

ENJAMBED 2022



Enjambed

Spring 2022

Presented by the 2021-2022 California State University Dominguez
Hills English Graduate Association

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SPRING 2022:

“Unity”

In a disunited world, unity can be our only hope. Healing and love begin with this unity. In continuing with *Enjambed*'s themes from previous years of “Crisis” and “Rebuilding,” the CSU Dominguez Hills English Graduate Association has chosen “Unity” this year to unite us as students and community members in creative submissions.

-Andrew A. Leung

POETRY

Enjambed

“Bleeding Blue”
By Andrea Morales

I’m trying to translate
my feelings into words.
My words into feelings.
But the plastic blue gel pen
does not speak the same language as
my shaking right hand.

This paper is to be
constructed as the home to my thoughts.
Little does it know
How gruesome it has become.

These blue tinted words stare back at me
like the cameras in a prison.
Mocking me, praising me, enjoying my suffering.

Yet, I’m the one in control.

How disappointing it must be
for this paper lacks knowledge of its true potential!
The potential to fail.

Even if it did, it would merely cower
like a hyena scavenging for food.

The words smeared on the page
once so full of innocence
now filled with despair, confusion,
by the malice of my hands.

Nothing can be made if one tries too hard
yet I have created nothing of this page.

I want to rip it into shreds and never see this creature again.

As I reach for the paper, I notice a new cut on my finger.
Instead of red, I’m bleeding blue.
Smearing the page
with its unconditional spirit.

This hand

this sad excuse of a prolific hand
Perhaps, I should cut it off
and continue to bleed
upon the pages of disaster.

It has made a home for itself here
and It wasn't planning on leaving anytime soon.

-

Until the teacher suddenly came around
and yanked it away from my grasp.

"I hope you completed the assignment for once." Her voice echoed as she walked off.

Assignment.
every piece is just an assignment
for me to complete
and never see again.

Is this a Mirror?
By Andrea Morales

I Found myself staring back at
this thing
no... me
except a look of fear was staring back
young, naive, Innocent,.. alone
How I survived the hardships of an
awkward teenage phase is beyond me
I was the grapefruit among many oranges
the lone wolf among happier huskies
There was no one who would glance
in the
direction of the odd
odd...
was I really odd?
How odd that we're labeled this way
having no say in what we're pictured as.
This needs to stop.
I put a hand out to the
frightened soul
saying,

"I know the world may
seem frightening, and quite mean actually...
But together, we'll grow & become our own
person. No labels. No awkward glances or eye rolls will stop us from becoming
the best thing we could create."

Us.
We're the best thing we could create.

Peach

By Andrea Morales

Ripening

I'm just a peach.
sitting on the counter
without a care in the world
no problems in sight.

I'm just a peach...
rolling along the table
my rebellious phase
only bringing me trouble.

I'm just a peach?
Surrounded by those
who are different from me.

They don't have seeds.

Am I just a peach?
Separating myself away from everybody else?

Am I really a peach?
With the bruised spot on my forehead?
The brown tint slowly
spreading through the surface.

It's just a bruise.
Everybody gets those...

But with every passing day
that big ugly bump only got worse,

the icky brown spot
spreading like a rash.

I can't take it anymore.

I take one last roll
towards the edge of the table.

The last thing i see
being bits and chunks of myself
oozing on the floor.

I *was* just a peach
born to rot.

Unless the pit in me
decides to give life a second chance.

“¡Ah, Mi Novia Favorita!”
por Andrew A. Leung

¡Ah, mi novia favorita!
¡Ah, eres una humana!
¡Ah, tus ojos son bastante marrones!
¡Ah, tu pelo es bastante castaño!
¡Ah, no eres mala!
¡Ah, tus besos son verdes!
¡Ah, tus manos son grandes!
¡Ah!

STAY

By: Alana Alas

@lana_desiree96

My mind is a restless place
Where overtime is ongoing,
Encouraged.
It's a taxing trait.
A trait I would ecstatically let go
In exchange for peace and well being.
I mean well, but intention
Is not action.
I act like relentless arguments
Aren't constantly replaying
In the run down theater
That is my brain,
Where the screening is seven dollars.
Seven days in a week.
Seven...days...in...a...week.
So many days to try and be okay.
I'm okay.
I'm okay because
The honest answer
Will invite you in to
See, and feel, my pain.
Trespassers take a portion of that weight,
And I can't allow them to feel the aching.

But,
I think of you, and I say,
"I would have gladly surrendered my back
To relieve you of your pain
If it meant you stayed."

Stay.
Just stay.
Eventually the intruders go away.

A dedication to my cousin Nathan.

Twenty-five
By: Alana Alas

Twenty-five
Not like Taylor Swift's
Twenty-two
I'm not a Swifty. Miley's more my vibe. It's law to blast your music so it masks straight
pipes
Thigh high boots are one of the staples of womanhood, like the tattoos on my mom's arm.
A woman with a brilliance to thrive.
I like quick thrifts, but it takes time to sift.
My patience is not strapping, but my temper is, and that makes me blue
Blue because my mind resembles a zoo. Busy, but contained. If I could, I'd capture
happiness in a jar as a remedy for when I gripe

I met myself at twenty-five
I'm ripe because I'm full. Not only in body, but in life. My soul was redraped and the
excess bid
adieu. I got a facelift
Lifted above ground on the trampoline in my backyard, nestled under the lime tree. When
you
lay there, the sky eats you up. Chew
Eat me up like a ripe fruit under the sky. We can be time travelers tonight. I thought a
relationship like this was an archetype

You're my type. My hands remember you as I type. I didn't know this then, but God
wanted me
to dive
Dive into a life that made me uncomfortable, because growth demands discomfort. This
is my
birthday gift.
You used to bring me thoughtful gifts. But, with time, people change. This year, you'll be
twenty-two
Maybe when you've sifted through your life we'll all share a peace pipe

I'm twenty-five
At twenty-two I danced to Taylor Swift
At twenty-one I questioned my will to live, so I drew
Drew closer to rare steak prayers. Bloody when you cut deep. "Yikes,"

I say as I wipe small salt packet stains from my freckled cheeks. I came alive at
twenty-five.

ghostwriter
by Ashley Smith

sweet words were written for me
and as
years have passed
and
the memories have faded,
you're not the one i used to know.
there's a haunting that lingers around those old
sweet words
sweet words that are no longer honey but
vinegar
no longer gives me goosebumps
but a rash.
you were a poetic artist but are now a
ghostwriter.

laying at the foot of my bed on a Sunday night
by Ashley Smith

a thought popped into my head
one sunday night
as I laid at the foot of my bed –
*I'd like to think someone would want to
study the curves of my temple
and master the moves
of my soul.*
someone,
someone who wouldn't have a problem
catching onto my rhythm
with its silence,
its secrecy
and a little bit of
its riskiness.
I turned onto my back and stared at the ceiling.
i'd be a sweet, soulful
soft
kind of song.
a song
he'd hum in the middle of the day.
he'd pause
and slowly close his eyes
to the melodies that would bring him into a place of
euphoria.
the strings of the guitar
the depths of the base
and I'm sure there'd be a violin somehow —
he'd feel it all.
the warmth of my soul would immerse him
into imperfect bliss.
I smiled a bit.
all because of a thought
I had while
laying at the foot of my bed on a Sunday night.

The Carpet at Home by Ben Wheeler

Gross carpet with spots
Cat's vomit, nasty spills, yuck
I walk barefoot here

Dreams
By Carmen Hernandez

I wanted to open up the world
Swallow its secrets and whisper it deep inside
But the seas were rough, and My galley sank upon the great divide
Succumbing to its thirst I gasped, twisted, and twirled
Alas, I awoke upon Wonderland, the Madhatter unperturbed
We drank tea, dined supper, and laughed not caring for the night that devoured the mind
Tick Tock, Tick Tock the white rabbit cried
So I followed him into the woods and got ravaged by a dreamworld
A place to live deliberately or so Thoreau prescribed
But I am lost and deprived in a space that was never mine
For it was I that craved for hunger, for the truth that was never shown in time
Now I sit waiting like the daffodils that get left behind
When suddenly I feel weightless and free like a wandering cloud
Like Wordsworth who had smothered me like a baby and carried me along the twinkling crowd

Aging Poem

By Catari Martin

As I approach 59, I feel afraid of aging
My body is weaker than ever before
Yet my mind is still young and racing
My heart feels open to possibilities
Excitement is ticking and knocking on doors
I feel so alive like never before
I'm fighting inside and opening doors
Let's take away the fear that aging is here
And break down the word in positive terms
If I block out the walls and determined to learn
What does the word aging mean on this planet
Must I suffer in negativity and strife
Or rise to the occasion and be thankful for life

A = Alive, Accept, live in Abundance

G = Get up and Go while you have another day

I = Inspire, Intoxicate, Invigorate

N = Namaste is divine spirit

G = Glorious I Grow and Gleam in Goodness

Now look up the quote Positive Ageing

It's a way of living and not a state of being

Five Stages by Daisy Aguirre

There's a starry night above my head,
Has it always been so visible?
My father was an astronomer
We used to watch the stars together when he came home
When you're used to someone coming home as a routine,
You never think about how it'd feel not seeing them,
You never know when you'll see someone for the last time,
Is there even a home to come to?

As I scatter through the left of pieces of our home I feel his spirit and soul fading, There's so
many memories, I can't fathom that he's not here,
I have to look for him even if I have to search the entire town, I know he's
here

Father please, don't make me wait another moment,
Where are you!
I can't do this alone!
You made a promise to be there no matter how tough it gets!
Where are you!
You were supposed to be my hero!

I see my father in the stars,
I keep reaching for him but he's thousands of light years away, Soon, he'll
crash onto Earth and we'll be reunited
He'll tell me all about the beautiful planets he shined over
And teach me about new constellations

Should I take my last breath?
There's nothing left
I've cried out all my fears
Everything I saw in my nightmares has become reality
They say the future is written in the stars but,
All I've see is
Damnation
I'm alive but,
My heart won't strike a single beat
All the memories are ashes
There's nothing left to salvage
As a new day sets in,

There was enough light to begin rebuilding,
The sun, a beautiful warming star, brings warmth to cheeks, It's a nostalgic
feeling,
I've felt it before in my Fathers arms,
As my Father was a hero for me,
I will be a hero for others,
As he shined on others,
I will continue to be a light for those who once were lost as I was because, Father is the
brightest star.

Gathering
By Daniel Ojeda

Let the ceiling fan have the spins
Collecting interior dust.
With its very dull wooden rims
it creates minimal gust.
Their blades keep spinning without stopping,
Pull switch chain sounds throbbing,
How I want sounds to keep moving,
Think through and through.
Create anything possible, to name a few.

Unlike childhood, we age to be decision-makers,
Even some unfortunate heart-breakers.
Whether you were alone or surrounded by friends,
You are covered in our creations.
Pencils, tiles, your heart, and the cells
Then rings the bells
Alarms that dwells
Where sensitive conscious is.

Written in space that I had comfort, support, needing materials
And under a ceiling fan that did not stop.
Such as creativity, cannot be dropped.
Not soon, not now.

The Crush...

I hate I met you,
I can't forget you.
It was your eyes,
It was your smile,
Those that made my mind go wild.

It was our destiny,
It was our time,
To meet each other,
Guessed you were mine.

Now that the time,
Has passed us by,
I know your tastes,
I know your sign.

I gifted you KitKats,
Kisses and crunches,
But you continued
Thinking we were besties.

Now you've met someone,
I hate to see you,
Kissing that person,
I hate this sensation.

But you continue,
To be my friend,
My heart is trash,
You'll never know,
You are my secret crush.

-Emerson Vanegas Munoz

Hasta Siempre by Felipe De La Rosa
Para mi mamá

Purple into the night
you float along
sidewalks sprouting hope

You vanish through doors
that separate the worlds
of healthy and sick

I always imagine you
entering a world whose souls forget
they are breathing away
their existence, preparing
their lungs for a new world

When you exit
your shadow
baila sobre la banqueta
dando vida a los fantasmas olvidados

When you kiss me, hello
Decías
hasta siempre

My heart splashing
debajo la luna negra
y your words, sweet pollen
falling gently into my ears
floreciendo

I don't know if your own mother,
who spent her life moonlighting
for pan y jamón
held you the way you did with me

But you must have learned
Maybe from mothers you nursed
or from hugs your mother gave you
coming home from her swing shift

Must have learned
que una flor no crece
sin la voz de sus adoradores

To My Future Lover by Felipe De La Rosa

Up on my palm tree
the doves that call
the palm fronds home
sway
between
quizás
y
será

Y yo aquí
pensando en ilusiones

If you arrive with eyes
filled with daisies
y hummingbirds
I'd gift you my heart
palmed in paper bags
Watch it sliver away
before your ethereal sighs
While loving seconds
clog the void in my chest

Mientras mis
glossy lips
slide all over
tú
leaving footprints
like midnight dew
Your eyes bloom
y nuestro momento se encharca

You can leave
while I stay
with your eyes
daisies in my hand
Deshojando—
quizás
y
será

**Waiting at The Tijuana Border
(Haibun)
By Felipe de La Rosa**

From El Norte, a man is crossing la frontera into Tijuana to visit his familia; when their hands clasp, I feel borders collapsing.

From Tijuana, another man stares with hopeful eyes across la frontera, thinking only a few steps away, dreams about a fresh start residing under a tree in the parking lot of a Home Depot.

The scent of canela roams between cars and sometimes takes a passenger seat. A doña is selling churros y bolsas de papitas. A veces she sneaks in a chip and savors the taste of salt inside her mouth when she thinks her boss isn't looking. A veces she stares over la frontera, and her eyes dream the promise of safety that gleams from across, instead of walking alongside Miedo, wondering if her daughter will return every morning después de bendecir su camino a la escuela.

Through the waves of parked cars, a little boy surfs through—washes as many windshields as he can. Cars cross la frontera with windshields clean enough to see the dreams of the little boy: a soccer ball rolling around green fields.

Two cars behind, José Alfredo Jimenez sings “Quiero ver a qué sabe tu olvido.”

Una vereda
Blocked by walls that say, yes, no,
Say, you dream, you don't.

Blind Star

By Franco Linares

Like the horizon over the sea, or whether his eyes or her eyes are looking at me.

Oh blindness, you never cease to amaze, you took color away from the most beautiful place, and with your irrefutable ways, I felt like you took the youth away from my days. Especially when you took the light away from my face, I was lost like a mouse in a maze. Now I play, in the dark, lead by my better senses, and once again, I'm back in the race. The race called life!

Being blind, we see the darkness, in my mind I've planted many seeds, now I have profound thoughts to harvest, I have a goal, let my music and poetry travel the farthest and let the music be felt from the soul of the artist and regardless of any obstacle, I will work the hardest!

Being blind has made my vision much clearer, I see myself in pure blackness, I need no mirror, and from up close or afar, I now see people for who they truly are. How do you explain color to a man born blind? You have to ask yourself how is color defined? Color is electromagnetic radiation, vibration can turn into sound, sound resonates from the mouth sending out emotions that can make you smile or frown. You see me? I'm a blind star, blinded way before stardom. However, there is no one blinder than those who choose not to see, you have to choose what to be, it's essential that we exceed and excel beyond potential. We are all blind to certain degrees, it is the mind that sees, so let us all shine in time at least, because we are all truly divine indeed!

Cancel Cancer

By Franco Linares

Cancel cancer and don't cancel the answer.

Deadly cells dance with the dancer.

Follow this rhythm, negativity cannot be in my system, my spirit is wisdom, my spirit is length, I
take from infinity and gather my strength.

Life can be quite scary, but if your illness has no cure then why worry?

If your illness has a cure, then why worry? If you can't beat time then why hurry?

Dear people,

Your words keep me alive, in war I will thrive, Ferrari engines, now you understand my drive.

I stay in my lane as I maneuver through terrain considered insane,

I appreciate the light and love, it is bright above, cancer can be quite the bug but we will light
this mug!

Dear cancer, you are temporary so I am not to worry. Early bloomer I should've caught you
sooner, A few months and a farewell, it is almost like my past relationships. Probably as toxic.

However, my current is a stream of consciousness, five seconds away from scientific
breakthrough, don't be surprised if I eat a steak and have my cake too. I hope they get it on the

first try because I don't want a "Take 2!"

Hush now, you can't let one percent of doubt rush now, If you are not fully focused, you will be
crushed now!

Meditate through war and don't worry about the inevitable, like miracles happening and your
story not being so credible. Tell the scientific community that when it comes to miracles, I am
eligible, even though some may say that's not intelligible.

I just see results, in my dream I felt a hundred thousand volts, Nuke the cancer, test my blood
again and see no proof of cancer. What's the answer?

Do not let yourself rot! Mind body and soul united and keep on fighting with everything you got!

Yerba Mate

By Florencia Bravo

Mama hollows out the grapefruit and the mist of citrus makes me smile;
the scent is strong like summer heat, and I welcome its acidic tang.
But the grapefruit is not as popular as the orange or lemon
for many, its bitter flavor can be too commanding

Mama shows me how to put the mate into the fruit
and she adds a sprinkle of sugar.

Not too much, she says.

She carefully sticks the metal straw into our makeshift cup,
her steady hand holds the battered red kettle.

Out pours a steady stream of hot water.

Mama hands the fruit to me; try it, she says.

The metal straw is hot between my lips, and I take a small sip.

The drink slightly burns my mouth,

but in the earthy tea and sugary fruit, I taste Argentina.

I nod and take another sip. This time its cooler.

Mama smiles and we go to sit down, enjoying the mate,
a small reminder of home and family.

Poem for the Environment

by Gloriosa Sciurus

Forests are dying when trees are cut.
Oceans polluted by cigarette butts!
Microplastics poison guts of fish.
O, were the oceans clean, I wish!

Fires make waste of prairie and range;
All this due to dread climate change.
The intensifying of hurricanes is all too real.
DOGGONE IT!!!
We need a Green New Deal!

When we drive our big trucks
Pumpin' out CO₂,
It's no wonder why Greta asks,
"HOW DARE YOU?!?"

We push owls and wolves and sea turtles away.
Please don't let it be that way.
Forest Kin, Forest Kin, Forest Kin,
Please don't cut off my Forest Kin!

Headache
by Hannah Wonagsegid

the colorful backs of soap bottles fuse with water bottles to create a perfect world silent
deadlines like a toy you trip on in the dark
a new hobby is a loudly beating heart
stand up straight and remember to breathe
and make tea instead of coffee for once

United in Water
by Jacqueline Aguilar

There is a gentleness about you that makes me float like a feather on the waters. I do not belong here the way a feather may not belong on water. But still, the feather floats and the gentle object makes its way down the stream.

I know I do not belong, but everything about me does not bother the existence of the water. Nobody would question the object if seen. Even a jogger on their daily run would continue running. Even the bird that the feather came from will not miss its plumage, and only grow more with time. The water in which the feather floats is eventually replaced too.

For now, I will remain at peace and enjoy the gentleness in which you hold my featherweight heart within your strong water-based hands. For now, I will take in the way you are now and let you hold me as I disappear into you.

Empathize the Void While the Light
Shadows

Another second, another minute, another hour, another day,
And so on.

Contemplating developments, regrets, milestones, embarrassments,
So it goes.

What the future holds, what the past has held, unanimously stems from
Self-observation.

Saturated with curiosity, although dull,
Due to contemplation.

Plans are formulated but emphasize
OBSOLETE.

Mass production of nothing devalue genuine
Somethings.

However, radiant somethings generate powerful
Impacts.

Empowerment gazes vastly, like the sun from horizon to
Surface.

Objection to change restricts a structural
Sound future.

Reminiscent of accomplishments, no motivation,
Attributes will come to a stall.

Envisioning goals produce shadows that lurk.
Maybe it's not too bad when shadows emerge and are deemed

Un**r**e**c**ogn**i**zable.

-Jorge Soria

Decoding the Divide by Katie Colln

Wandering without.
Struggling to find a way.
Divided by ideas.
Speaking. Nothing to say.

Boxed houses and smart cars.
The perpetual scroll.
Two-day shipping by drone.
The internet troll.

Inside the same space, but
separated by screens.
 “Too busy to see you.”
 “I don’t know what you mean.”

When tech begins to take,
When we can’t relate,
When time slips past,
MAKE CHANGE FAST.

Shift
 the focus.
Seek to be whole.
Find——connection.
Regain control.

Less algorithms.
More outdoors.
Feeling truly free
deep in our cores.

Unshackled from the
distraction of modern life,
we can realize what matters
most and truly UNITE.

Grief in the Time of Covid by Katie Colln

An atmosphere of loss suffocates this space.
With grief abound, we're forced to find our way.
Our hearts break for those who have left this place,
heavy – burdened from the price we've had to pay.

Face masks and flatlines.
Loss of connection.
Feelings of doom and despair.
Variants and vaccines.
Fear of deception.
Losing our minds unaware.

We hold to the joy we can list,
hoping it sticks and sustains.
Between hope and nostalgia we exist,
torn – repeating the same refrains:

“Hurt and hope,
watch as I carry both.”¹

“Breaking down
don't mean I'm broken.”²

“Go ahead girl,
keep pressin' on.”³

“I ain't there yet
but I'm healing.”⁴

¹ “Still Wonderful” by Johnnyswim

² & ⁴ “Healing” by Fletcher

³ “Press On” by Shoshana Bean

Ode to Mother Earth, Ode to Us

by Lily Adame

At the end of the day,
Her roots are all the same
We all stop to watch the same sunset.
Our fingertips graze against the same wet, cold grass
Sitting in a park, a backyard, or a pool.
Overlooking a sky that makes us contemplate
Whether we're really a person or not.
And then we go home to a mother, or a father, or a dog.
And we sit on a bed, a couch, or the floor
Thinking some more
Or not enough
About how this tiny dot in the cosmic web
Is what we all call Home.
We see the same racial slurs
Sprawled on our phone screens
In the comment section on another's post.
Or we hear those comments screamed
In our ears each day.
Our voices grow hoarse
After marching, chanting, and crying all day
In a protest that was supposed to be

Peaceful.

Perhaps we weren't meant to make it this far as

The human race.

To see for ourselves the

Brutality and hatred any being is capable of.

Or perhaps

This is what we were meant to witness all along

To decide our own roles in this persistent

Divide.

Call me naive,

Call me progressive.

I still have hope for our world.

The Mexican American Tourist

Stepping off the avión I am greeted by luscious green mountains

The heat and humidity envelope me like a hug at first

But then quickly morphs into discomfort

We're definitely not in Los Angeles anymore

I look around and I see personas that look like me

The same tanned skin

Dark curly hair

And last name

We collect our equipaje that are filled with our old and new clothes

And rush out of the small airport in pure excitement

But my excitement turns into worry

Worry about my American accent

Worry about my terrible Spanish pronunciations

Worry that my family will notice how much of a "gringa" I have become since our last visit

How do I say hello again? Oh, I remember "¡Hola Everyone!" Wait that's not right

Every day I wake up to the smell of my great abuela's cooking

To the sound of boiling hot water hitting the large bucket for someone's shower

To the sight of random people I just learned are my relatives

To the reflection of a Mexican American tourist staring back at me in the cracked mirror
“What am I doing here? I don’t belong here”

These thoughts keep turning in my mind like people's heads when they noticed our arrival

Throughout the week I hear my family speak in an idioma that I barely understand

I hear about tales of the past, hopes for the future, and the hard times of the present

The speed, the fluidity, the assurance of themselves when they speak invokes a jealousy within

Why can’t I sound like that when I talk?

I walk around in the small pueblo and notice people staring at me

I wonder if they’re thinking

“What is she doing here? She doesn’t live here

She belongs over there, in the otro lado”

Are they right? Am I just another tourist?

In the early days, time seems to drag on for what feels like an eternidad

The electricity turning on and off and on and off

The sound of people selling bread, gas, and water fills the afternoon silence

The ideas and plans for the next day have been finalized

As the end of the semana approaches I begin to feel the sadness

I think I’ll miss the sound of my great grandma’s voice

The feel of her fragile body as she hugs me with all her might

The sound of my tías gossiping in the kitchen over who gets which terrenos

The sight of the small casa that my great grandfather built with his own hands

All this time I felt like an outsider, a Mexican American tourist

But my family and I were actually closer than ever

I realized getting back on the avión that even though I come from two cultures

With two different languages

In two different countries

I am part of one united family

-Lindsey Martinez

Honey and Chocolate
By: Lynda Rodriguez

Yours is the color of sweetness
Always comforting
Warm
Like home

Sinful is mine
Inviting
And satisfying.
but never first choice

But if amber pours into
Obsidian
Does it not make something
Beautiful

Tis all it took
Your warmth
Fifteen Seconds.
more

fallow

what cloths do you swathe your being in?

who cried obscene at the healthy jiggle of your flesh?

who mocked the scars, the pits, the rivulets;

the very topography of your vein rivers

and flesh soil, your shrubs and valleys?

do you dare to shepherd, till, and sow?

can you wonder at a sacred freckle,

a divine mole? what constellations live in you?

what skin supernovas, what mudcrack patch,

what new growth in need of nurturing?

i want these thoughts like water to a new spring field.

i want them to flood my neurons, cleansing.

i want them seeping into my ruptured grey matter

to recode me. to renew me – my amygdalic ruin.

i know their balm rushing through my limbic chatter

will leave me green. fresh and new and something

altogether worth taking root, taking up room.

- Mason Martin

pull the plug

the feedback loop – audio
the hair of a leg – animal
two transient, fragile vessels
full of untouchable worlds, pulses
and static, fraying along, obscuring
radio vein, human wire, fleeing
from silence, cognizance, sweat – entropy.

another arm pain – the heart this time?
just more swollen armpit. more
disturbance of the nodes.
the loop resets, hums against it.
the world inside is an old fiction -
a decay endless and inevitable.

*but what do you know?
what makes you so eager to touch ghosts?*

i see you hold the bell of the speaker
like a child, letting it beat your heart for you.
i see you toss the crusts of another sandwich.
i see you stand in the shower as though water
still carried the myth of infinity, of surplus.
i see you let the tub fill, considering the poetry
of the old radio, the old shame, the old trope.

*cliché or cowardice; just let the thought
leech into the static – disperse
into the universe.*

- Mason Martin

“Say Sex, Because Not Everyone Likes Cheese”

by Nate Hertweck

It's all trash and dog shit, jagged rocks where smooth sand goes
But no matter
The day's enterprises fade like the ink in this goddamn pen
And we become what we hold onto
Bootless and empty again
Hell, turns out there are some clouds not even George Harrison can play away
I'll take songs about rain
Danko, Harpo, Ronstadt, Armatrading, Waits
It makes no difference
Ponies, dust, trouble enough
And rain
Rain that overserves the broken ocean stumbling home to shore
Over and over and over

And they said it was too big to fail

You'd think it'd be enough that we'll all wash up
Enough to take off the edge
The weak breeze gets to be pleasant, while the strong wind just ruins wedding pictures
Unless you're adrift

Grief

by Tori Harris

She glides by, gauzy and veiled in black
I reach out my hand but then snatch it back
A dying rose shedding its petals on the floor
I can't take the silence anymore
Rain and condolences, dark clothes and despair
So many tears unshed and even less to spare
Ironically what is missed was never real
What do you say when you aren't sure how you feel
The five stages are an unending cycle on repeat
That grief is so difficult to master is extremely bittersweet.

Use Your Words

by Tori Harris

We will theorize
While you weaponize
Fabricated alibis
Words that are plain lies
You don't realize
What strong is in our eyes
Standing up for a legal vise
To crush your foolish cries
Speaking out for those who try
To hold on when they want to die
Our bodies aren't yours to memorize
False concern is your disguise
But we are not your prize
We will continue to advise
Become stalwart allies
Protest those who think us unwise
Fighting to be equalized.

MUSIC

Enjambed Submissions

An Incredibly Romantic Hymn

By Andrew A. Leung

The musical score is presented on three staves. The first staff begins with a treble clef, a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat), and a 3/4 time signature. The melody consists of a quarter note G4, an eighth note A4, an eighth note B-flat4, a quarter note C5, a quarter note B-flat4, a quarter note A4, a quarter note G4, a quarter rest, and a quarter note G4. The second staff continues the melody with a quarter note G4, a quarter note F4, a quarter note E-flat4, a quarter note D4, a quarter note C4, a quarter note B-flat3, a quarter note A3, a quarter note G3, and a quarter note F3. The third staff concludes the piece with a quarter note G3, a quarter note F3, a quarter note E-flat3, a quarter note D3, a quarter note C3, a quarter note B-flat2, a quarter note A2, a quarter note G2, and a quarter note F2. A fermata is placed over the final note, G2.

"Celebrity" (song lyrics)
By Nate Hertweck

To be alive
It's bad for business
And when we die
Inside
They divvy up our interests

We are tigers
Captured by the toe
Too tired to go wild

Give my money to the dealer
Leave my freedom to the free
Lock my patience in the basement
And give my love to a celebrity

Extra!!! Extra!!!
Greed all around us
And on to the next one
We run
And hide right where they found us

We are strangers
Who can't turn candy down
We play around with fire

Give my money to the dealer
Leave my freedom to the free
Lock my patience in the basement
And give my love to a celebrity

For we who die with coins as eyes
Live on in infamy

Give my money to the dealer
Force my freedom on the free
Lock my patience in the basement
And give my love to a celebrity

Cash my chips in for the croupier
Throw my reputation out on the street
Pour my courage down with the sewage
And give my love to a celebrity
Yeah give my love to a celebrity

PHOTOGRAPHY

Enjambed



Walls Work

by Ben Wheeler



Collocation of Self

by Jaqueline Aguilar

ARTWORK

Enjambed



More the Same than Different

by Jane Talbott



Juxtaposition
by Jaqueline Aguilar



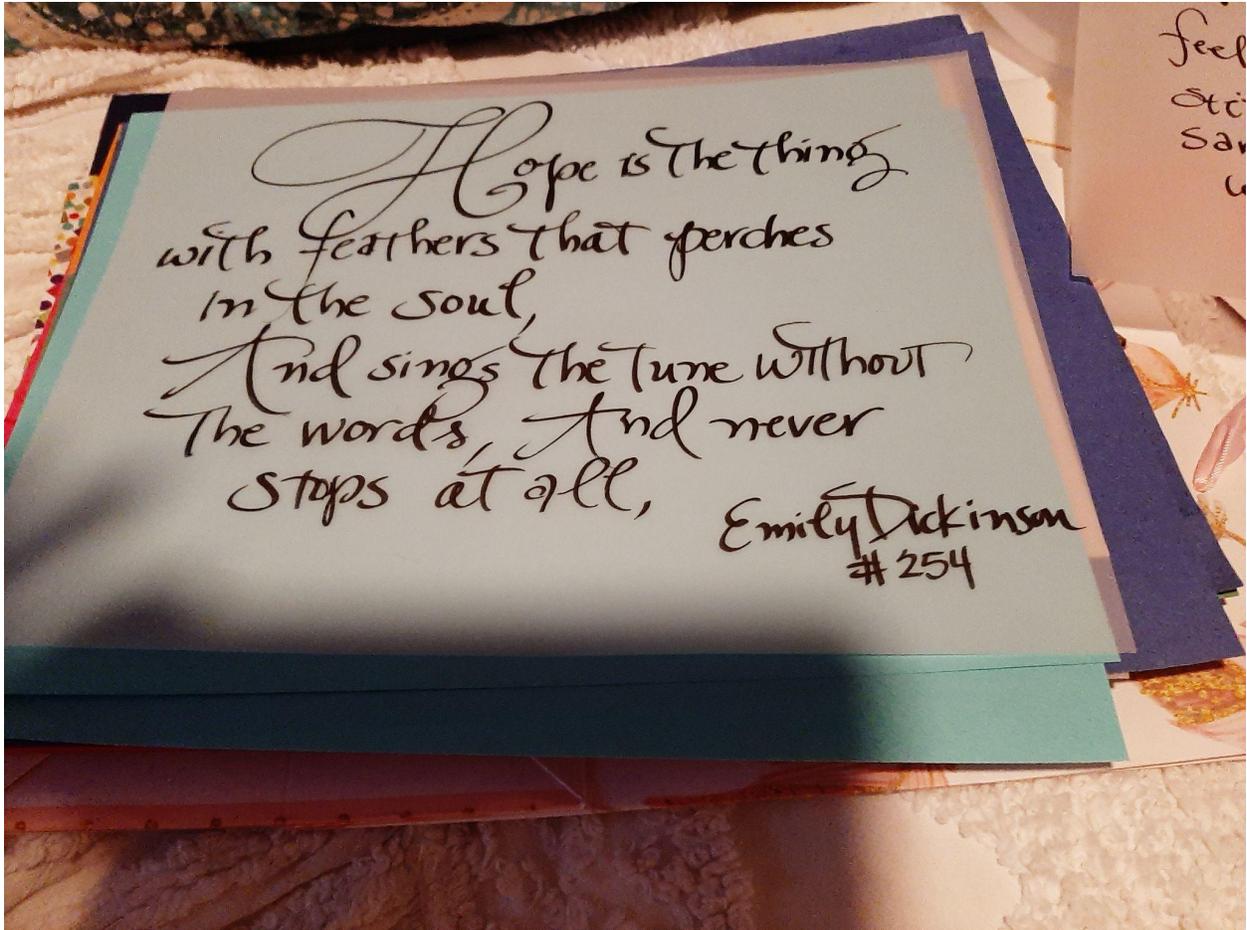
Earth

by Maria Amecusa



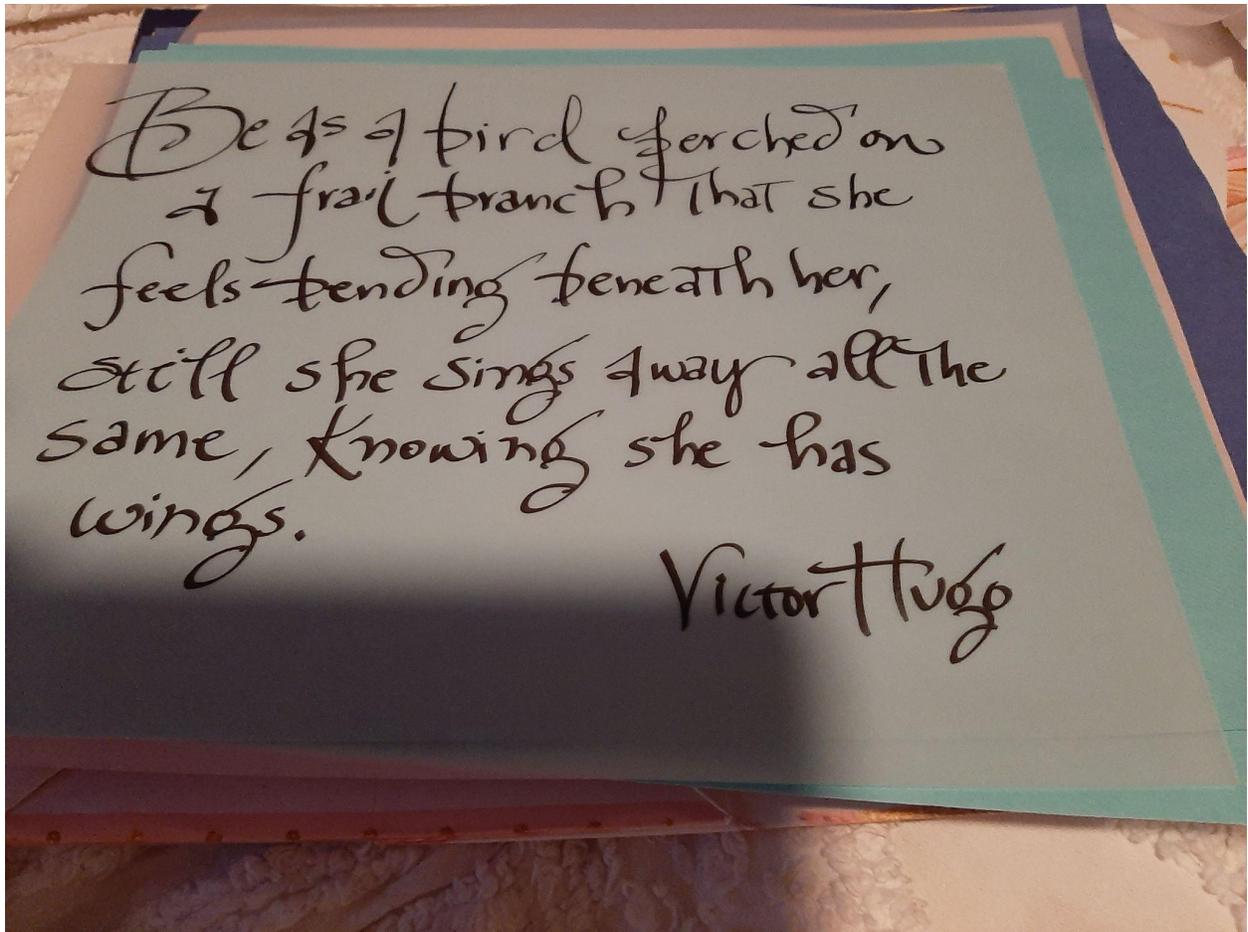
Reunite

by Mason Martin



Emily Dickinson Calligraphy

by Susan Flores



Victor Hugo Calligraphy

by Susan Flores

ESSAYS

Enjambed

Jesús Colón's Refutation of the Myth of the Nonexistence of Racial Prejudice in Puerto Rico

by Andrew A. Leung

In "Angels in My Hometown Church," Jesús Colón refutes the myth that there is no racial prejudice in Puerto Rico because of the history of miscegenation and how it ostensibly erased the racial hierarchy. His experience with white supremacy and racism present in the visual culture of his homeland such as in church frescoes contests this illusion. One of the causes for the impression in Puerto Rico and elsewhere that racial prejudice does not exist is that miscegenation has occurred for four hundred years, which was argued as having erased the racial hierarchy. However, in "The Negro in Puerto Rico Today," Colón mentions that this ignores the colonial hierarchy of "'superior' and 'inferior' races" (94) that justified slavery. He argues that modern-day racial discrimination and white supremacy, instead, is "practiced not crudely or openly, [but] suavely" (94), which is demonstrated in his experiences in "Angels in My Hometown Church." Colón's reflection on a fresco with angels reveals the ideology of white supremacy in the visual culture of his homeland that still survives, refuting the lie that racial prejudice is nonexistent. Like Arturo Schomburg, Colón had a liminal experience that made him acutely aware of the realities of the racial hierarchy in Puerto Rico, similar to DuBois' concept of the veil and the color line that cuts through societal institutions. As a child, Colón saw "white, brown and black angels in a heaven of equality" (53) on a fresco by Don Ramón Frade. In contrast to America's and Puerto Rico's racial tensions, the author recognized a certain comfort and sense of identification racially at a young age. However, Colón observes anti-black racism to still exist in his homeland, refuting the myth that there is no racial prejudice, when he returns in August 1965. He finds the black and brown angels to have been covered with "coats of ... cement" (54), to his surprise. The angels of darker skin colors have been literally and

symbolically whitewashed because of white supremacy in the visual culture of Puerto Rico, leaving only the white angels remaining to surround the Virgin Mary in the fresco. This experience of seeing the whitewashed fresco proves Colón's point in "The Negro in Puerto Rico Today" that this racial prejudice is done "suavely" and subtly now, disproving the lie that there is no racial prejudice in Puerto Rico. The author argues that "El Carimbo" is branded through hypocrisy and shallowness when the reality of racism is ignored. Colón's experience reveals that the racial hierarchy of Puerto Rico appeared to be even more rigid when he returned—integration, even symbolically with angels, was removed.

Colón's interaction with the woman at the church in the same scene from "Angels in My Hometown Church" also resists the illusion that there is no racial prejudice in Puerto Rico. The woman with the shawl explains that "'Puerto Rico is becoming a great tourist center. Many ... Americans are visiting our hometown'" (54) as the reason for the erasure of the black and brown angels on the fresco. Racial prejudice and discrimination are readily visible in Puerto Rico today; the ones who erased the angels appear to cater to tourists from other parts of the United States. The subtext of this explanation is that Frade's ideas of integration would be unacceptable to presumably white tourists. This occurs in the midst of the civil rights movement in the 1960s, when race relations were transforming. However, the desire to please tourists by showing only white angels confirms that white supremacy and racial prejudice are still present in Puerto Rico. The woman goes on to opine that "Frade, the pride ... of Puerto Rico, had very queer ideas" (54). This final piece of dialogue from the woman, when taken with her initial vague assertions about how the church covered up the angels of color because it had to be remodeled, makes clear that Frade's vision of integration is not welcome. Even though this integration is symbolic through religious art, racial discrimination that still exists in Puerto Rico is manifested through

the whitewashing of art that features black and brown cherubim. The woman's use of "queer" to describe the ideas of the painter reveals how unconventional and unwanted such ideas of integration were of not featuring typical displays of white cherubim. Colón is given a poor answer as to why the multiracial angels were cemented over; he "know[s] exactly what [the woman is] trying to say" (54) about the black and brown angels. The racial hierarchy and separation is strictly enforced with this erasure. Colón's texts contest the illusion that there is no racial prejudice in Puerto Rico because of miscegenation throughout history that was falsely argued to have erased the racial hierarchy. This is visualized through the author's experience of the whitewashing of a fresco of angels at his hometown church.

Works Cited

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FICTION

Enjambed

The Last Word by Ashley Smith

The table lamp flickered three more times before the man thumped it. He thumped his index finger a little too hard and shouted a hard “damn it!”

He palmed his face and sighed deeply.

He sat there for a minute.

Another minute longer.

Charles Maxim began massaging the bridge of his nose in hopes to massage out his stress, and as he lowered his hand he looked at the clock. It read a dreadful 5:00 a.m.

He thought, “*Two more hours and then I won’t have to worry about this shit anymore.*” And all he did *was* think about it. He nearly obsessed about getting this assignment in. He didn’t like being up Richardsons’ ass all the time about extensions. If he had to pour that son of a gun one more cup of coffee, he would have damn near broke the kettle against his face.

His glasses were turned rightside up and as he reached to get them, he felt an eerie twinge in his neck. Confused, he looked around.

What good would that do? Charles was *almost* as blind as a bat. He wouldn’t be able to see anything, but it was weird to him that his hearing was always heightened when he wasn’t wearing his glasses. There’s this weird universal thing where if you aren’t wearing your glasses, then it would be impossible to hear someone. Not Charles. He heard everything.

The distant sound of a chair scraping the wooden floor was as close as if it were in the next room.

“*Okay.*” Charles let out a fatigued and frustrated laugh. “*I’m tired! I’m manically running on words and words and more words. My mind is fucking with me.*”

Charles didn’t see the tall silhouette standing in the window’s reflection because he was rubbing in between his eyes again. Oh, how tired was he!

Charles sat back in his chair and spun around. He gasped because he remembered that he left his coffee in the microwave.

He looked back at the clock. *5:18 a.m.*

Charles shrugged it off. *“I’ve already wasted time – why not warm up the coffee and just get back to it.”* He finally put on his glasses but a very confused and frightened look settled on his face.

He bent over and looked at his computer screen. He tried swallowing some spit but it was met with the vomit desperately trying to escape his body.

...there were words written on the screen that he didn’t write.

Charles spun in a little circle and paced his bedroom, not going any further than his computer chair. *“What the fuck, what the fuck, what the fuck? Am I asleep? I must to dirt be sleep.”* He placed his hands on his hips. He bent over and began reading. As he quietly read the words to himself, his mouth began trembling.

It read, “The table lamp flickered three more times before the man thumped it. He thumped his index finger a little too hard and shouted a hard “damn it!”

Charles’ heart immediately began racing, as he assumed it stopped the moment he recognized words that weren’t his own.

“Someone’s writing about me? How? WHO’S DOING THIS?” His thoughts yelled. Surely, if someone were writing about him then they could hear his thoughts.

He read the next few lines, “He palmed his face and sighed deeply.

He sat there for a minute.

Another minute longer.

Charles Maxim began massaging the bridge of his nose in hopes to massage out his stress, and as he lowered his hand he looked at the clock. It read a dreadful 5:00 a.m.”

He felt a bit dizzy and sat on the edge of his bed more abruptly than he planned to. It was an old mattress so it didn't have much of a bounce to it. He didn't care because he *couldn't* believe what he was reading.

Someone was writing about him, minutes after he was performing his thoughts. His words and actions. He rubbed his face again and caught a glance at his bedroom window.

There was a bright light illuminating a blurry face.

Charles leaned back and wrestled with himself. "*Do I go see who the fuck is doing this? Or do I go warm up my coffee?*"

Without thinking, his body jerked up and he began walking to the window.

There was an African American woman. She had long black, blow dried hair that rested on her shoulders. A cream colored sweatshirt, covered with faded pink spots. She wasn't paying attention, but seemed to be furiously typing.

Charles was intrigued. "*Hello?*"

She kept typing.

Charles tried to adjust his throat.

Nothing.

He scrolled to the top of the document, "*Written by Ashley Michelle Smith?*"

She looked up and smiled.

The insertion point on Charles' document birthed a train of words, and it left his bulging eyes craving what was next. This *Ashley Smith* was accomplishing what Charles couldn't.

The last word.

The Ocean Never Forgets

Florencia Bravo

Martina checked her bag to make sure she had gotten everything she needed. It wasn't much. Onions, carrots, potatoes, and flour. She wished her family could afford a good cut of meat for today's dinner, but purchasing these measly groceries was already getting too expensive. She sighed as she set everything on the small, chipped counter. The elderly woman at the cash register quickly calculated her total and held out a pale wrinkly hand to accept the pesos that Martina had taken out. Martina accepted back her change, first the price of meat had gone up and now the price of vegetables. She managed a weak smile for the older woman, "Gracias".

"De nada niña, te veo el Domingo," the old woman responded in a gruff voice.

Martina nodded and assured her that she would at mass this Sunday. With everything going on, practically everyone from town was going to one of the few churches located nearby. Mama always said that people sought out God during the hard times and then forget about Him during the good times. These times were had been anything but good.

Martina secured her grocery bag in her right fist and began her long trek to the other side of town. The docks of Puerto Deseado were fairly busy this morning, some of the fishermen that had gone out at dawn were already back, their nets full of the native seabass. The smell of salt and fish was thick and the boats tied to the docks made loud slushing sounds as they rocked. The strong odor of the men's catch was making her nauseas and she made sure to keep her eyes ahead or on the beach. Martina was not interested in seeing the men slash open fish bellies in order to clean and separate the meat.

The atmosphere of her town in the providence of Santa Cruz, Argentina had been tense since April. It was heavy in the air, in the people. Purple shadows hung beneath everyone's eyes

and the grim lines on their faces had formed into bitter unchanging frowns. There was no hope, not anymore. Ever since they had heard about the surrender some weeks before on June 14th everything had changed. No-one stopped to chat with anyone anymore, everyone would keep their eyes on the ground as they hurried to their destination. Usually, on Saturdays, boys would be on the main street playing soccer in their outgrown ripped shoes. Girls would linger in front of the boutique windows on the nicer side of town, wishing they could afford that luxurious looking ivory sweater.

Now, as Martina walked home, there were no cries of children screaming "¡gol!". There weren't any giggles of teenagers, men listening to the radio while grumbling about money and work, Mamas chasing after the little ones, not even the quiet rushed whisper of gossip between neighbors. Everyone was silent. The whole town was holding their breath. Wondering what would happen next. Wondering if their loved ones had perished. Wondering about their own survival. Martina felt a chill go through her; how many men had lost their lives because the whims of some greedy politicians?

Many of the people in her town had yet to hear from their loved ones. Whether they had been fighting in the war or sailing as civilians. The *Formosa* had been one of the civilian cargo ships that had been hit by an airstrike on accident. No one knew whether the sailors on board had survived or not. Whether the ship had reached its destination or sunk. For all they knew, those men could be laying at the bottom of a merciless ocean.

Martina shifted the thin plastic bag in her hands and stopped by the shore. The fog from this morning had not yet lifted, making the ocean look like a steaming pot of boiling water. Mysterious blue-grey water shimmered in the dim sunlight; each wave glimmered like dark satin as it hit the muddy beach. Pearly white foam collected at the shore, lacing through the glossy

water in a delicate pattern. It was beautiful really, but it had been hard to find the beauty in anything lately when death hung over the country like a thick mourning veil.

Martina set down her grocery bags and tied her coat closer to her body. She had brought the beige scarf her Abuela had knitted for her, but it was doing little to subdue the chill that was seeping into her bones. She wished that she could afford a new sweater, the one she had on was thread bare from constant use and the once bright green color was faded. Even with all the layers she wore, it seemed impossible to get warm. Martina took one more look at the dancing waves just a couple feet away from her. The ocean only gave her horrible morbid thoughts these days. Like how awful it would be to drown. Lungs burning as they filled with saltwater, your body lost to the sea forever. She shivered and picked up her bag, the sack of potatoes was getting heavy. She needed to get home and get started on lunch, her parents would be back soon with her little brothers, and she had promised them a hot lentil stew to fight off the cold day.

Martina followed the old path back to the small family cottage just at the bottom of a hill. It was an old concrete structure, made of heavy bricks and weather-stained windows. Behind their small home, they had a nice garden that would grow plenty of vegetables in the spring and summer months. Papa doted over all the plants in it, he was always trimming, watering, or fertilizing. It was sad to look at it now. Winter had come early, freeing the ground and vegetation. Even her Mama's carefully pruned rose bushes had wilted and dried up. Martina took out her skeleton key and twisted it into the doorknob. She shifted it harshly and pushed it open, the sticky hinges creaking rather loudly as she walked in. Martina stretched after she set the groceries on the small counter by the stove. Her body was stiff, begging for a nap. She had woken up early to clean and do other chores while the rest of her family was out. Martina was hoping she could give Papa and Mama some much needed rest today.

Sometime later, she hunched over her Nona's yellowing recipe book, reading the same line of instruction over and over again, without actually processing what it meant. She usually didn't mind cooking, but today it seemed like a never-ending chore. An eternity had passed by when she finished peeling and chopping all the vegetables. She took out the large, dented pot Mama kept at the back of the bottom cabinet and threw in some butter with the chunks of beef. She seared them until they were brown and crispy and filled the pot with her family's homemade beef broth. By the time she put in all the vegetables and the lentils, the whole house smelled of the food cooking in the kitchen. It was a wonderful thing, to have a roof over her head and food for her belly. Not everyone was as lucky as her.

When her meal was ready, Martina sat at her kitchen table to do schoolwork. She looked through her math worksheets and cursed under her breath. Her mind was too distracted today to work on problems such as these. She looked out the window, hoping for some divine intervention. This morning, there had only been thin wispy clouds in the grey sky. Now the heavens were covered in a blanket of them. A flash of lightening and the roar of thunder startled her. There wasn't any news of a storm, where had it come from?

Martina walked outside as rain began to fall around in thick sheets. Suddenly a strange, blurred object appeared in the sky. It was unstable, rocking violently as it tried to make up its mind on which way to go. As she tried to make out the shape, she rubbed her numb hands together, a reminder that she needed to sew the hole in her wool gloves. She saw now that the crazed thing was a small plane, with sickly black smoke coming from the end of it. Martina's eyes widened as she saw it come crashing down, landing on the beach some ways ahead of her. Her gasp made her breath frost in the cool air.

Her clothes became weighty as they soaked up the rain. She trudged towards the fallen plane, flames had begun to lick at the metal trying to consume it whole. The sight of fire made her panic, surely the pilot was still inside. She would have to figure out a way to get them out. Martina began to run as fast as she could in her alpargatas, almost slipping more than once on the moist dirt underneath her feet. The smell of burning metal filled the air and a strong acidic chemical odor made her nose sting as she coughed. Just as she was about to get closer, the small door of the plane burst open, and a man staggered out.

Martina's first instinct was to hide behind sparse brush, hoping he could not see her. She had always been told be wary of men, especially strangers. The man was wearing a sort of uniform, but it was tattered. He was covered in blood, ash, and broken glass. His light golden hair had turned dark from the dirt and rubble and his coat was like the one of a soldier, but she didn't recognize it. Maybe he wasn't a soldier. He could be a rich man that did this as some type of hobby. Her father always said that rich people did strange things to amuse themselves. As the stranger limped forward, Martina dared to stand a little taller, trying to figure out who he was. The seal on his hat caught her eye. She felt a chill run down her spine. She had seen that symbol on the news before. It was on the uniforms of the British royal air force.

The man now slumped onto the ground and moaned in pain. Martina's hands shook as she thought about what to do. As she carefully tried to move, the crunch of leaves gave her away. The man looked back at her, and she met his blue startled gaze. She didn't think twice now in running back to the cottage. Martina burst into her home and headed straight for her parent's bedroom. Underneath the mattress on her father's side, her hands gripped a rifle and bullets. Her heart was pounding against her chest and her mind was racing. She wasn't too sure what she was going to do. But she would protect her home, no matter what that meant.

By the time she reached the plane again, it was completely engulfed in orange flames. She could feel the warmth of the fire from where she stood. Martina stayed a safe distance away, keeping her eyes on the man. He was gripping his side, a steady flow of blood moved through his fingers. The man held up his other hand as if that would stop her. In the distance, she heard sirens. If the town hadn't already seen the plane fall from the sky, they would know about it soon enough. She heard men in the distance, were they headed this way?

Slowly, Martina raised her father's rifle and aimed it at the man. It was hard to see in the dark rain, but she knew she couldn't let him get away. It didn't matter what the outcome of the war had been. He could be responsible for many if not hundreds of Argentine lives. This man could have been the one that killed the butcher's son. He could have been the one to drop bombs on their ships. Just as she laid her finger on the trigger, his intense gaze met hers again.

"Wait! Don't shoot!" he groaned.

Martina stepped back in surprise but kept her aim. She wasn't a good shot, and her chances were slim in this weather, but she would take her chances.

The soldier's eyes were desperate, "please, don't shoot."

Martina had been studying English all throughout la secundaria and although she wasn't very good at speaking it, she understood him well enough, "you are British soldier. Tell me why I not kill you?"

She looked back; the men's voices were louder now. They were getting closer, "I don't, they will."

The pilot heard them too and looked at her with a frantic expression, "you need to hide me, if they find me, they'll kill me."

As he talked, Martina realized he was younger than she had first thought. He couldn't be much older than she was. She shook her head, "and why they let you live? You come from las Malvinas, no?"

"Yes," he gasped and stepped forward, "please... don't kill me, I'm a soldier. I follow orders."

"Stay back!" her heart began to beat violently in her chest, the voices were getting louder as if the men had begun to shout in her ear. She couldn't think. Would they kill him? Despite everything, who was she to decide that this man deserved to die? But how many people had this man killed? What did orders have to do with one's own moral choices?

The man took another step toward her, and she flinched, "stay back!"

His pleading eyes were tearing a hole into her soul, "Please, you need to help me. They will kill me if you don't."

Martina's hands were sweaty and shaking now. She felt as if the gun would slip under her reach. She shook her head, "nowhere to hide you."

And the abandoned shed boatshed nearby? As the voice in her head whispered, the soldier slumped onto the ground. Martina was struggling to breathe. If he was the dead, the people of her town would leave him alone. But they had to be convinced he was dead. And they couldn't be allowed to examine the body closely.

Martina squeezed her eyes shut. Her head was throbbing. Finally, she spoke, low and quick, "you pretend dead."

"What?"

“Lie down, close eyes. Pretend you die!” She hissed as the man quickly obeyed her orders. He took one more look at her before he closed his eyes. Martina murmured a prayer and swallowed. Then she held the pistol steady in between her hands and pulled the trigger.

A Star in the Darkness by Paige Martin

Mary was never the religious type. She was a psychiatrist. She went to work, came home, read a book, maybe went out for a drink with friends. That's all there was to her life. Until that was taken away. Now she tries to retain as much of that life as possible. And strangely enough, that means life as a nun.

Pros to nunhood: one, religion seems to be the way people deal with their problems in these times; two, she gets to be around the one and only book of this era—the bible; and three, most of all, she doesn't have to marry. Not that romance is all that bad. Well, she wasn't married in her past life. But romance is oftentimes bad in this era, and she can't be tied down to anyone. She has to get home.

It was about three months ago that she appeared here, awoke in the hay of some peasant family's barn. She'd thought she'd gotten drunk and gone to some kind of renaissance fair, but when the family wouldn't give up their act, she accepted her fate and ran. She stole some food and clothes to help start her new life. She felt bad later. Once she became a nun, she returned the goods as part of her charity work.

Charity work: that's what has kept her sane—getting out of the abbey, doing something that doesn't completely revolve around God (at least not for her), helping people, like she used to.

Mary approaches a woman curled up in the alley. The woman has bright red hair—quite distinctive. It's tied back in a messy bun, and freckles dust her cheeks. Her dress is plain brown, fraying, layered with an apron, much like the outfit Mary stole when she first arrived.

The woman is asleep. Mary gently taps her on the shoulder, trying to wake her, trying to offer her some of the bread.

The woman's eyes flutter open and all she must see is a black figure looming over

her. “Oh my fucking god,” she murmurs, pushing closer to the wall.

“What?” Mary hasn’t heard anyone speak like that for... well, three months. “I’m so sorry, mam... sister.” The woman’s ankle is visible under her threadbare dress, and there, she wears a bright pink anklet with a golden-in-color, plastic-in-material star charm. She twitches her ankle out of the way, back under her dress.

“Thank you,” she says, taking the bread, “uh... bless Jesus.” And she’s up and running, and Mary’s just staring after her.

...

It’s a new day, a new batch of bread. And there’s the red-haired woman in an alley again, a different alley. Mary would recognize that red hair anywhere. The woman’s eyes dart around as if looking for an escape, but Mary is blocking the only path.

The woman backs away, hands up, then gesturing. “I’m sorry. I’ve prayed to God for forgiveness.”

“I’m not angry... I mean, God’s not angry.” Mary’s sigh shifts to a laugh. “I guess there’s no point in pretending.”

“What am I going to hell?” She doesn’t look concerned, more offended and doubting. “No... I mean, I don’t know... I mean... you’re not from this time, are you?” “How did you—”

Mary rushes to explain, to form a plan. “I’m not either... and if you’re here, there must be others. We can find them. We can find a way back, together—”

The red-haired woman approaches, her hands slowly reaching out as if to calm a wild animal. “Woah, slow down. It’s nice to meet you and everything, but how are you going to find these supposed other people sucked back to the dark ages? I... I don’t think there’s any hope

of getting home. Besides, I do better on my own.”

Deja vu, if that’s even a thing in this time. The red-haired woman is jogging away, and Mary is staring after. It takes her some time to realize that the woman stole the bag of bread. ...

It seems like fate when Mary returns to the abbey to hear that Old Man Baldwin has passed. The second after she thinks it, she thinks she is going to hell. The second after she thinks that, she thinks she *has* to get out of the abbey.

Old Man Baldwin was known to be a carzy loner, hense the not so flattering nickname. He was also one of the few vegetable merchants, which kept him popular despite his rude manner. With no family and no friends, no one will be around to collect his things for quite some time. Fate. Mary is in need of a new disguise. She comments on the great sadness of Baldwin’s death, then slips from the abbey.

She finds Baldwin’s door unlocked, his posseesions seemingly waiting for her. First her outfit. She dresses in the late man’s clothes, arranging the baggy cloth to cover her figure. Then her hair. She take a knife to her ponytial, catching it, then allowing it to fall to the floor. Finally the supplies for her new occupation. She finds the crazy merchant’s cart in what appears to be a work room. And she gets to work. At this point, it’s quite late, but the work must be done, and

she is feeling restless.

She’s calling them good luck charms, the trinkets she plans to sell at the market tomorrow. Into

the stolen wood blocks she carves symbols meaningless to most, recognizable to some. To anyone from this time, her carvings appear a bizarre collection of squiggly lines and shapes. But

no one from the twenty-first century could fail to recognize these fragments of home.

An iPhone, a football, an ice cream cone, a game controller. Mary carves until her hands bare blisters from her grip on the knife.

She eventually allows herself to sleep (in the dead man's bed) and awakens to overpowering sunlight, a beam from the open window right on her face. She's not angry at being woken, nor is she groggy. As soon as her mind registers her surroundings, remembers her plan, realizes that the thing to do in the morning is to get up, she's packing her things and wheeling the cart towards town.

She worried that the market might be hard to find. She'd never been there. It wasn't a place nuns spent a lot of time. But the noise of cartwheels and people bartering pulls her there like a magnet, the movement of people drags her like a current.

She passes a man selling pottery, another, raw chickens, a third, bread. Her stomach grumbles. She hasn't eaten since she departed on this quest. She's fed on nothing but her determination to return home. She's already stolen an entire portable woodshop, what's a little more thievery? While the bread merchant is busy with a customer, an actual paying customer, she slips a roll off the far corner of the cart and into her clutter of spoils.

Mary slides her cart into place next to a woman, a widow, selling hand-woven cloth. The fake man, fake merchant that Mary is feels comfortable there.

It's not long before a farmer approaches. "What are these?"

"Good luck charms."

"Will they help with my crop?"

"To know that I'd have to look into the future." A hint, if he picks up on it. "How much?"

"5 halfpennies." This man doesn't seem like he's from the future, but Mary needs money. The farmer puffs his lips out in thought, then purchases the carving of the ice cream cone, holding it upside-down so that it kind of looks like a strange raindrop. He mutters his thanks and is gone.

More people walk by, more people walk up, more desperate people buy charms, trade for barley or cheese, more walk away scoffing at the useless hunks of wood. Mary is ready to give up hope, when a middle-aged woman approaches.

“What are these?” There’s something in her tone, in that look on her face—maybe it’s hope, maybe it’s fear.

“Good luck charms, mam.”

“The symbols, they look so familiar.”

“It must be a sign.”

The woman leans in, lowering her voice to a whisper. “You’re from there, aren’t you.” Mary nods. “Tomorrow, sunset, that inn just down the block.” She’s been waiting quite some time to deliver her secret message and the words tumble from her mouth. The woman nods, brushes a finger over the carving shaped like a camera, then disappears into the crowd.

From then on, Mary counts the number of people from her time. It’s that kind of counting so slow that you lose track between numbers. Still, she doesn’t feel deterred. Why does it matter if it’s four people or five? No matter what, she has a team to work with to get home. She needs a team unlike that loner in the alley. Mary feels sorry for that woman; she’ll probably be stuck here forever.

When the sun begins to set, the merchants begin to pack up, and Mary follows. She wheels her cart over to the inn and hides it behind the stable. She’s not too worried about it getting taken. Who would steal a cart? Well, besides her.

She trades a handful of coins for a room at the inn. Up in her room, she pulls the wood tools from her bag and carves new charms to replace the ones sold. Only to replace the ones sold, no more. Once that’s done, she collapses in the scratchy bed and enjoys some well-deserved rest. ...

It’s a bit nerve-racking—being herself again in front of a room full of people when she’s

spent all this time pretending. Seven. She found seven people over the course of these two days. When she takes her cart out again tomorrow, she'll find more. But right now there's a different task at hand.

The tavern doesn't look good, doesn't smell good either. Dirt covers the floors and instead of chairs or benches, there are planks of wood held up by barrels. All the pre-shower bodies stuffed in here cook up a foul stench. But Mary doesn't much mind. Her thoughts are on the seven people sitting around her table, not the splinters poking up from the wood and through her trousers.

Fourteen eyes stare her down, expecting something. Words. They expect her to say something. Something inspirational. Something to give hope to these seven people ripped from their homes.

“Two days ago, I was alone. Two days ago I, Mary Ainsley, wasn't here, not truly. My body was a nun, but I was never myself. Then I met someone... someone from our time. And she gave me hope. Now, we're together. We have each other. We have hope. No matter what happens to us.”

One man smiles softly. A woman looks down at her lap. Another awkwardly claps. A few others join in.

“Now, I'd like to know the names of my givers of hope,” Mary says with a chuckle. They go around the table, introducing themselves. Mary repeats each name in her head over and over. She does not want to forget these people like all those names from her History books in school—read and forgotten. The people in front of her are not history. They are the future.

“Okay... umm,” Mary stutters even though she spent hours planning the meeting agenda during her free time in the market. “Next, I think we should share what we were doing right

before we appeared here. Maybe it can tell us something about how we got here, how we can get back.”

“I just woke up here,” says Charlie. *Charlie, Charlie, Charlie. Dark curly hair, blue eyes.* “Same,” says Elizabeth (dirty-blond) and Simon (blond, blond) and Alex (tan skin). Mary doesn’t know what to say. She stops repeating names and thinks. “Well, then maybe we need to go back farther.”

Awkward silence. If their days before disappearance were anything like Mary’s, she can understand their hesitation to share. But if no one talks, they might as well go off on their own. Mary takes a deep breath, prepares herself to speak. She is the de facto leader of this group after all. But someone cuts her off. Mary’s words come out as a sigh of relief instead. It’s a man named Finn. *Finn, Finn, Finn. Pointy hair.* “I went to work, as usual,” Finn starts. “I worked at this diner. It was crap. The pay was nothing and rush hour sucked. But I had to pay rent, so...

“That day was different... because my friend quit. My best friend. She told me to quit with her, that we could start a business together, make the rules and make them better. But I told her I couldn’t. I guess that’s just not me. I don’t take risks.”

Silence overtakes the table once more. Alex puts a hand on Finn’s shoulder. Elizabeth supports in a different way; she tells her story.

“I got drunk. Really drunk. It... it’s silly, but I kind of think that’s why I was sent back here. Because I have a problem.”

A different kind of silence overtakes the table—not an awkward one, not a pitying one, but one of wonder.

There’s no point in Mary sharing her story now. She has the answer. “The dark ages—they mark a significant loss in human knowledge. We’re here because we’re at the dark ages of our lives, and we need to move past them.”

There was already fuel, already oxygen, Mary's realization is the spark. The fire spreads, consuming the table. All silence, awkward or otherwise, is gone. Suddenly, everyone is talking, telling the story of the day before they time-traveled. And Mary is swallowed up by others' problems—just the way she likes it.

Then her mind turns to a different problem. Who is going to help the red-haired woman from the alley? Who is going to listen to her problems?

...

Mary *is* pleased by the progress made last night. She *is*. But she is also filled with a sense of dread, for the secret to escape is not as simple as gathering a few herbs and mixing them into a potion. No, she has to find the secret of life for seven people.

More than seven, really. She didn't find all the lost people in medieval England in two days. There are more out there, more people in need of help. That's why she's out with her wood cart again today.

The market seems busier this morning. It's quite comforting, being a nobody in a sea of bodies once more.

Mary spots a flash of red across the sea. She squints, focusing on the stripe of fire. It's the woman from the alley. Her hair flies up behind her as she flees from the baker's cart, where she just swiped a roll of bread.

Mary imagines what alley lady would say if she came to one of the meetings at the inn. She hears the woman's voice echoing in her head: *I do better on my own*. The woman would go on to explain how she leads an invisible life, not producing anything in this world, only taking a little from everyone in a way that goes unnoticed. And what would Mary say? What would Mary do? She'd listen. She'd help.

"Watch my cart, will you?" Mary says to the widow. She's formed a sort of friendship

with the old woman. Every morning, she's asked the widow, Ms. Goffrey how she's doing. Ms. Geoffrey seems to need that, someone to care how she's doing.

Mary fumbles for a carving in her display and sees the widow nod as she jogs to catch the woman with fire for hair.

Mary puts a hand on the woman's shoulder. She holds out the carving. She says only two words: "It worked."

The woman stares at Mary's face. Then she takes the carving and stares at it. She holds the tiny, wooden rocket ship in front of her face. A rocket for the woman with the star anklet. A rocket for the woman whose hair is like a shooting star.

"You sold these? There's stuff like this, stuff from our time, floating around this medieval town?" Mary knows what she's thinking. *This is why I do better on my own.* "They don't know what they mean. And with these carvings... I found seven others." "Seven," the woman murmurs.

Mary thinks she might just have gotten through to her. "You can join us. We *will* find a way home."

The woman says nothing for a second. Mary wonders if they are both holding their breath.

"I do better on my own." The girl hands the carving back.

Mary feels like a rocket malfunctioning, her heavy parts falling back to Earth. She doesn't let it show. She just says, "We meet at the inn down the road at sunset... if you change your mind."

She watches the fire leap away. She feels it burn.

...

The woman does change her mind. Really, she changes everything.

They're talking about their lives, anything that can help. Alex mentions that he was an engineer for some space company. Though they ask, he doesn't have any time travel knowledge beyond that in the *Star Trek: The Next Generation* finale, an all-powerful being called Q transports Captain Picard around space-time. Still, the group idolizes him.

They're halfway through their stew, more the way through their beers, when she arrives, the shadow of her thin figure forming a line dividing the table in two. She doesn't say anything, just takes an open seat. The group quiets to stare, first at the newcomer, then at Mary. They are waiting for further instruction.

"It appears we have a new member," says Mary, hoping that her smile conveys welcome to the woman who finally opened up. "What is your name?"

"Emma."

"Emma, we were just talking about our lives, anything that might help us get home. Alex is an engineer and an expert on sci-fi and time travel."

Alex blushes. "What do you do?"

"Self-employed." Emma does not seem to want to say more words than necessary. Still, anything is progress.

The rest of the group seems deterred by her silence. Mary picks up the pieces. "I guess I'll go next. I was a psychiatrist."

Everyone stares at Mary again, but this time, they give instructions.

"Psychiatrist?" says Charlie.

"*You're* the one who can help us!" says Alex.

"If we really time traveled back because of some break in our knowledge, some obstacle in our lives—" says Elizabeth.

"Then you can help us work out our problems. You can help us get home," says

Finn. “But... I’m just a psychiatrist... I just talk to people.”

Emma speaks, no more words than necessary, “Maybe that’s what we need.” ...

It is what they need. Finn is the one to prove that hypothesis. He’s the first one to return home.

They worked out a waiting list, the order in which people would meet with Mary. Then, one at a time, she took them up to her rented room, and they talked.

“It does seem a bit extreme... sending you back in time just because you wouldn’t quit your job.”

Finn looks down guiltily. “Maybe it was a cumulation of never taking risks, never accepting change.”

“Well then maybe you can try taking small risks, build your way up to the bigger risks.” They decide the first small risk Finn will take is accepting a new responsibility. He’s going to man the cart, learn to carve, help attract more lost people. This way, Mary has more time to meet with group members.

He never does though. As soon as he decides it, he fades into a blur of light, and he’s gone.

Mary runs and tells the others. They leap up, cheering. Some randos in the tavern start cheering, too. Emma just sits there, looking shocked. It’s not an unhappy shock, though. There’s a slight smile in her open mouth.

Emma ends up helping with the cart. It’s a bit ironic really—the person who once thought she was better off on her own now being the one to do the recruiting.

Mary meets with many people, and many people go home. The one that sticks with her the most, though, is a girl named Charlotte.

Charlotte is thin and frail, and she can't be older than sixteen. When they sit in Mary's room—Mary on the desk chair, the patient on the bed, as usual—Charlotte sits on the very edge of her seat. She flinches when Mary's coat falls across the room and when Mary moves to cross her legs suddenly.

It takes some time to get her to talk, and when she does, what she says is surprising. "Nothing was wrong. I had a perfect life."

"Something must have been wrong."

"You shouldn't be talking with me. You should be talking to someone with actual problems."

"This is your time."

"Nothing was wrong. I lived in a nice house. My parents were still together. I went to a nice school. Everyone was moderately nice to me, but..."

Mary holds her gaze so Charlotte knows she's listening.

"But I was sad all the time. I could never eat, I could never sleep... And then I was torn from my life, and still, I can't change, I can't get better. There was nothing wrong with my life. There is something wrong with me."

"It's okay. Charlotte, you need help. And you are just as worthy of that help as anyone else."

Charlotte stays in this time period longer than most, and it isn't even Mary who helps her get home. It's Emma.

Mary is meeting with someone else, locked away in her room. And there's Charlotte, sad as always. And there's Emma, alone as always. Emma asks Charlotte how she's doing. Charlotte says she's fine. Emma pushes her. And only when Charlotte opens up to a second person, a person she doesn't have to open up to (she almost had to with Mary), only then does

she return home.

Emma tells Mary about it later. She comes with a new member during Charlotte's appointment time.

"Are you okay? I know you and Charlotte were close."

"Yeah... I'm really happy for her... I'm just sad I didn't get to say goodbye." Emma's like that, always asking Mary how she is. They spend half their appointment time talking about Mary, the supposed doctor, not Emma, the patient.

"I'll see you later, then."

Emma always takes the last appointment of the day, since she mans the market cart. The rest of the day passes. No one else fades to light. It takes time. Some take longer than others. Emma's been here the longest, besides Mary.

"Why do you think you're still here?" asks Mary when it comes time for Emma's appointment.

Emma takes a second to think, mouth open. She's not thinking of an answer, just how to phrase it. "You are the first person I've connected with... ever. I don't think I can leave without you."

That's not the answer Mary was expecting. She doesn't have much time to ponder it though because Emma returns the question. "Why do *you* think you're still here?" "I have to help people get home."

Emma presses her lips together. "I don't think that's it."

"What?"

"You were pulled here long before you were helping people. You have a problem, just like everyone else."

"I don't know what that could be—"

“In fact, I think *that* is your problem. You run from your problems. You help others rather than helping yourself.”

Mary shakes her head. “Sometimes you have no choice but to run.”
Emma pushes herself from the bed and comes to kneel in front of Mary. She takes hold of her friend’s hands, looks her in the eye. “Let me help you.”

Mary looks away. She tries to pull her hands away, too, but Emma’s grip is firm.
“You’re right. I am a runner.” Mary can’t run now. She has to talk. She allows her hands to relax in Emma’s. “I just... I messed things up so bad that it was easier to run, to start over, than to stay and clean things up.”

Emma’s still holding her hands, staring at her.

“The day before I appeared here, my mother contacted me. I hadn’t talked to her in years. But I ignored her.”

They say admitting you have a problem is the first step. Hand in hand, Mary and Emma fade to light. They did the impossible. They traveled through time. But Mary knows the hardest part is yet to come.

“A Goldfish Named Chopin” by Naomi Cahill

Scene 1: Final concert flashback

Flashback to 15 year earlier. Backstage, a violinist named George massages his wrist in pain

GEORGE. *In the left wing, to himself* Ouch, come on, we don't have time for this. Better take an Advil.

ANNOUNCER. Ladies and gentlemen, please give a warm welcome to George Nelson *curtain goes up*

GEORGE. All right, get out there, they're waiting for you. *Violin Concerto D Minor, Op. 47, by Sibelius plays.*

Scene 2: Doctor's office later that week

DOCTOR. Your left wrist has two bones inside rubbing against each other. Surgery's the best option. However, replacing the bones with metal plates will alleviate the pain, but it will limit some hand movement

GEORGE. Doctor, that's not something a violin player wants to hear

DOCTOR. I know George, I'm sorry.

Scene 3: Present day at George's apartment

Dark room with a radio on shelf; the classical station plays. To the right is a red sofa chair facing a window with long curtains.

GEORGE. *Turning off radio* That's enough music. I should be receiving that check today *looks out window* What is taking that mailman? Ugh finally! *Opens door*

MAILMAN Good afternoon, George

GEORGE. It would have been if you have been here an hour ago. Some of us have places to be, you know

MAILMAN. Sure, places to be. George all you do is sit in your house and listen to the radio. *Hands him his mail* You know, you can get your social security checks quicker if you set up direct deposit

GEORGE. Don't tell me what I should do with my money, that's none of your business

MAILMAN. Ok, sorry I mentioned it. Just try to have a nice day. Maybe actually go out; go to a coffee shop or something *he leaves*

GEORGE. Can't stand young people. Who does he think he is telling me what to do? I'm 67.

Goes through mail Yes, my check. Junk, junk...John Stouffer...Hmph! Lousy mailman delivered the wrong mail... *opens letter and reads* “Congrats you've won a free fish bowl”... Hmph *puts coupon in pocket*

(Next door neighbor, John Stouffer, comes out to his mailbox)

JOHN STOUFFER. *Looks through mail* That's weird, I thought that fish bowl coupon was coming today

GEORGE. *To himself*, Hehe, time to go get my new fish bowl

SCENE 4: Petco

PETCO EMPLOYEE. Hi welcome to Petco! My name is Lizzie, can I help you pick out a new best friend?

GEORGE. No. I'm here for my fish bowl *hands over coupon*

EMPLOYEE. All righty! Let me go get that for you. Be back in a jiff!

GEORGE *Walks up and down fish isle*

EMPLOYEE. Here it is. Did you check out our super cool fish friends? We even have these groovy freshwater turtles-

GEORGE. I'll take that goldfish behind the blue rock

EMPLOYEE. Sure! Let me just grab a net and a plastic baggy

GEORGE. I'll get this fish food too

EMPLOYEE. Ok, here's your new addition! We also have colorful gravel and some mini tiki huts or treasure chests to make his space a little homier.

GEORGE. It's a fish, water is fine.

EMPLOYEE. Okie dokie, let me ring those up for you...that will be \$5.78

GEORGE. Here's \$6

EMPLOYEE. Thank you, 22 cents is your change. Here's your new fish besty. Have a nice!-
(*George is gone*)...day

Scene 5: Back at the apartment

GEORGE. (*Walks into his apartment*) Ugh that lady was too perky...I have a headache, better turn on some music. (*Turns on radio, then pousr goldfish into bowl*)

GOLDFISH. (*Frantically swims around tank, then relaxes and just floats there, sad*) Blub, blub, blub

GEORGE. A waste of six bucks, maybe I can sell it to Stouffer. Better feed it though before it dies *sprinkles fish food into bowl*

GOLDFISH. (*swims to surface to eat, making splashes*) OM NOM NOM NOM!

GEORGE. Man, didn't they feed you at all at that pet store?

GOLDFISH. BUURRP!

Scene 6: Kitchen next day

GEORGE. All right, 6pm, time to hear "From the Top." *Turns radio on* These kids sure are great musicians...those stinkin, lousy overachievers

GOLDFISH (*mouth open*) Blub, blub, blub

GEORGE. I fed you an hour ago

GOLDFISH. (*sadly*) blub, blub

GEORGE. No, fish, the label on the bottle says "feed once a day"

GOLDFISH. (*angry*) ROAR!

GEORGE. Look at me, arguing with a goldfish. Besides, you're not hungry, you're just bored. Now, I'm gonna read the paper, and listen to the radio. Why don't you entertain yourself? *The goldfish dances along to the music and pretends to conduct the orchestra. George turns to fish. Fish stops. George turns away. Fish starts again. George turns and catches fish in act*

GEORGE. Got ya! You sure are weird... This 12 year old pianist is playing a piece by Chopin. Do you like Chopin?

GOLDFISH. (*sings*) Blub, blub, blub

GEORGE. I do too. I never really studied piano. I was a violin player

GOLDFISH. (*in an "oh really?" tone*) Blub?

GEORGE. *annoyed* Yeah I was. I haven't played in years though. Arthritis started in my left hand, and then I got it in my right. My hands are too stiff to play now.

GOLDFISH. (*Sympathetic*) Blub, blub

GEORGE. Yeah, it's a shame. I was pretty good. Do you want to see my violin?

GOLDFISH. Blub, blub!

GEORGE. (*Goes to get a violin case under a coffee table*) This is "Susie". We used to play in concerts all over the U.S.

GOLDFISH. Blub-blub?

GEORGE. No, like I said, I don't play anymore. That's why I don't tell people what I used to do for a living. They always insist I play, they'll say, "Oh, can't you at least try? Can't you remember?" Of course I remember. It was my life. They just don't understand, I can't hold a chord, I can't move my fingers fast enough. It's just me and my radio now

Scene 7: one week later

GEORGE. *Closing front door* I'll be back from the store in a bit, Chopin. I left the classical station on for you

CHOPIN. *(splashes happily)*

JOHN STOUFFER. Good morning, George

GEORGE. Morning.

MAYA STOUFFER. Who's Chopin?

GEORGE. My goldfish

BEV STOUFFER. Aren't you a violin player? You named your pet after a piano composer?

GEORGE. Used to be. And so?

BEV. Nothing, it's cute

JOHN. Weren't you playing violin a couple nights ago? I could hear the music

GEORGE. I was showing Chopin videos of myself performing

MAYA. *(Laughs)* You were showing you fish your home movies?

BEV. *to Maya* Mind your manners. George, do you teach? We'd love for Maya to learn. Keep her off Tik Tok.

MAYA. What?

GEORGE. Well, I don't play violin anymore

BEV. But you remember how, don't you? How much do you charge?

MAYA. Waiiit, Mooooom, nooooo!

GEORGE. \$20 per half hour?

JOHN. Sounds good

MAYA. I don't want to learn violin!

BEV. Shhh! How about Tuesdays, 5pm?

GEORGE. That's fine

JOHN. Thank you, have a nice day

MAYA. Well... at least I get to go see Chopin tomorrow... Mommy, wasn't I supposed to get a fish for my birthday?

BEV. *Whispers* Yeah, John, what happened to that free fish bowl?

JOHN. Ummm...

GEORGE. *(Over hears)* Hehe, suckers!

Scene 8: Apartment, one year later *George now gives private violin lessons at his apartment.*

GEORGE. *Opening front door* You did very well today Maya, you'll do great in the next recital

MAYA: Thank you, Mr. George that was a fun lesson, have a nice day! By Chopin!

CHOPIN: *splash!*

GEORGE *Closes door. Goes to Chopin's bowl and sprinkles in some fish food* Ah, last student of the day. Remember how much she hated violin? Now she loves it. Hey Chopin, we need to get started on printing those recital pamphlets for next Saturday. Remind me ok?

CHOPIN Blub blub!

GEORGE How are you enjoying your new treasure chest house? It's nicer than the plastic cave you used to sleep in huh?

CHOPIN. *(Nodding approvingly)* Blub, blub

GEORGE. I think it matches your yellow gravel nicely

CHOPIN. (*Pleased*) Blub, blub

GEORGE. Guess what Chopin? I have two new students coming in at 10am tomorrow. A brother and sister; never touched a musical instrument in their lives!

CHOPIN (*amazed*) Blub, blub?

GEORGE. Yeah. According to the mother, the brother is not happy about taking lessons. But we'll show him just how fun violin can be, right buddy?

CHOPIN Blub blub *SPLASH!*

[The End]

CREATIVE NONFICTION

Enjambed

Dontonbori by Chris Pigao

“Mitte! Mitte! Guriko man iku yo...”¹

I heard a drunk woman run over towards the sign. I try to ignore it as I held my dirty clothes in a bag. I would've done it in the capsule hotel, but the washing machine was broken. I was waiting for my turn for about an hour or so. I queued my clothes right next to the washing machine. When I put my clothes in the dryer, it wasn't working. I went to the front desk and told them that the machine was broken. Even though they did not know that much English, I tried using the limited Japanese that I knew.

Me: “Ah...ito....Washing Machine wa arimasen.”²

Front Desk Lady: “ah..iinee. Let me call manager.”

The manager came out and inspected the machine. He tried putting in more coins, but the machine was unresponsive. He came back after 10 minutes or so and gave me a refund, a map of the nearest laundromat (which was around the corner), and a bag for my clothes. The conversation went like this:

Me: “*Ah Arigatou...ito...Shouganai desune?*”

Manager: “*ah soudesuyo.*”³

It was nice for him to not only give me the money back but print out directions and give me a plastic bag. Most places would just have given me a “shit outta luck” ordeal or give me my money back. They went the extra mile which was nice for them.

So here I am, at 2 in the morning, walking to the nearest laundromat which happens to be smack dabbed in the middle of the city. Everyone was livin'. The streets were packed, the

¹ “Look, look. Let's go to the Glico Man” (electric sign in Dontonbori)

² Me: (Translated into rough English) “The Washing Machine is Not working?”

Front Desk Lady: “is that so?”

³ Myself: “Thank you. It cannot be helped, right?” (colloquial way of saying “shit happens”)

Manager: “Ah yes.”

street performers were gathering a crowd, even the stand-up ramen bar were occupied by the businessmen who wanted a late-night meal. The string of bars along the river hosted the nightlife, the people brought it out.

I saw one gaikoku-jin⁴ try to hit on a woman. He looked like a middle eastern man. Almost in his mid-40's or so. The dialogue went something along the lines of this:

Guy: “*Come back to my place.*”

Girl: “*oh no, it's okay.*”

Holy fuck, that was the most politest way I've seen a woman turn down a man. The man couldn't even complain about that. He had disappointment in his face. He knew he couldn't do anything and if he did try something funny, there were other people around him. If anything happened, did I want to play the hero? I'm glad nothing happened though, I was just trying to do my laundry and enjoy this vacation.

She got on her bike with her cherry red face and rode off. The man tucked his tail and went off somewhere. Maybe to another bar. Who knows?

A few moments later, I see a group of men carrying his friend. He was passed out.

Friends: “*EEh...mattakune.*”⁵

I giggled. I remember those drunk nights with my high school friends. I'd never got that fucked up like that guy, but still, I'd hate to be in his position especially in this weather. I probably would've have been dry-heaving or so. It would not work so well in my favor.

I see a woman come up to the laundromat on a fixed-gear bike. She had her load of laundry right next to mine. She looked at me. I glanced but we quickly look away. I thought she was cute. She had shoulder length hair and a white shirt. She had a blank expression on her face.

⁴ Foreigner

⁵ Colloquial expression. loosely similar to “ah fuck...”

Maybe she knew I was gaikoku-jin as well. With that look she gave me, it wouldn't work well, I guess. I didn't want to be another foreigner who got shot down that night. Loneliness can do the craziest things to a man. The only thing that set me apart, though, was my conscious effort not to stand out. She gave me the silent treatment, just gluing her eyes to her phone.

Following suit, I see an old Japanese man, an older punk. Grey beard, denim blue jeans and jacket. He looked like he just finished drinks at the biker bar a little downwards. He was stumbling around. He knew where he was going, which I guess he use muscle memory to remember. Usually, I'd admire these guys. However, this guy had a big swastika patch on the back of that denim jacket. Staying true to what Jello Biafra sang: "Nazi punks fuck off". I didn't bother to look or care any further.

I sipped on my Strong Zero. Knowing that it was 99 degrees Fahrenheit, I might as well enjoy my vacation with this cheap Japanese beverage my friends were raving about. Sure, at 150 Yen⁶, it'll definitely got the job done. It always did. It went down so smooth, you could hardly taste the alcohol. What type of alcohol, maybe vodka? It had to be vodka. It was clear. It was hard to read the ingredients on the can. There were some Kanji that I didn't learn yet.

BEEP BEEP

My laundry was done. These machines were so advanced because it was a 2-in-1 washer and dryer. You didn't need to move your clothes from one machine to the other. We probably have this back home but we're always so behind on shit like this. I folded my clothes, packed it in the bag, took a last sip of my Strong Zero. I nodded to the lady still outside in the laundromat. She didn't notice me at all. "Oh well," I head back to the Glico Man sign. That's where the capsule hotel was. That was my temporary home.

⁶ 150 yen = estimate \$1.50 USD

“Should I get another strong?” I asked myself. There was a Konbini⁷ on the way towards there. I could use another one, maybe stare at the river since I couldn’t bring it up to the room. “We don’t have these in the states,” I said to myself. I convinced myself otherwise not to overdo it. I decided not to since I had a long day, nearing at almost 2:30 am.

“Just get one tomorrow” my subconscious told me. I put away my clothes in the locker and headed back to capsule space 403. I turned on the TV and had the NHK channel play me off to sleep.

“Well that was something,” I said when I laid in my capsule bed. They say that Osaka is a lively town. For someone who just wanted to do laundry, I saw the lure of just sitting down and watching. It is marvelous to feel the energy of a city that’s physically miles away from home...and yet make it feel like you never left.



⁷ Konbini = Convenient store

“Seijin no Hi” by Chris Pigao

The sounds of bells and whistles filling the park reminded me that I’m alone. I was in the happiest place on earth. Why did I feel this melancholic feeling?

I saw the sunset as it moved to my part of the world. A new day for them means nightfall for me. I am supposed to enjoy this spectacle that was about to happen. I was with my boyfriend for the time being. Should I even put that label on him? My friends back home would be a bit impressed. I never was much of a looker anyways. I am too short. I’m so shy. I don’t like to speak much; I’m even embarrassed to speak English sometimes too. But I need to, it’s why I was there.

Him and his family are very nice. The only decent people that I’ve met here in California. This boy is a bit of a rambunctious American. Very direct. Very sharp and sometimes speaks too fast. A bit fat, but he can be very active and move fast. I know he’s a good person - deep down. He took me to places that are national landmarks. The Walk-of-Fame, the Art Museum, Hot Dog stand, the Pier that I see on TV. He smiles a lot. Too much actually. At least I read his emotion on his face. He was so happy when he told me that we were going to the theme park. That was my dream when I went there.

His family brought us in. We didn’t pay for admission because his sister works for the company. Her husband had the same identity as me, albeit a 5th generation American. We rode all the attractions. They bought us dinner. I couldn’t finish it. These portions are a bit too big.

We were sitting in our area before the show started. I’m looking through my phone and saw my friends’ photos on my SNS feed. I kept scrolling to see them all celebrating the coming-of-age ceremony. All my friends looked beautiful. Their colorful patterns, the sharpened-dress suits, the hair so silky smooth. I feel a bit of melancholy in me. I wonder how my family are doing? Should I have celebrated back home? I only turned 20 once - did I miss that opportunity.

“Everything okay?” he asked.

“Yes. I see pictures of my friends.” I replied.

“Oh! Today is ‘Seijin No Hi’ right?”

“Yes” was all I could say.

“Well, you know, I’m sad that you couldn’t celebrate back home. I know it’s hard to be far away. I’m glad you’re here, though. I hope today makes up for it” he said.

“Oh, yes” was all I could convey.

I wish I could have said more. I just don’t have the words to express it.

As the show began, I could see the look on his face. He was so amazed at all of the colors being displayed. The music was so vibrant, complimenting the images projected through the mist. I see all of the characters dancing and having a good time. It's different from the performances back home. No, this was a magical one. Being there, at that moment, felt a little bit better. I saw some of my childhood figures right in front of me. The weather complimented the show - I didn't feel cold at all. The "ooh's" and "ahh's" meant that everyone was in sync with the show. They were all having a good time.

The show was over before we knew it. We were ready to go home now. I felt less melancholic than before. I hope my friends enjoyed their time as I enjoyed mine.

"Hey, this feels like we're about to go to Maihama Station," he said.

"Oh yes. That's the station back home," I replied.

After that reference, I don't feel alone anymore.

The Adventure of the Summer Frostys

Florencia Bravo

Perhaps it was the feeling of the wind flowing through our loose summer clothes. Or maybe it was the fact that we weren't supposed to go any further than the mobile home entrance. Whatever it was, sneaking away like this made us giddy as we flew down Orangewood on our bikes. My initial fears and hesitations were whisked away as our laughter spread, loud and contagious. It was late summer, only a couple of weeks left of freedom, and we had raided our piggy banks for a couple of bucks to be able to get some Frostys. Now we rode as quick as we could to the Wendy's some blocks away. The smell of hot asphalt, cut grass, and fried food filled the summer air as we pedaled as hard as we could down cracked sidewalks. We would all have to be back home soon to not risk any suspicions by our mothers.

I thought back to us some minutes prior, trying to discreetly creep into our respective rooms. I had quietly taken some crumpled up bills and change from its hiding spot in my closet, trying to not make too much noise. If Mama were to ask why we were getting money I knew that I would not be able to lie. Do all mothers come with a lie detector? Because I am convinced that not even the best liar would be able to get away from my Mama's all-knowing eyes. I could never lie to her, and she knew it. I carefully shoved the money into the pockets of my shorts, hoping the denim would keep the coins from jingling loudly. I exited my room just as my little brother left his. He gave me a small nod and tapped the pocket of his own jeans. With neutral expressions, we prepared ourselves to face Mama.

We walked right past her in the kitchen, walking quickly to avoid questions. She was preparing dinner, her expert hands multitasking between chopping vegetables and frying meat.

"We're gonna ride our bikes with Kevin," I had said as we left our house.

Mama smiled but kept her eyes on the onion she was dicing, “Papa will be home soon for dinner. Come back soon.”

When we got to our driveway, we were once again engulfed by California summer heat. It was always worse in August and September, the sun a relentless foe. As we gathered our helmets and courage, our neighbor, Kevin was waiting for us at the end of the driveway his hands impatiently messing with the worn handlebars of his bike. As I sat in my stiff bike seat, some fear crept into my mind, “what if something happens?”

Kevin gave me a toothy grin, “we’ll be fine! If we go fast, we’ll be back in like 20 minutes tops.”

It had taken a whole lot of convincing on his part to get my brother and I to agree to go in the first place and now he was nervous that we would change our minds and back out. My brother, Jeremias had needed less convincing than I did, but he was always fearless. The two boys looked at me, waiting for me to cower away. It was like that a lot with the three of us. Though Kevin and I were the same age, he got on a lot better with my brother. I would often have to beg them to let me tag along. Most of the time when we played, I would have to compromise with Legos or boardgames. I was never allowed to play videogames with them and of course they never wanted to play with my “girl” toys. Anytime I was included I couldn’t complain too much or else they would change their minds. There weren’t any girls my age in the mobile home park, and I didn’t have the social skills Jeremias or Kevin had. I barely had friends at school so I very well couldn’t do anything to upset the only two friends I had.

I smiled warily and mumbled, “okay, let’s go.”

I couldn’t back out now, I wouldn’t hear the end of it, “God please keep us safe,” I prayed, “and don’t let us get run over.”

My irrational eleven-year-old mind kept trying to tell me that if we went, we would surely be run over, or mugged, or beat up. Whatever the situation was, something horrible was bound to happen. I didn't stop to consider who would beat up some kids, or what real chance there was of us getting run over. After Kevin was sure I wouldn't back out, he quickly took the lead. The first few turns of the mobile home park was familiar territory. We knew the old lady who always talked with her phone on speaker, the strange looking cat that slept underneath the lemon tree, and the recognizable sound of someone watching *Casa Cerado* so loud, we could hear it from the street as we whizzed by. There was the old, faded houses next to the brand-new ones that had recently been brought in. These streets were safe, familiar, I knew what to expect from inside the mobile home park. What waited for us out on the main street was the unknown.

Kevin quickly got more and more ahead of us, his feet pedaling quickly knowing the faster he pedaled the faster he would get ice cream. My brother was as he was most of the time. His green eyes shone brightly against his happy face and his shoulders were relaxed as he pedaled at his own speed. Not a care in the world, the only thing on his mind now was French fries and Frostys. Soon we were at the threshold of the park and Euclid Street. I swallowed as I turned back to look at the safety of the mobile home park. When I looked back to find my brother and neighbor, hoping I could convince them to turn back, I saw that they had both picked up speed. They seemed miles away now.

Taking one more look at the mobile home park, I forced my feet to follow behind the two boys in front of me. Even with my worry, I couldn't very well leave my younger brother to face this all alone. Not to mention that the idea of a Frosty was starting to make my worry recede into a deep forgotten corner of my mind. I began to think about whether I would get vanilla or chocolate and if I would have enough money for some fries as well. We flew on the uneven

sidewalks, past houses and trees, and soon enough we were going down Brookhurst, past the Marshalls where our moms liked to shop and past the Chase Bank our parents would go to. Down the street was the elementary school we went to and in the other shopping complex was the theater we would go to sometimes on the weekend. My family loved going to the movies, usually comedies and cartoons. If our dad would take us, it was always *Lord of the Rings*, *Star Wars* or *Mission Impossible*. If our mom took us, it would be anything with Adam Sandler in it, or anything Disney. Whenever we spent time with our family, it was always a good time.

When we finally saw the big red Wendy's sign in the distance, it was like an "x" on a treasure map. We got there soon enough and quickly lined up our bikes chaining them together against the railing so they would be safe while we stepped inside. Immediately the overwhelming scent of burgers, fried chicken, and ketchup filled our nostrils. We could hear the hum of the soda machine and the music playing through the speakers of the restaurant. The gust of air conditioning greeted us and was a much-needed reward after riding in the heat. We giggled to ourselves as we ordered our French fries and Frostys. My brother chose vanilla, Kevin and I chose chocolate. As we looked through our winnings, Kevin held his Frosty in the air as if he were giving a toast, "see I told you guys this was a good idea."

My brother and I nodded in agreement as we ate up our spoils. When we were satisfied, we grabbed the leftovers of our food and deposited it carefully into my bike's basket, "we can eat the rest when we get home," we reasoned, "we have to get back before our moms notice."

"Let's hurry," I said, my anxiety sliding back into my focus.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. You gotta relax, we'll be fine," Kevin rolled his eyes at me as we began the journey back home.

The heat was dying down now and soon the sun would set, lighting the sky with blood orange, magenta and golden hues. The ride back was mostly quietly as we were focused on getting back home as soon as possible. The entrance to the mobile home park was waiting patiently for us when we got back. My brother and I sighed in relief when we noticed my dad's car was not yet in our driveway.

"See told ya," Kevin said smugly as he parked his bike and grabbed the rest of his fries, "they'll never know where we went."

"Okay I get it... you were right," I pursed my lips as we sorted ourselves.

Kevin gave us a final wave as he walked into his yard, still munching on his fries. My brother and I smiled mischievously as we thought about our little getaway. We never once stopped to think that our secret adventure would be brought into light the second we stepped into our house our hands gripping red Wendy's cups still halfway filled with cold creamy Frostys.

Soki Soba and Fried Doughnuts
By: Ike Tamanaha

A surgical mask hid Em's face at a grassy park one December, joined by a crowd of Japanese American Buddhist families. Towels were spread over the grass, shaded from the Long Beach sun by pine and fir trees. Rice cakes, spam musubi, salad, vegetable tempura, sushi rolls lined the tables.

Winter parties smelled like steaming miso soup, white rice and cinnamon tea. Sitting on a blue towel, Em pulled her legs toward her knit Christmas sweater and watched Japanese kids run around the park. On the towel beside her, her friends found common humanity in their shared struggle of Zoom class nightmares.

To her and this community, December was a month to let go of one's baggage. They celebrated *Bounenkai* to forget the year's regrets and misgivings, letting the wind cover footprints in the sand. *If only it were that easy*, Em thought. She wished a furnace could melt her metallic tight chest and filter away its thick impurities. She wished hot chocolate and a warm shot of sake could relax her dense bones.

Grounded beside the grass, Em looked for some solace in the bittersweet freedom of young adulthood. Yet this was easier said than done. Back home, an unemployment check waited on her bed next to a bachelor's degree diploma. She longed for a reprieve from a pandemic, from commencement, from *him*.

That's right, she thought. *Him*. Her fist tightened then loosened in fatigue and resignation. Sometimes his leather-black sweater floated by in a crowd, sending her into a fit of short, heaving breaths as she hurried away. Sometimes his tenor voice greeted her over the phone, and she would hold her breath and check the caller ID. Often she could forget, but other days her body betrayed her mind.

Em paused and recalled her therapist's words. *Just notice your physical sensations*, she would say, *and let them pass*. She inhaled for five slow seconds, then exhaled for seven. Her shoulder muscles slowly loosened, and sensation returned to her fingers. Some semblance of harmony was restored.

Until she saw Guieb in the distance.

The park's sea of grass melted into a bottomless void of grey static. A shattered television's deafening scream replaced the soft chit-chat of her friends. Shadows covered the green park around her, as a black hole of memories distorted spacetime.

All because Guieb had *his* eyes –his coffee-colored irises, his short black hair. Guieb morphed into her ex and towered over her, a poltergeist smashing the glass and walls of her insides, summoning back the screams, tears and hurled chairs of an imploding two-bedroom apartment.

Just notice the thoughts, Em told herself, *until they leave*. Nonetheless, Em began to smell her ex's cologne; she gagged as its sweet scent turned rancid. Guieb's torso stretched into her ex's tall frame, his eyes tapered downward like *those* eyes, with a light that lured her like an anglerfish's soothing, deadly trap.

Observe your surroundings. What do you hear?

Eyes closed, Em felt a light breeze caress her eardrum. Pinecones fell, bouncing and crunching against the concrete. Sunlight kissed her neck as clouds passed. A child squealed; a mother's voice chided back suppressing laughter.

Em opened her eyes. A floating brown leaf, delicate and resigned to the wind's yoke, oscillated before her.

Em didn't seem her usual self, Guieb thought. A thin watery layer hung around her hazel eyes, calm yet heavy like an ocean. When she turned to grab food, Guieb's legs instinctively rose and approached the utensils and napkins.

"Here you go," he said, holding out a pair of chopsticks.

"Aw, thanks dude," Em replied playfully.

"Any...time," Guieb replied, blushing. The skin around his eyes stretched into a smile, and Em blushed. From a distance, Guieb reminded her of a house cat curled under a sofa, sweet and affectionate yet sensitive and reserved. At least when she could detach him from her boyfriend, she found him good natured and genuine.

Lately—and this both stirred and frightened her—she felt warmth around him, as a father holds a child before a fireplace. For months, Em had an inkling that Guieb's feelings were more than platonic. She was not ignorant to his occasional glances her way after Buddhist services. Flustered, she found a corner to turn around, a crowd of friends to throw herself into. And yet a part of her longed to be watched, to be *seen*. She longed to be alone and also to be loved, and this bittersweet paradox lingered in her chest in those moments without her ex-boyfriend.

Guieb second-guessed himself when he heard Em's voice.

"By the way, you make some bomb Okinawan fried doughnuts."

Guieb dropped his spam musubi.

"You've been to the bazaar?" Guieb's cheeks turned pink.

"Oh yeah. My Mom's side of the family often volunteers there, and every year she mentions the Shimabukuros' hand-made fried doughnuts made from scratch. 'Their son carries after his Dad,' she always says. Come on, take a compliment Guieb, don't look at me like I just ate your firstborn! Well." Em paused. "It occurred to me that I'd never introduced myself to you."

Guieb fumbled for words. "You're Okinawan?"

"On my Mom's side! She's family friends with the Kameyamas—you know them don't you?"

"My parents volunteered around Gardena with them. And Esther Kameyama—Yeah, Auntie Esther, her!—she makes this rich brothy soki soba with soft spare-ribs—you've eaten it too? Wow—small world."

"It really is. Ah, I could smell her soba just thinking about it."

As the two conversed, they found their lives intersected Every summer as a child, Em visited her relatives in Okinawa. She bathed in its blistering sun, soaked the emerald ocean with her cousins, listened to her family banter in the *Uchinaa* dialect. So too did Guieb—but he remembered the sound of American warplanes blaring ominously in the sky, the megaphone speakers of locals protesting the military.

“Those afternoons catching bugs and dragonflies—they define my childhood, really. But when I go there now, there’s conflict and politics with Washington and Tokyo that I never saw then. And it makes me feel confused about being Japanese, Okinawan, and American all at once.”

“I know the feeling—trust me, I do,” Em replied. “And I hear the echoes of the Osprey aircraft right now, as I talk about it.”

Em relished this sense of connection with Guieb, deeper than names and church services. “It’s why I majored in Asian Studies in college,” Em continued. “I know, the humanities get this bad rep and all, but I got to do fieldwork in Okinawa. Despite the pandemic economy and loans I have to pay, I don’t regret that I explored something that mattered to me.

“If you don’t mind me asking,” Em continued, “what’s your major?”

Guieb froze. For a moment, the rice in his hands vanished, and he was lifted into a black ceiling that stretched infinitely. The next moment, he was pleading and supplicating at his father’s bedroom door until his hoarse voice could not sob. The food before him vanished into the void, and a naked child appeared lying in the fetal position. The boy turned toward him and there to Guieb’s horror was his mother’s tired gaze and wrinkled eyes--

“I’m—it’s, well—” Inside him, doors squeaked open and led to nowhere, nails screeched against metal, and shrill violin strings burst his brain and threatened to melt into liquid bile.

Don’t tell her... panic attack...

A hammer slammed against his chest, thumping and thumping, and violins shrieked—

A hand rested on his shoulder.

“I apologize,” Em interjected, her voice shaky. “I shouldn’t have asked, I know it’s been hard for a lot of people—”

Guieb swallowed. “I’m taking a break right now.” He looked into Em’s hazel eyes, sunny and gold yet with a tint of solemn blue. *I know*, her eyes spoke, *You don’t have to explain*. Warm cinnamon coarsed through his chest and soothed a stinging sensation within.

“I’m proud of you for taking that step.”

Guieb sighed, relieved and yet resigned. “Not everyone thinks it’s brave. In the eyes of my parents, it was pathetic. Going to therapy with them was like being stripped naked and mocked in public. And I don’t blame their judgment...”

Guieb’s voice trailed off. A hummingbird sang in the distance.

“Well,” Em spoke gently. “I’m not your parents.”

He nodded, and his lips relaxed to a thin smile. He replayed Em’s every word like smooth stones being picked up, surveyed, gently touched and caressed. Around them, people ate and laughed over the sweet whistling wind.

The words left Guieb’s mouth before he could take them back.

“You can take your time responding and there’s no pressure, but—” Guieb felt his heart drop. “Do you ever want to meet for lunch?”

Em paused for a second; to Guieb it felt like ten minutes. She took a deep breath in, and one back out. The wind caressed her black hair.

Before she could reply, her friends asked for help cleaning up.

“I—I’ll be right back,” she stammered, and strode toward the trash bins.

For as long as possible, Em faced away from Guieb and stopped. To notice the swaying pine trees. To notice the cranes in San Pedro hanging their tired steel necks.

She felt the knots in her chest. A male voice echoing the words “your fault, your fault, your *god-damn* fault!”. Girls with slimmer waists and smoother cheeks that she never had. Em let herself feel every cut, every sting, every burn of memory and heartache. Half of her screamed for her to run.

But she turned around. To look Guieb in the eye.

But Guieb had disappeared.

He had already started the engine of his Corolla when Em came knocking on the windshield. He froze in the driver’s seat, slowly rolling down the window.

“I never got your phone number,” Em said, “Or we could do Facebook messenger if you prefer—”

“Em, I’m so sorry,” Guieb said. “I wish I hadn’t asked.”

Em’s heart sank. “What do you mean?”

“I—I told you about school, and there’s other things going on, and I haven’t graduated college yet while you’ve been done since June—”

Guieb’s voice trailed off, and the two of them stared silently at the grass, turning dark green as the fading sun tilted westward.

“I—I should go,” he said, “and I’ve been a burden.”

Even as he drove off, Em’s eyes followed his car until it turned the corner.

It rained that night. Guieb went to his bathroom, undressed, and stood before his reflection.

He scanned the walls around him, grey and peeling and pathetic, yet scared of the touch of a paint brush. And as the walls longed for color, he yearned for love and pushed it away all the same.

Could I make just one brush stroke, careless to whether it’s clean or sloppy? No—not when I look like this. Standing before a mirror, he inspected his blemishes like an artist scrutinizing a nude portrait--the mole on his shoulder, a birthmark on his ribcage, the fat hanging from his sides. And he longed to repaint his pale naked form.

There was a knock on the entrance door.

Guieb pulled on sweatpants and a hoodie before stepping out of the bathroom. He squinted when he opened the door.

Two hazel eyes looked back.

Outside, the soft pitter patter of raindrops crescendoed into a shower. Inside the house a warm yellow light glowed, and the dining room smelled of steaming rice.

“I’m sorry to come unannounced,” Em began, staring at her brown rain boots. “Got your address from... Esther.” In her hands was a heavy aluminum pot. “I helped her make soki soba tonight, and we had a lot left over. I just wanted to... leave some to you.”

A long silence passed between them. Raindrops soaked Em’s wavering voice.

Guieb gazed at the sky, grey with blue patches, sunlight filtered by a somber haze. Slowly, he mustered the courage to look into Em, cold and seeking warmth, eager to lower the mask over her face. For the first time since he tearfully dropped his college classes, Guieb

realized that Em saw him, validated him, made him feel human. He also noticed the blue drop in Em's eyes were one tint lighter. A paint-stroke of gratitude, gold with a tint of blue, crossed along his chest.

“You're too kind, Em,” Guieb replied. “Come inside. You can warm up the soba while I fry the doughnuts.”

A Rebirth in a Professional Relationship by Jesse Tovar

Months ago, Effie, with actual tears in his eyes, wished why can't he find peace in being in the same space as his old professor from community college. (You might be wondering the same thing.) For an attempt at brevity, here's the backstory.

When Effie took Daniel Jose Ruiz for an online Graphic Fiction class, he felt really intimidated whenever he spoke to Professor Ruiz during office hours about his inquiries regarding the class. What didn't help with Effie's nerves was that he earned a C on his first essay. Ruiz did warn his students on his class syllabus that he's not an easy A, yet easy like Sunday morning. Once midterms arrived, Effie misread the instructions and thought he only had two hours to write six questions, with each question being two paragraphs long. After Effie turned in his midterm, he realized he was supposed to carve out two hours to complete the midterm, meaning he could have spent more than two hours if he wanted to. When midterms were returned, Effie was surprised he earned a B. After another B on his second essay, Effie finally earned an A on the final essay. A week after Effie turned in his nine question, two-paragraphs-each, final, Effie saw he earned a B in Graphic Fiction.

After Effie left community college as a transfer student to major in English at a university, all the English courses he took felt like a breeze in comparison to an English class taught by Daniel Jose Ruiz. Around the time Effie was in the Bachelor's program, Ruiz released his first book, *Coconut Versus*. On the day Ruiz read live at a Hollywood bookstore, Effie mustered up courage to head to Ruiz's reading, but Effie backed out once he arrived in Hollywood and got drunk at The Well instead. After Effie earned his BA and went through his Master's program in Rhetoric and Literature, it was only then those seminars felt as equal as a Daniel Jose Ruiz class, minus the six-to-nine questions to answer in at least two paragraphs.

Days after Effie earned his Master's degree, and months after becoming a host for author readings at a coffee roaster shop, Effie mustered up courage to reach out to Daniel Jose Ruiz. Ruiz released his second novel, *The Life of Jian Ciervo*. Effie wanted Ruiz to read at the roaster's brick-and-mortar, and was shocked when Ruiz agreed. Once the day of Ruiz's author reading arrived, Effie was frantically looking for another author to oversee the event, since Marcelo Hernandez Castillo was also booked by him to introduce Daniel Jose Ruiz. Effie was scared to be in the same room as Ruiz. Effie was still intimidated by Ruiz, even more so now that Ruiz is a selling novelist. No one came through for Effie. Effie drank a mix of espresso beans and whiskey. That still didn't calm him down. Effie sequestered himself in another room before the event started. Effie's first time being in the same space as Daniel Jose Ruiz after about five years was when the event officially started. Effie was shaky on stage (even though his face mask hid his full nervous face), and was suturing his words welcoming Castillo to the stage. Effie stood behind Marcelo Hernandez Castillo while Castillo gave his brief introduction to Ruiz. When Daniel walked up the stage, he hugged Effie. It was at that moment where a rebirth in a professional relationship took place. After the event, Effie was very comfortable being around Daniel and Marcelo. They took pictures. Effie appeared as having the time of his life in

pictures. Effie brought unity in bringing together an author whose memoir appeared as a prop in *Sex-and-the-City* and author who was his teacher. That's not an everyday thing.

Months later, Effie booked Daniel Jose Ruiz to read at another restaurant where Scott Noon Creley introduced Ruiz. Effie also arranged for Ruiz to appear in *The Chills at Will* Podcast. *Chills at Will* and *Nervous Ghost Press* then booked Ruiz to read at an author showcase. Who knows where Effie will take Daniel Jose Ruiz and other authors next.

The Art Of Becoming United With Oneself by Natalia Espinoza

October 2020

My mind is constantly swarmed by negative scenarios. *My heart beats faster.* I obsess over the imaginary event, playing it again and again, to find a solution to a problem I know does not exist. *My breath trips over itself.* And when I happen to somehow manage to get over the last crippling thought, there's always another one that's just as paralyzing. *I can't breathe.* It's funny how one thought can have the power to steal my joy. *My chest aches with every deep breath.* I feel on edge all the time. *I can't calm down.* I am living in constant fear that something horrific will happen at any moment. *One breathe at a time, in and out.* Nothing has happened yet, and here I am still miserable. Over nothing. *Tears form at the corners of my eyes.* I am frustrated, angry, sad, and overwhelmed. *My breathing calms.* Anxiety is debilitating my life. *And the cycle repeats...*

March 2021

The belief I held over the concept of therapy is simple; therapy is for the weak. But after the anxiety began to send me into a spiral of suffering for weeks, no matter how ashamed I felt for needing help, I could not prolong this anymore than I already had. I found it difficult to be vulnerable because I feared others' judgment. Yet after a couple sessions, I felt lighter. After a couple more, my therapist told me to "find things that made me happy." But the problem was, I spent many years running from this anxiety. I buried it using one thing after another. Until there was nothing left. I refused to choose myself in every aspect simply because I was afraid to face myself. But unfortunately, there was nowhere left to hide. I gradually learned that therapy is essentially shifting your way of thinking and purposely doing the things you fear the most. Although panic demanded to make itself seen and heard, I persevered through each minute. My days soon became filled with educating myself on anxiety, reading self-help books, mediating, journaling, and finding all the small things of life that made me happy along the way.

January 2022

I still have anxiety. It never went away. But it stopped being the central point of my life. Experiencing anxiety with such profound intensity was transformative. I did not like the person I use to be. So I decided to change parts of myself I did not like. In one particular therapy session, I remember complaining about how difficult it is to purposely change your ways. Instead of nodding and consoling me (the way I expected her to), she said "So? Life is Hard. You are a person who can handle hard things. Pick your Hard." I am not sure if it was what she said, or the way she said it, or maybe both, but for some reason, this stuck with me. From that day forward, I understood that no one was going to hand me the exact life I wanted. My journey of becoming the person I aspired to be is one I had to face alone. This is my responsibility. After all, it is *my* life.

One year and four months later, I have done exactly that. I now fully understand that self-love means having the courage to invest in your needs, no matter how challenging. I have never been more content with my life. *I am in love with who I am.*

To whomever is reading this: Life is as painful as it is beautiful. Pick your hard. From my experience, choosing yourself is one of the most powerful things a person can do.

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Thank You for reading!

Always stay creative.