to say, it was fairly regulated. What was not regulated were the amount of car companies competing with each other. There were dealerships surrounding that area. The lots were never stock piled with cars. It always had a sizeable amount of inventory.

Nowadays, the biggest market is still business. The amount of the younger demographic going to University and studying business economics are fairly high. They get their degree, study finance, and work at the local banks or loan offices. People are also private contractors, working to fix houses and home improvement types-of-ordeals. The most common installation are back yard porches. Some of

the finest mahogany woods were used as a small patio. Perfect for a summer day. If they needed to chill their drinks in the wintertime, they could just leave the cooler on the back patio for a couple minutes.

Unsurprisingly, the demand for the medical field is also at an all-time high. Many of the younger generation become CAN's or Nurses and work at the local medical facilities or retirement homes. The number of elderly patients outweigh the amount of the younger generation. A lot of foreign workers begin their work in these facilities, later moving onto the city. Most of them are content with staying and eventually buy homes in Oshawa. Regardless of banking or nursing, their salaries can afford them a nice, cozy two-story home (for less than 50K).

Schools:

Speaking of cozy two-story homes, Oshawa had a great number of schools in the area. Oshawa was the ideal place to raise a family. It was a strange thing to see elementary students with no dress code turn into high school students with a uniform. It must be due to the part that the schools were regulated by the catholic churches in Ontario. The kids live a simple, happy life and often come home at 3. Most of them can't wait to watch YTV (Ontario's children's television channel) to catch the latest anime and cartoon block. The older high school kids are occupied with club activities like soccer or basketball. If they weren't into sports, they often helped out as a member of the church. They could be altar boys or become a member of the Knights of Columbus. Anything to get out of the house.

As for higher education, all of these students had to

go away from the town to go to university. Some went to Peterborough for degrees in Nursing, others went to Ryerson university in downtown Toronto for business. There were local trade schools here (ala ITT tech in the United States) but they had low enrollment.

Entertainment:

Not many forms of entertainment there. There was once a roller-skating alley midpoint between Oshawa and Whitby, but it closed down a while back. It was a popular venue for Canada Day. There are a few “fun centers” with old, beat-up arcade games. Most of those centers would be right next to a Cinéplex theater that always showed the latest Hollywood hits.

There used to be a music venue in Downtown Oshawa called “The Dungeon”. Apparently, Hamilton Ontario’s infamous screamo band, Alexisonfire, performed there. Amongst the schoolkids, that was the place where everyone shot up heroin. That place ceases to exist, mainly because musicians don’t perform in Oshawa anymore. Either way, the kids out here are eager to drive so they can party in Toronto or hang out at Canada’s Wonderland.

Bunnyman:

The local legend of Oshawa. Middle aged man, wears simple, everyday jeans and a plain shirt. He’s a pretty tall person. Maybe clocking in at around 5’8, maybe even 6 ft exact. Every town has their one infamous local that roams around the streets. Most of them for not for being popular and well-liked. Actually, the bunnyman is quite the

opposite. He's odd and eccentric to some. He doesn't have a bad reputation or any criminal records, he's just marginalized as an odd person. He's not a homeless man nor does he have any physical deformities. What is his appeal amongst the people of the town? He wears a pink bunny rabbit headband. That's it. That was the appeal. It's an oddity for a small town like Oshawa to have a grown man wear bunny ears. Everyone here is a simple, rule following person.

Now, some might think, "Well, he's wearing a bunny headband? What's the big deal about that?" To everyone in Oshawa, it's a huge deal. They want to understand why. Many don't even know his real name. According to a message board, his real name is "Chris". With the lure of this man, the internet does not seem like a reliable source for this. Some people have conjured up ideas. The most common one is this account:

"Well, I actually talked to the Bunnyman while I was waiting at McDonald's at Thickson and Dundas in Whitby. He's such a nice guy. I politely asked him why and he said, 'It's for my daughter. She passed away from cancer. She loved Easter time.' Such a heartbreaking story."

-Common Oshawaian

However, there are other witnesses that claim otherwise. Some of them local rumors, others on messaging boards like Reddit or 4chan.

"I heard he's a doctor that entertains kids."

-Unaware Oshawaian

"This man does not like people, and hates having to work for a living. So, he wears bunny ears on his head to get welfare cheques from the government because he pretends to be insane, and people won't bother him because they think he's insane. Fucking brilliant."

-funny junk use from Durham

"I heard he runs a bunny farm on the outskirts of the town. Right by the GMC factory."

-Basic Girl Oshawaian

"The Bunnyman? That guy is a dick. I bought him an electronic chess piece. Just the other day, he yelled at me at the bus stop."

-Chad Oshawaian

"My brother is a cop in Durham. He has a mental disability, but he is harmless. He wears them to protect himself from getting taken by aliens again. That's what I have been told, whether it is accurate or not I do not know."

-reddit user fryguy1987

You can often see him in the epicenter of Oshawa. During the holidays, he changes it up sometimes and wears antlers and a Christmas hat. Whatever the case may be, the origins of these ears are still a mystery to many inhabiting Oshawa, Ontario, Canada. Some may never find the answers to this. A select few know the truth, it's hard for the people to comprehend it.

To the outside world, he is one like all of us.

**The Discourse on Dominance and Interstitial
Identities of Ethnicity and Masculinity in Parks'
Topdog/Underdog
by Andrew A. Leung**

Suzan-Lori Parks' Pulitzer Prize-winning play *Topdog/Underdog* discusses two men's struggles with race and masculinity in America. The two main characters, Lincoln and Booth, have differing ideals of dominance, ethnicity, and masculinity. In his employment, Lincoln accepts a subordinate underdog role to don a costume in whiteface though he is a Black man—this is a reversal of minstrel traditions where the theatricality of race and race issues was exemplified. However, he asserts his own kind of power in his command of Three-Card Monte and in his relationship with his brother. Booth, though, resists taking on the role of an underdog; he often resorts to violence to put on a façade of dominant masculinity to compensate for his sexual and financial failings. Lincoln resists the binarism and strict hierarchy of ethnicity and masculinity to define himself with an ambiguous and interstitial identity. He is neither completely a topdog nor an underdog, and his varied experiences in the play define him in an ambiguous manner. Booth's unclear masculinity is demonstrated through his attempts to establish his authority as a topdog in relation to his brother, an underdog, although he himself falls short of this masculinity many times.

In order to gain employment as a Black man in America, Lincoln accepts a subordinate role in his work, dressing in whiteface and simulating being shot by

customers. In fact, he goes to great lengths to perfect his act, making it look extremely lifelike, underscoring the history and theatricality of race issues in America. Lincoln is satisfied with his role of dying and being shot at while being dressed in whiteface, calling it “honest work” (26) while asserting that the suit does not “make him” into a Lincoln (34). Through this, he mocks White America’s passion for masculinity linked with violence, making fools of those who pay for a chance to shoot a Black man portraying a White historical figure—he is earning money. He also reverses the longstanding tradition of blackface in entertainment. Lincoln’s Whiteness as Abraham Lincoln suggests sexual impotency and is the reason why he is met with American guns and violence in his work. His role as an underdog and his presumed loss of manhood are stressed when Booth accuses him of being impotent and a sellout “Uncle Tom” (26). Unfazed, Lincoln does not fight back because he sees through the theatricality and fiction of dominance between his brother and him, as Booth is unemployed. Though in public, Lincoln is complacent with appearing as the underdog, he proves himself to be the breadwinner within his family.

On the other hand, Booth is unwilling to take on a submissive role and asserts his identity as a dominant man, often through violence to compensate for his shortcomings. Unlike Lincoln, he is opposed to dressing in whiteface that would dampen his perceived masculinity; Blackness is associated with virility and manliness. In opposition to the impotent Lincoln, Booth says, “I need constant sexual release... If I wasn’t taking care of myself... I’d be out there doing who knows what, shooting people (49). Booth’s

insatiable desire to become a dominant male is exhibited through his conflation of violence and sex. His various boasts of sleeping with his brother's wife and winning Grace over again when it is a lie speaks to his inability to express his manhood in a nondestructive manner. The connection between violence and masculinity is hopelessly intertwined in Booth, reflecting American society's obsession with male violence and dominance. It is readily apparent that Booth accepts only a dominant role in order to be an African-American man in society, and he despises Lincoln's approach of confidence in his subordinate role that reflects his assured masculinity.

Lincoln redefines ethnicity and masculinity in an ambiguous manner in *Topdog/Underdog*, resisting binary and hierarchical notions of them. Though he is highly adept at winning Three-Card Monte, Lincoln leaves his life of conning people out of their money with the game. It is perceived as a zero-sum game, where one gets either all or nothing. Lincoln resists this binary to take on an ambiguous and interstitial identity when he elects to find work dressing as a White man though he is Black. The binaries and hierarchies of lucky/unlucky, winners/losers, and topdog/underdog are resisted with Lincoln's calmness and unwillingness to play the game or fight Booth back. Lincoln resists the violence and trickery linked to masculinity although Booth embraces it.

Booth continually begs Lincoln to teach him how to win at Three-Card Monte. In spite of his gratuitous use of betrayals and violence to attain his ends sexually and financially, Booth still is insecure because of Lincoln's

expertise in the game. Booth is unable to attain the role of a topdog because of his adherence to the binarism of topdog/underdog and his resistance of interstitial identities. Lincoln, late in the play, however, believes that he exhibits masculinity when he ultimately beats Booth at the game, becoming like his brother in his boasts. Manhood is associated with winning. Booth's angry question, "Who thuh man now?" (113), reveals the inadequacies of confining definitions of ethnicity and masculinity to hierarchical and binary terms. Though Lincoln has proven himself to be a man, a topdog, in winning the game of Three-Card Monte, Booth resorts to masculinized violence to reclaim the title. The text demonstrates the deleterious effects unbridled masculinity and racial and gender binarism can have on two brothers in a society obsessed with dominance and violence over subordinate roles.

Work Cited

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1140 – Ryan Ritchie

A man and a woman approached, three o'clock, as I stood on my brick porch. I was checking my Fitbit to see how many steps I needed to hit ten thousand, the same thing I do seven days a week, when I saw them a few feet from where the grass meets the curb. The man was wearing a cheap purple collared shirt and from fifteen feet away I could see the perspiration dripping down his cheeks and the puddle of sweat in the middle of his chest.

"1140," she replied when I asked what his glucose was. Since I was diagnosed with type 1 diabetes, everything has become about blood glucose levels. I check mine immediately after I wake, two hours after I eat each meal, before I go to the gym, anytime I leave the house, whenever I feel drowsy or anxious and just before bed. A year ago, a friend and I were at a comedy club and he said he wasn't feeling well. I could see his face turn paler than it normally is. He asked me to go to the bar for a glass of water. I gave him one of two glucose tablets in my pocket because if I am outside of the house, there are at least two glucose tablets on me.

My friend isn't diabetic, but that's the only treatment Dr. Ryan knows to give his patients. Even in my dreams, I see sweaty strangers who have lost their wherewithal and I diagnose them with the only ailment about which I know something.

My therapist, an actual doctor, wants me to remember my dreams. This one happened last week, but I am writing about it now because taking two graduate courses, teaching

two winter courses and leading a private creative writing workshop made me busy. That's ok — this time — because this dream stuck.

Some dreams wake me and I'll say, "Oh, I'll definitely remember that one." Five hours later, when I'm awake for reals, I'm asking myself if the dream was about shoes or donkeys. The remedy, my therapist says, is to keep a journal near my bed so I can document these nocturnal hallucinations. I haven't because my nightstand is full of glucose tablets, Synthroid, atorvastatin, two insulin pens, needles, lancets and water. Also because I don't want to keep a dream journal.

This dream didn't require a journal because the scene is still vivid. The woman told me the man would be fine. I don't know the exact high glucose number that kills people, but I know it's much lower than 1140. I went inside, got my meter and pricked his finger.

"1140," the machine read.

I asked the woman to let me inject him with my Humalog, the short-acting insulin I take before every meal. I inject between six and eight notches on the pen when I eat creamy soup, hummus and unsweetened chocolate milk. Getting him to a reasonable glucose — which for me is between 80 and 120 — might have required three pens.

She said no and his glucose was so high he couldn't talk. I begged her, pleaded for her to call 911. She was indifferent, telling me again that he'd be "fine." He lay on

the grass, moments from death.

The dream ends here.

When I tell my therapist about this dream in two days, she'll ask who or what the dream represents. I could tell her I am the man and the rest of the world is the woman, that the only people who understand what it means to have food try to kill you are diabetics. I embrace the therapeutic process, but I don't know how much credence I give to dream interpretation. I like to think of dreams as my brain's playtime and the time when I am awake is devoted to work. I get it. I give lectures and grade papers from eleven a.m. until ten p.m. I take a break at eight p.m. to eat and the rest of my night is devoted to writing. Playtime. This duality works for me because I can't write anything before nine p.m. — not anything I like, anyway — and I'd like to think my brain operates similarly. My body goes horizontal and my brain is given time to roam, to tell the stories I don't have time to write during the day. How else can I explain last month's dream when I was Danzig's bass player and the backstage security guard was someone from high school who I didn't like so I grabbed him in my arms, walked him around a corner and threw him into a river knowing he couldn't swim?

I don't know what the Danzig dream means nor do I know what the sweaty man on my lawn is trying to tell me. Maybe that's irrelevant. More importantly, to me, is the man. Wherever he is, I hope he's ok.

FICTION

Reaching – Andrea Morales

Ring ring!

No response.

This was the third time today that I was sent to voicemail.

Funny how the sound of the phone
makes my heart pound twice as much now.

I wouldn't have minded last year.

But this isn't 2019.

Ring ring!

This mailbox is full.

It's impossible to reach them.

I wonder where they could be?

Last I heard, they were admitted to the hospital.

I hope they're okay.

I send a text.

Good morning! I hope you're doing well! It's a shame we
can't come over and visit, but maybe we can FaceTime later?
Lmk when you're available!

Hours pass, and still nothing.

I get a text from a friend.

I just wanted to let you know that the funeral is going to take place tomorrow at 10am. I really hope you can make it.

Right...the funeral.

Body count: 1

Ring ring!

No response.

They're probably busy getting tested or something. I don't know how the hospital works.

I mean, it's been about 2 weeks since they were admitted, and they appeared to be fine last time I checked in.

Ring ring!

It's my friend from church.

"I heard that the family is in mourning," she recounts, "the husband also suffered a heart attack, but he's doing much better now. They're not sure what they're doing to do. Cremation is a cheaper option, but they really want a burial."

But she was doing just fine last week. I say back. That was the last time I saw her smiling face at church.

Body count: 2

Ring ring!

Nothing.

Soon, morning turns to evening. Perhaps I'll try again tomorrow.

Ring ring!

Someone's calling me.

My ear rings with the sound of my father's cracking voice. It's something I never wanted to hear.

"He passed away this morning at the hospital." He tells me.

Body count: 3

This isn't true.

Ring ring!

The number you have reached is no longer in service.

It's too much.

The number you have reached is no longer in service.

Why now?

Ring ring!

The number you have reached is no longer in service.

The children.

Body count: 3 million

The sounds of the walls echoing with sadness and despair.

When will this all end?

....

Body count: ERROR! COULD NOT BE DETERMINED!

Maybe – Jon Sebastian

'...what? He's your father, too.'

'Oh, was he? Since when?'

'He, is, God Dammit! Is!'

They were siblings by blood but not by love. They had it once upon a time — learned it on their own mostly — but could feel it fading along with the reception of this collect call.

'You mean you're just gonna sit on your ass in California while the last of our family withers in this hellhole?'

'No. Of course not. I'm going surfing.'

'I hope you drown, you bastard!'

She slammed the receiver back on the payphone rack and spun around, smashing her back against the wall and screeching her sneakers to the ground. Clumsy tears fell through tethers of blonde hair, down through her delicate hands, then danced on the linoleum floor. This floor had an immaculate sheen that constantly reflected a thousand dire faces.

The custodian coming back from break tossed a rolled-up Chicago Times into the recycle bin. As he washed his hands in his utility closet, with the zeal of a prizefighter wrapping before a bout, he thought to himself *the snow somehow makes you feel younger, but not when you're shoveling it*. He dried his coarse hands, then — turning to tie back his gray pelt — saw a young woman crying on his floor through the window. 'Maybe...' he exhaled to himself then pushed through his closet door. He walked over to the young woman and whispered in her ear...

He plucked her off the ground and in tandem they walked down the desolate hallway toward the ICU wing.

They parted ways at the corridor.

She tiptoed into room 111.

'Daddy...'

He marched back alone holding the caution sign and unfolded it beneath the payphone with a surgeon's graceful precision, like he's done a million times before.

From: Mrs. Snuggle-Wump – Nathaniel Gilliam

Her fingers were stuck over the “keyboard” (the contraption was an upgrade from the typewriter, if one could believe it). Each finger hit a barrier as it neared a key. This was highly unorthodox and unbecoming of an Imaginary Friend of her status and tenure. She should be above hesitation!

And, yet, here she was.

Once this letter was sent, that would be it. The higher-ups would surely know what she was up to, if they didn’t already, and she would be imagined up by another child in need. There would be no more observing. She would have to return to work. She had become her own worst enemy with all this dawdling. The keyboard was an enemy, too: the confusing nature of its existence had begun to put into doubt its usefulness.

She put an end to the mental rambling and relaxed. She took a far-too-large bite from the coffee cake on her desk, feeling a bit ashamed of her gluttony. She put her hands to her side, took a sip of her Earl Grey, and squared off against the computer screen once more. Her arms rose, fingers positioned above their opposition. With all the care she could muster, she touched the ‘H’ key.

TO: Timothy Carlson <timmycc93@gmail.com>
FROM: Mrs. Snuggle-Wump
<snuggles4days@imagimail.com>

Hello, deary.

I hope this gets to you, as we don't really use this sort of communication where I'm from. Not sure how it works. My name is Mrs. Snuggle-Wump, master of hugs and cuddles, and I was your imaginary friend. You forgot me some odd twenty years ago. Now don't feel bad: that's quite natural! We're only supposed to be there for the formative years, lad. Too long and you grow a bit too reliant. Can't have that! Yes, usually we pop in when you're still being watered, then pop on out once you begin to bloom. You go on, none the wiser, and we find a new charge.

*So you have to understand how extraordinary it is for me to send you a missive like this. Don't go thinking you're in trouble or anything, little one. You were a perfect little bundle growing up, and you've become a splendid young man! You could do a bit better to mind your P's and Q's, but nobody's perfect. Your punk-rock stint was quite good; I even got into it myself. I recommend *The Addicts* if you haven't given them a listen yet. Oh, to see you experience the world from afar has truly been a gift. Your years of schooling and university, your first love (that was a tad messy, wasn't it?), all of your accomplishments! I don't mean to gush, deary, but I've wanted so long to let you know how absolutely proud of you I am! I want to really stress that, so you don't think I'm nagging you in this next bit.*

The real reason I'm writing is the change I'm seeing in you, and not for the better. The last year I've watched you become more and more withdrawn from the world. You barely leave the house unless it's for work. You don't ring up your friends anymore.

Have you spoken to your cousin in the past three months? You lot were two peas in a pod when you were just babes. I know you still miss your parents, dear. Mr. and Mrs. Carlson were a good sort, and it's a shame what happened to them. I know it occurred recently, and I'M sorry I couldn't have been with you for it. You've started punishing yourself for it, lad. No one could've known what was going to happen, especially you! I can't fathom why you wish to take on the burden of blame for their passing. You don't deserve that kind of self-imposed cruelty, little one.

I'm not saying you still can't grieve. All I'm asking is that you let others in. You deserve all the love and care you desire, and you shouldn't deprive yourself of comfort. Let yourself cry and weep and be vulnerable. Let the ones that love you see your darker moments and let them help you. Find safety in those that are willing to embrace you and cherish you. You've always been there to light up their days; let them brighten yours in kind.

I have to keep this shorter than I'd like, as cross-dimensional communication is especially frowned upon. Keep your diet up: you've definitely slimmed a bit (though I'll miss those chubby little cheeks of yours)! Daniel's imaginary friend tells me the young man has been worried about you, so do send him a letter as soon as you can! You're doing splendidly at work, and if you don't get a promotion soon you should drift on over to a company that can appreciate your effort! Most importantly, stay safe. I love you, Timmy.

*Best regards and warmest of wishes,
Mrs. Snuggle-Wump*

P.S. You should spend some more time with that nice Pauline girl. She fancies you, that one!



She must've scanned through the words twenty times by now. She was on her third cup of tea, this one heavy on the milk to dilute the caffeine. The letter was as good as it was going to get, wasn't it? If she kept up her fretting she'd put off sending it for another week. She hovered the cursor over the 'Send' button, absentmindedly moving it to and fro.

Click

Without any further pomp or circumstance, the newfangled contraption sent her letter. She let loose all the stress that had been keeping her rigid these past few hours. She could already feel her connection to Timothy weakening. It was a dulling of a particular sense: everything was in crystal clarity, except for her thoughts of him. The higher-ups were working faster than she had thought they could. They probably didn't appreciate her making contact like this, so the reset would be severe. She could feel her very nature being poked and prodded, taking away the specifics of Timothy but leaving in the lessons that were learned. It wasn't fair. He was supposed to be the one she held onto forever. After they were done, Timothy would just be a number on a record somewhere: Child #3456, Boy. Concord, New Hampshire. October 1995 - December 1997. Status: Resolved. It wasn't fair, it wasn't fair, it wasn't...

Within a few moments, Mrs. Snuggle-Wump's reset was done. She was a new amalgamation of her entire being, sans any lingering oddities that might've prevented her from doing her work. She wiped the moisture from her eyes with her handkerchief, not quite remembering why tears had

been shed. She dutifully got to work. She updated her guides on how best to comfort children who had lost a guardian, she added a new lesson plan that should keep little ones engaged, and she put the kettle on in anticipation of another cup of tea. She was in a Rosemary mood, so Rosemary she would have. Her work continued and various other teas were made. She nibbled on cakes and chatted with coworkers as they bustled 'round the office, all the while waiting.

It came one day. She could feel herself being called away by the whispers of a child in need. She closed her eyes and focused on that tug, easing herself along to its source. She was briefed as she traveled, learning the ins and outs of her new charge. Young girl, not even a few months past three. Single-parent household. Mother's caring...bit distant due to work, but she tries. Crippling fear of the dark.

With a **pop** she was there. It was nighttime, maybe a little past eleven. The room she was in seemed typical, for a child. There were a few posters up, each with a superhero of some sort. Very flashy and colorful, it was. A nightlight stood on the dresser in the shape of an 'S' over a shield. It staged the room in bright red and yellow hues and gave Mrs. Snuggle-Wump more than enough light to see the shaking, tiny bundle of covers on the bed. She eased down onto the edge of the mattress.

"Now, now, enough of that. You're not alone anymore, deary."

The shaking subdued. A mess of curly hair, followed by brown eyes, peeked up from below the cover. The little one pushed the covers away, recognition showing on her face as she realized her wish for a friend had been answered. She wrapped her twiggy little arms around Mrs. Snuggle-Wump as much as she could. She burrowed her head into her, a whispered 'thank you' barely audible in the silence. Mrs. Snuggle-Wump took her in, cooing and running a hand through the child's untamed mane. She sat with her until the whispers turned to snores, and then she hugged her even more.

This is the one, Mrs. Snuggle-Wump thought to herself.

This is the one I'll hold onto forever.

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Thank you for reading!

Always stay creative.