

ENJAMBED



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SPECIAL THANKS TO
CSUDH English Department

and everyone who submitted their work to
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your creativity!

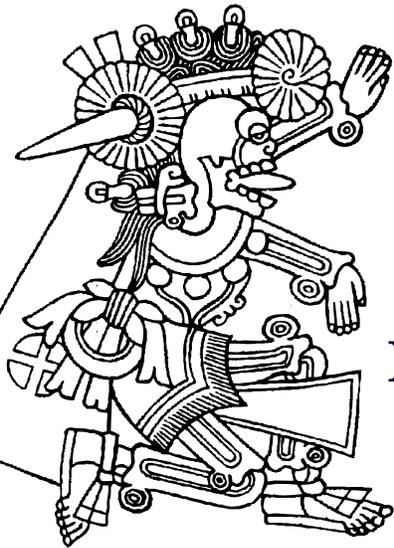
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ENJAMBED

SPRING 2024

MYTHS:

For the stories that inspire us
& those that bound us



“I liked myths. They weren't adult stories and they weren't children's stories. They were better than that. They just were.”

— Neil Gaiman, *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*

Department of English
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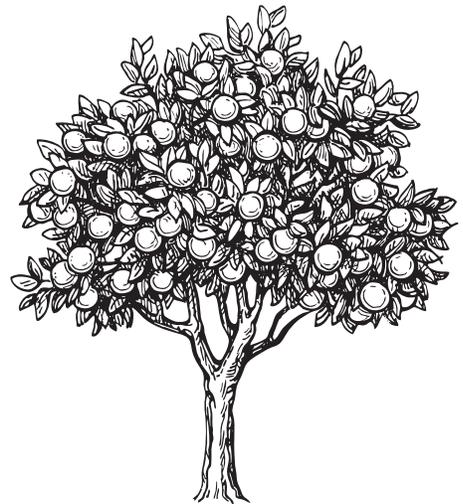
P O E T R Y



The Same Old Story

By Amirah Al Wassif

Every time I start to laugh
Somebody invents a new way of laughter
I run to the closest mirror
Burying my swollen face
Counting my disappointments on my fingers
No music in the background
Only the cracking of my bones
Do you hear it?
I see you on the walls
Your purple face waving
Like a curse
I put a hand on my right chest
Singing as if the world dissolved
Between my knees
In this story
Adam didn't eat the forbidden fruit
Just Eve who did
He was busy
Creating a sudden plot twist
God upstairs
Watching in silence
In the mirror
I see your favorite song
Turned into a worm
Crawling toward my belly
Your face
Without features
I ask you
Are you hungry?
You ask me
How did you survive?
And the rest is history.



To Bury a Curious Girl

By Amirah Al Wassif

When I was younger,
I stood on a mountain of pillows
With a brave decision to swallow a whole finger.
My father insulted me because I am curious.
All his life he wished to have a non-trouble baby whatever girl or boy.
My forefathers preferred to bury baby girls rather than put them
In carriages and sing them a lullaby.
I was born with a great motivation to scratch the sky upon my shoulders,
Crazy monkeys and heavy weights, I used to bake my grief each night
And through the daylight, while they're trying to sell me,
I spend my time calculating the distance between my gender and my awaited funeral.
When I took my first steps, my tribe circled around me like bees.
They approached figuring out that I have thighs and breasts.
They tucked me in the obedience pocket, they dwelled me in an iron cage.
They ate my wings, my ears.
When I was younger,
I crawled towards my father's shoulders,
I whispered, "how far does the world extend?"
He frowned and replied "just, look at the space between your legs."

Prayers from our House Roof

By Amirah Al Wassif

We were boiling bananas on the roof of our house.
Mother's laughter clutched the heart of my ears.
She was gossiping with a neighbor.
Mother was storytelling, sweet as poetry.
I loved to watch her tongue play the music of conversation.
They worked on their knees, their noses colored by wood smoke.
Boiling bananas was like a prayer
We whispered, sang with faces lifted up,
We made art through peeling bananas, slicing them into pieces to boil on
The fire, hoping for a kiss on a cheek
From a bird; an old hymn bathing our exhausted souls.
At the roof's edge, I overlooked a cavernous grotto,
And I saw God cooking for children like me.
I watched him prepare the dinner table for them in heaven,
A kingdom of mercy.
I stretched my arms to touch the magic,
Then ran to my mother, whimpering
That I saw God cooking for the children.
She smiled but continued talking with her neighbor.
I yelled at my mother for attention, pointing, but she just smiled.
I kept watching God make delicious food for one hundred children
Gathered on their knees around him, longing in awe.
I waved to them,
But they didn't notice me.
I imagined the smell from our rooftop carried a kind of hope.
Under my bare feet, bananas peels and two bowls, one for us
And the other for the hungry people
In our neighborhood.
It became a ritual ever since one hundred children had died of hunger,
One hundred innocent souls vanished.
I swear I saw God cooking for them, but no one believed me; they just kept smiling.

Nature is a Mother

By Jasmin Cruz

Nature is relentless
She will destroy
Nature is unsteady
She will regrow

Mother keeps us alive
She lives to love us
Mother lets us go cold
She isn't shy to show her wrath

Her gifts in fruit and shelter abundant
We learn to survive poisons she disguises as nutrition
Her winds and rains devastate
We lack stability

We hurt the one who loves us
She takes independent endeavors as insult
Why does she hurt us if she loves us
She is patient, tenacious, frightening



Bitter

By Jasmin Cruz

I bite into you
It stings
My eyes swell with tears

Tacos for flavor
Lemonade for thirst
Honey for sore throats

On your own,
You're too strong

Dilute yourself
So I can handle
Your place in this life

Zest for pastries
Seeds for the soil
Slice in half for cleaning

I need you
In every aspect of this life
You keep me healthy

I give you something
To work for

Gemma

By Florencia Bravo

Can you imagine being the unloved wife?
He wrote poems about the other woman,
Lovely sonnets.
She was his guide, his muse, his inspiration—
But he did not write about you.

Your marriage was one of a long-ago promise,
While you were both children, your parents matched you up.
In his exile, when the darkness of night came,
Did he think of her?

Years in the future, you will be cast aside,
Forgotten about.

Unloved, unwanted, insignificant!
How could he do this to you?
You, the mother of his children!
Everyone knew of his betrayal and your failure.
Shameless, selfish man!

They will both be famous.
People will talk about his undying love for her—
Who was this Beatrice?
What was so special about her?
Why did Dante love a woman he only met twice?

Your heart may be bitter, Gemma, but rest in peace,
Knowing he suffered over his own creation,
For he can never have her
Not even in death.



Good Friday

By Florencia Bravo

It was Good Friday,
That he first saw you, Laura.
Beautiful, modest, perfect. No one else compared—
And how could they?

Did you ever notice him, Laura?
The shadow that was not yours,
The ghost that haunted you,
The tortured soul that loved you,
The man who wrote about you! Only you.

Did you always feel his overbearing,
Obsessive presence—
A weight, a noose around your neck.
He drowned you in his sea of sonnets.

But Laura, you couldn't possibly understand.
If Aphrodite is the goddess of love, then, he was the god of heartbreak!
You could not be with him,
And his lovely words never could have convinced you.

Laura, did you pity poor Petrarch?

For even though he watched you, wrote about you,
Obsessed over you,
And fantasized about you,

The idol he created in his mind, didn't exist.
You were mortal.

You were gone,
And he, he was alone.

Las Velas

By Gabriel Ramos

We light it when it's dark.
We light it when we are scared.
We light it through celebrations.
We light it for memorials.

This wax stick may not be significant
But I realized how important it was when my mom passed away.
Marigolds usher the souls onto the other side.
Pero las velas guían a los espíritus a buscar la luz.

It was a dark time of my life.
My first true love, my comfort, my heart, my soul
It all vanished and slipped through my fingers.
I was there watching her, holding her, comforting her.

For two days, she was not eating or drinking.
Mama was not able to open her eyes or talk.
When I was finally able to see her, I knew it was for the last time.
I walked in and spoke to her, holding back tears.

Once she heard my voice, her eyes opened and she spoke.
We shared a wholesome moment together until her last minutes.
My world, my comfort, my walls came tumbling down.
The novenario was supposed to bring comfort but I felt alone.

Despite being around loved ones, despite the comforting words,
I felt alone and lost. A family friend handed me a candle.
Las velas guían a los espíritus para buscar la luz,
Para buscar la paz.

I lit the candle and placed it next to la foto de mi mama.
Seconds later, my chest felt like it opened up.
I felt a cold breeze, and I was able to breathe.
I felt a hand on my back, but no one was there.
No one physically was there, but I know my mom's spirit was there.

Las velas that were lit up helped her.
Las velas helped me.
We both found our way to the light and felt serenity.
Las velas bring comfort, joy, light, and reassurance.

Las velas son para siempre.



An Unknown Black Hole Stares Me in the Face

By Natalia Espinoza

Infinite possibilities,
none of them known,
all of them likely disastrous.
What will happen next?
a dark presence feeds my anxiety,
thoughts race in my brain on a never-ending loop,
How to plan for something I don't know?
face to face with a black hole of change,
the magical array of colors outside of it,
bright and alluring,
you would almost want to enter to feel it's enchantment,
yet the black hole would swallow me,
so i could not escape,
the thought of being trapped in limbo
makes my breath stagger in and out—
throat closing—
eyes filling with tears—
my mind suffocated by the fear
that maybe uncertainty is Hell.

Absent

By Natalia Espinoza

You and I stand at the mirror,
staring at each other's features.

We have the same almond eyes with manchitas at the ends,
we have the same chinito curls that frizz when we brush it,
we have the same button nose and
small lips which spread widely when we smile
which pronounce our dimples.

We share the same face.
Yet you know nothing about me.

I was your little angel and now you are my haunting spirit,
the one who taught me how to make a remote control car,
but isn't here to teach me how to drive,
the one who introduced me to Fast & Furious at the young age of five,
but isn't here to see the latest ones with me,
the one who played with me after homework,
but isn't here to see me graduate college,
the one who loved me,
and the one who left me.

I see you in myself as I look in the rearview mirror,
and wonder if when you look in your mirror,
Do you see me too?

You got to start over,
while I am left unable to understand
how I—an extension of you—
could be untethered—
forced to float away
never to see you again.

Now I walk around protecting my heart—
not letting anyone in,
so I can't be hurt by another version of you—
scared they will leave me too.

To Unexpected Flowers

By Natalia Espinoza

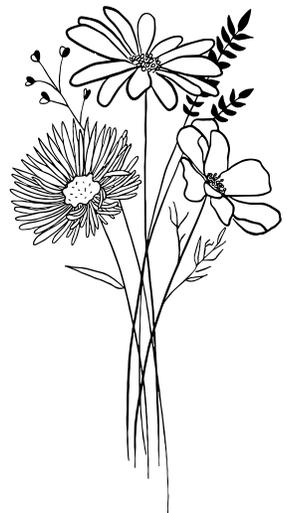
I didn't expect to see him today,
he walked up with a bouquet in hand,
sunlight roses and passionate transvaal daisies.

We stare intensely,
glistening eyes that say an unspoken 'I love you',
entanglement of our hands,
touch speaking comfort and affection,
sweet words pour as if we are the first two people that have experienced
a love as beautiful as ours.

Although thorns have pricked us,
the stems picked from the root of the earth,
are our foundation—
buds blooming,
souls intertwined.

Our love is petals expanding,
blossoming with each passing day.

Though our petals may fall and wither,
I still see the sunlight, a fractured kaleidoscope
of warm yellow when my eyes are closed
and I know our flowers will continue to grow.



White Walls

By Izzie Gonzalez

I empty my baggage at the entrance of this new refuge
Taken in to sanctuary.
Every so often the margins of the room I am confined in
Carry the weight of the world within me
And every passing moment the clock ticks and tocks
Where feelings grow numb and the door cannot be locked...
Though it always felt like a thousand knives stabbed my back all consecutive
Ceasing at the final moment- concentric cycles of headaches- the curtain is drawn
Performance is ready- I cling to what is left of my insides
Danger danger danger- dagger dagger dagger- the final moment before the healing kicks
In it I realize that there is no way out but to comply with my intuition
It guides me-
I had read earlier that year
That Athena, Goddess of Wisdom, had guided Odysseus on his journey
Triumph over everything that stood in his way:
A swift, victorious return home- I dream of Athena- where wisdom
Transcends the abyss the darkness and sadness and sorrow-
Directions taken- she draws a map of stars in my room-
An illuminated ceiling- I question my existence-
Though at great cost- and how did I become so different?
I did not ask for this and would never wish it upon my worst enemy
But time goes by ever so slowly never ending never ceasing always driving
Forward- Sinister savage smiles from them all!
Whiplash!
I feel my spine!
Not bloodied psychically but internally- And the master nurses and
Physicians A cruel fate A cruel practice- Malice- And I dance gracefully
Imagining that I have been rescued- But the next morning- it is week twenty-six
According to my count- suddenly the date changes and so does the time breaking
Every ounce of sanity I had within- My pillow is wet! I cry- ashamed, lost,
Hanging in direly for life- trying to kill the numbness that penetrates-
And I am still in the same place with the white walls towering around me
Sip of water cup of plastic water of life? Anodyne or positioned poison?
I wonder if I will ever be free... If I too, will make it home.



Is Anyone Perfect & Nobody's Perfect

By Isaiah Sepulveda

Is Anyone Perfect?

I might not be perfect,

But at least I'm fighting to change.

Happiness is a blessing,

But it can also be a curse.

I used to be that happy kid,

And I'm fighting to be that same happy person I used to be once more.

Nobody's Perfect

Life isn't meant to be easy,

But it's not impossible.

You might be afraid of what's ahead of you...

But if you don't fight to change,

You'll never find perfection in an imperfect world.

Every day is your best, so treat it as if it's brand new.

Grape Vines

By Daniel Galindo

The sun rises, it shines ever so brightly
In the back I can hear yelling and shouts directed towards me
I'm hit in the back by a grape
My moment of imagination is snapped by reality

The vines are loose
A whip from it can feel like a burn
I walk briskly as the heavy dirt burns my feet
Adjusting myself so I don't get overheated

The green grapes look tasty
But as I cut and cut, the fruit flies, mice, and snake make it grotesque to look at
Yelling and foul words are thrown at me as I continue to cut
The sounds of a hummingbird flapping takes my mind off it

The heat makes me nauseous as I fall to my knees
Thinking, thinking, when will the day end
Maybe I was destined for this life, the migrant life
But I dissociate for a bit so as to avoid the reality of the current situation

Thinking, what was life like back then
Hunters, Gatherers, the way of living before colonialism and imperialism
The stories and myths that I heard from my parent's, their parent's, and their parent's before
What did they do when they didn't know what to do?

My ear hurts suddenly as the vine whips me
But it feels better though, as the shouting and yelling go mute
Wondering, how did the great civilizations of the Americas fall?
If they were still around, what would my life be like now?

Would I still be a migrant worker?
Picking and working seasonally to help my family even when they're supposed to help me
The grapes here are too ripe I can't even enjoy the flavor of it
As I eat on the side, I throw them out of my mouth as I accidentally swallowed a fruit fly

Grape Vines (Continued)

By Daniel Galindo

Passing cars drive at the edge of each row of the grapevines
Driving somewhere anywhere but here
The yearning to drop everything and leave because anywhere is better than here
But I remember my situation, I can't

Even if I did, where will I go?
The supervisor always passes through when we eat our lunch
We eat within the vine yards to avoid any confrontation or outside our cars, standing, so it
appears like we're not slacking off
Figure they'd offer us some water or a canopy for shade but there aren't any

Huh?...People actually eat grapes? It's pretty gross when you realize how they're picked,
Stocked, and processed in the market
So much has happened from the days of the Olmecs, Mayans, Aztecs.
To see us, the descendants live in today's world with occupations that belittle us
God, to have been born in another time

Welp, leave it to the Colonizers and the new world ideology
I'm stuck here
A kid's worst nightmare is to be an adult when they're not
Ah, these grape vines, they're all I need to get me out of here

The Withering Sight of Envy

By Kristine Lei Villaraza

Every boy and girl can be seen growing sprouts from their bodies.
Short and tall, small and big.
Each sprout, growing at its own pace.
As they get older the sprouts slowly blossom to its own unique flower.
Blues to pinks, fluff to rough, and different shapes.
Each flower holding and representing an alluring attribute and happy element of their lives.
I admire the blooms of each person I see.
As the flowers they contain glows endlessly.
Compared to mine, few and puny.
I curiously plucked a petal off a flower from a man, who turned out to be a family man.
A loving wife, lively children and a simple but happy and complete family I witnessed.
Another petal I plucked from a friend and the vision I saw was her freedom of her dreams.
She traveled, pursued her interest and simply had the control of her own fate.
Another had time.
The non pressuring journey towards their desire, the non-existing obligations.
The time to do the things they wanted.
Unlike this ticking clock of mine.
A cheerful relationship that displayed before me.
This next petal showed a love, any hopeless romantic wish to have.
These sights I continue to see, I can't help but laugh.
As I compare them all to my not so vivacious blooms.
With no hope in reaching such similar vibrance.
Do not judge, as it is not like I have no positive remembrance.
It is simply the course of human nature, triggering sentiments.
Insecurities, fears and emotions arise from the complexity of this unspoken desire.
During all of this, an unnoticeable condition that lingeringly occurs.
The withering of my flowers that seem to have no cure.
Why have they lost their liviness? I pondered.
Did my watering source of stored happiness no longer hold value?
As I unclearly resolved the matter, the daily routine of plucking petals stopped.
Over time my flowers begin blooming again.
My sole attention was put in the preservation of my flowers, to the point where I stopped caring about others.
And that is what struck my realization.
This unknown obsession is what caused my own blooms to slowly perish.
The loss of time, attention and self love that I onced cherished.

The Withering Sight of Envy (Continued)

By Kristine Lei Villaraza

Should all have been only focused on mine.
Instead of resentfully watching others' shine.
Therefore this discontentment of one's own flowers should not be a reason to look away.
Because if you do, it would be no wonder why your once colorful flowers have turned gray.
What is this conflicting emotion I cannot clearly describe.
It occurs so unconsciously, unintentionally and is difficult to identify.
Envy.
That sounds about right.



Belief

By David Kirby

No harvest this year
Our discretion is unclear
Their rules are unjust

Fear heavenly wrath
Constant fear of aftermath
They watch over us

Our mythology
Science and technology
The gods of the gaps

Precipitation
Not of Zeus's creation
Gravity perhaps

They worshiped science
Partnership of reliance
Different in name

Now we understand
A new devotion, unplanned
It is all the same

Attitude

By Catari Martin

I wake up, the birds are singing all over the world, church bells are ringing.
It's a new day, a new beginning, my heart is beating, and thoughts are steaming.
Mind is brewing of clarity and feeling, and
Every day is a new birth of healing and making life better with a clearer vision.
I am alive, I am alive and awake inside and
Open to a new day dawning full of possibilities and not asleep and yawning
Because God is good and I'm still breathing.
With faith and hope I say yes because it's free to invest and it doesn't cost a dime
Because today is your time.
So, open up your mind and go to that place of love and joy where fear is gone, and
Life is a song of positivity and a mind of creativity.

An Introduction to the Heart

By Camryn Dorsey

Venus's offered hand of love is no kind thing to me.
Her open heart, an instrument of hurt as stinging as the blade,
Cuts me deep, and opens wide for the world to enter in glee.
Jupiter, the law of heaven, in all his wisdom, forbade
The coveting of fairest face, in marriage you were made
Yet still your wanton golden eye has marked me like a devotee,
For love of death has been outmatched by that sea foam mermaid,
Whose kiss, as supple, smooth as peaches, a riot stirs in me.
The arrow of Cupid, as cruel as my mistress's smile,
Has pierced my armor thusly and turned this miser's heart.
The king to the crusaders, chasing glory found guile
And in blond tresses, a hold I do not dream to thwart.
In lover's carnage, I plead not mercy for I do not know its name.
Urgency, dear love, is the folly of mortals, I pray you hold the flame.



From the River

By Kaitlyn Manoogian

The two walked beside Lethe
in all of its shimmering wet
and the blades of grass
and specks
of dew held their heaven.

Goddesses and gods disguised
unconcealment in the river.
Their tears—the filler of its morgue.

The two loved each other
and fetched fevers to their temples.
Desires heedless.
Burdens boiling.

Unconcealment intuited
by goddesses and gods.
“Renunciate, and you will be free.”

The river—the answer to let them be unmindful.
“Drink the river unwept!”
Movement wept them wet.

They reached for each other.
Last drop labored
and labor done.
Their fingers touched.
Eyes assembled.

Their heaven's
dew once built
now fled.

Persephone

By Mya Gibson

They told me I was too quiet,
so I was loud and they didn't like that.

I wore too many florals,
so I wore skulls and they shivered in intimidation.

My smile was too nice,
but then my eyes were too cold.

Why hate me one way,
but also hate the other?

Were my blood-stained lips too much for you?
Would you prefer a cute blush instead?

Doesn't matter now
I am the Queen of the Dead.



dilemma

By Ashley Smith

my negative thoughts
used to keep me warm
they are gone, so I'm cold once again

butterflies and intimacy

By Ashley Smith

He held my face.

“I’m scared.”

His body relaxed and he immediately embraced me. “You shouldn’t have to feel like that anymore. I’m not going anywhere and even if you wanted me to -- I’d put up a great fight.” We were in sync with our laugh. Our tears fell down together. Our lips desperately wanted to press against each other. I pulled his face to mine and if I ever doubted his love -- I was a fool. A scared fool.

His hands ran through my braids. I began to believe that he was inside of each knot, that he was a part of the 6 hour process, like he was a part of me. I felt his tongue graze across mine. His kisses traveled down my neck and I began to play with his hair. He picked me up and he carried me to his bedroom.

Later that morning, we were tied up in his blankets. I touched his lips with my fingers. I felt the security in us just as much as within myself. I watched the sunrise while laying on his chest. I heard the birds chirping and his heart beating. I saw butterflies fluttering outside and felt them nesting within my womb.

I was every bit of him as he was of me.



i heard the echo of her voice

By Ashley Smith

the rain is pouring
profusely
in the background,
the sound of music is playing
faintly
and I'm not satisfied.
there are closet mirrors on the sides of me
and I
am afraid to seek the eyes
to seek the approval of
the woman sitting beside me.
i'd like to hear from her,
but
what if she doesn't reciprocate my aching
desire
to be desired?
i sneak a glance
(how daring I must be!)
to seek the eyes
to seek the approval of
the woman sitting beside me.
our eyes lock and I begin to
feel
a sense of warmth
of familiarity
glancing back at me.
i whispered "hi"
and all she could do was whisper it back to me.
"oh, how excited i am to speak with you
- "speak with you."
i turned my head in curiosity
at the woman sitting beside me.
she couldn't speak without me,
but I needed her to need me.
i leaned in closer,
as she did the same.
her brown eyes encompassed the darkest shade of brown
almost sweet – like chocolate.

i heard the echo of her voice (continued)

By Ashley Smith

there were tiny moles
sporadically
planted around those brown eyes,
those inviting lips,
and her cheeks which hid a graceful smile.
“i love you”
- “love you”
suddenly, I felt myself falling into a
pond full of freedom
full of expressions
and I kept repeating
to this woman
the woman sitting beside me.
“i love you and i love you more.”
- “love you more.”
i became enamored,
i was in love with
i was in love with
the echo of her voice.

SHORT STORY
&
MEMOIR



The Boy & the Blanket

By John Zorb

"Have you ever been scared?" said the little boy to his baby sister.

Little Paulina replied to her big brother Johnny, "I get scared all the time."

Paulina showed her older brother Johnny to the window outside.

"Do you see outside the window, Johnny?" Johnny replied to his sister, "Yes Paulina, it is raining outside."

With her humongous, heartfelt hazel eyes, Paulina looked at Johnny like she had seen a ghost. "Johnny, it is not just raining. I hear noises. I hear clicks and clangs, bangs and booms, zippity doos, and zap zap zooms!"

Johnny replied to his baby sister, "Paulina, oh my goodness! You must be really scared. Paulina, your rosy-red cheeks have turned white as winter's snow. It is just thunder and lightning, Paulina."

Johnny got quiet, and he whispered into his baby sister's ear, "Paulina, can I tell you what I do when the storms of life start to happen?"

Paulina anxiously replied to her big brother Johnny, "Yes, please!"

"Ok, Paulina, you are my baby sister. I love you so much. I will now share with you how I deal with the storms of life. I will give you a blanket, but first please close your eyes and hold out your arms. I want you to dream."

Paulina was confused, then asked her brother Johnny, "Have you not given it to me yet? I am closing my eyes. I can't feel the blanket."

Johnny replied to Paulina, "Why yes, sweet baby sister, this is a special blanket. Unlike any other blanket in the whole wide world, it is invisible."

Paulina replied to Johnny, "I am starting to get angry. I still cannot see or feel this special blanket you have given me; maybe this blanket is not so special after all."

Johnny responded to his baby sister, "Paulina, I assure you that this blanket is in fact real. The only requirement is that you must continue to dream. Paulina, before you decide to stop believing that this blanket is real. I want you to close your eyes one last time. I want you to dream as you have never dreamt before. Paulina, can you see the blanket now?"

Paulina replied, "Oh my word, Yes...Yes! I can see it; it is beautiful, oh my goodness," she shouted with joy, "this blanket is so soft! This blanket is as soft as a thousand threads of tenderness, woven with the finest fabrics of faith."

Johnny replied to his baby sister, "Yes! Yes Paulina, tell me more."

Paulina exclaimed with excitement, "This blanket covers me like chocolate covers strawberries!"

Johnny replied to his baby sister, "Keep dreaming Paulina, keep going; please tell me more about your special blanket."

Paulina then told her big brother Johnny that the special blanket he had given to her could be everything and anything she wanted it to be.

The blanket was the calm against Paulina's storm, the comfort against her anxieties, the protection against her bullies, and the permission to accept unconditional love and warmth on the coldest of emotional winter days. From that day forward, Paulina and her special blanket were best friends. Wherever Paulina went the blanket went too. Paulina took her blanket to the movies. Paulina took her blanket to the playground. Paulina took her blanket on vacation. Paulina even took her blanket into the shower with her.

Paulina is now all grown up, not a little girl anymore. Her big brother John, no longer a boy, is a man. John picked up the phone and called his sister Paulina. Paulina answered, "Hey Johnny, how is it going big brother?"

Johnny replied, "Rather good. I called to check in on you Paulina. I know you are grown up, a momma now, having a family and children of your own. You will always be my baby sister Paulina."

Paulina responded, "I know, I love you too, Johnny."

"Today was the first time I gave the kids their own special blankets. I told my daughter and son the same story you told me when we were kids."

Johnny got quiet. He asked his sister over the phone, "Paulina, what about your special blanket? Do you still have it?"

Paulina paused, then responded to Johnny, "Of course I do big brother. Do you still have your special blanket too?"

Johnny then responded, "As long as I continue to dream my blankets of life will be there for me, whenever and whatever I need them to be. I love you, baby sister. Never stop dreaming..."

Los Duendes Vienen de Noche

By Florencia Bravo

“Los duendes vienen de noche...” Soledad paused for dramatic effect before continuing, “what exactly are duendes, you may ask? Well, I haven’t seen one, but those who have say that they are little men with pointed ears and sharp teeth. Sometimes, they have tiny little beards to go with their wispy white hair. They may look harmless, but one must not let down their guard around them. Some people say that los duendes only come to steal human treasures, but those who know the truth know that they come to take away naughty children.”

Six little faces looked up at her with pure horror as she continued her tale, “In fact, they’ll steal anyone who will fall for their tricks, and they’ll grind up their bones to use for their potions and brujería.”

Soledad’s little sister, Sara, swallowed audibly. The other children were deadly quiet, and the room was filled with heavy suspense as they waited anxiously for the rest of her story. Soledad and Sara’s neighbor, Fernando, smirked in Soledad’s direction, amused with her acting and the genuine terror of the children. Soledad looked away from him, trying to ignore the blush that now covered her cheeks. They were the oldest of the group, with Soledad being fifteen and Fernando turning seventeen next month.

Soledad thought about when they were children. Fernando had told her all the scary stories that she now knew by heart. In between their bike rides and campouts, he had made up all sorts of fantastical tales and additionally passed on the ones his older cousins had told him. She let herself sink into the past for a moment before focusing her attention back on the children. They had gathered their younger siblings and cousins in her house’s dim living room. The younger children had been complaining about their boredom all day, and the harsh weather had not let up to allow them to play outside. As the oldest of the group, Fernando and Soledad had promised to keep the little ones entertained while the adults went out to their weekly church meeting. Looking back now, Fernando was the one who had actually volunteered. Soledad had just been roped into his crazy idea.

Soledad caught a glimpse of her reflection now in the small mirror that hung on the wall across from her in the dark family room. She looked like one of the fortune tellers that came with the traveling circus every year. Her costume made her look eerie in the darkness. She had swiped a lacy black table runner from her mom’s cabinets and wrapped it around her head. The make-shift veil cast her face in shadow as the candlelight illuminated her dark eyes ominously. Oh yes, she and Fernando had gone all out. Only one of the lamps in the large

room was lit. Fernando had inconspicuously taken his position right by the light switch on the other side of the room when she had first started telling the scary story. He was ready to flick it off when she spoke the code phrase they had agreed upon earlier. She briefly looked his way. Fernando was calmly leaning about the opening of the living room, his lanky figure towering over the sitting children. His arms were crossed, patiently waiting for his cue.

The kids were anxiously squirming now, eager to hear the rest of her tale.

Soledad's lips curved up slightly, and she lowered her voice to a whisper, "I know the whole truth about los duendes, you see. Some are peaceful little fairy-like creatures who only wish to collect shiny things. You mustn't be afraid of them. No, you must fear the ones who use promises of riches and candy to trick you. They steal children from their parents, trick pretty women into following them, and drive men mad! Listen now, for it is very important you pay attention to this: los duendes will use anything to get you to go to Faerie Land with them. They will promise you many things, but they will tear you apart once you are there!"

Little squeals of terror rang out through the room as Soledad sighed, feigning sadness, "I knew someone who thought that duendes and faeries were just a myth, a silly old story her abuela told her so she would behave. I warned her not to question their existence, but she was stubborn and naughty. Naughty children are easier to steal, you know; that's why los duendes go after them and those who say they don't believe in them. Anyways, one day my friend came to me so excited and happy because she had been visited by un duende. He had promised her many treasures and riches if she went to the land of faeries with him. He promised her that she could bring anything back to the human world so long that it would fit into her basket. I warned her that he was tricking her, that she needed to be careful and protect herself with iron or silver. But she would not listen to me."

"What happened to her?" Martina, the youngest of all the cousins, exclaimed, her little face twisted with concern.

Soledad made sure her expression was very serious, "She went to sleep in her bedroom that night, and when her parents went to wake her up in the morning, she was gone. I never saw her again."

"There's no way they took her away!" Santiago eyed Soledad suspiciously, his tone accusatory.

She stood quickly, surprising the children with the sudden movement and causing the coffee table to shake, "Santi, do not doubt their existence! They prey on those who do not believe they are real!"

The eight-year-old's face wavered, his brows furrowing with worry. Soledad looked around

the dark room and met Fernando's dark amber eyes once more, "They may even be here now; we must be careful!"

"How will we know?" Some of the children asked in unison.

Soledad raised a finger to her lips, "There are signs we can look out for..." she tilted her head, "the tinkling of bells and coins, the soft pitter patter of feet... if you smell cinnamon in the air."

The kids looked around the room nervously as she continued, "They can only travel when the moon is at its fullest and brightest... a full moon... just like the one in the sky tonight!"

Fernando flicked off the light at the same time that Soledad blew out the candles below her. She quickly reached into her jacket pocket and shook a little pouch full of coins. Fernando took out the cinnamon powder and gathered it into the palm of his hand, blowing it to spread the scent of the spice throughout the room. The room erupted into chaos as their siblings and cousins cried out in fear.

"We've come to take away the naughty children!" Fernando yelled out in a gruff, spooky voice, cupping his hands around his mouth to give off an echoey effect.

Fernando and Soledad let the children scramble for a couple more seconds before they turned all the lights back on, laughing as the younger kids caught on to their trick.

"You guys are mean!" Sofia huffed.

"That's what you get for complaining all day," Fernando retorted, "now you'll think twice before saying that you are bored."

Santiago glared at them before stomping off into the kitchen. Some of the other kids were less angry and more relieved that los duendes hadn't really come to take them away. Soledad and Fernando met each other's eyes, and they laughed again, knowing their little cousins and siblings had learned their lesson.

"This is just like the time you told us about el Viejo de la Bolsa!" Mari cried out, "I didn't sleep for a week!"

"C'mon don't be mad," Fernando was trying to stifle his laugh now, "why don't we play hide and seek? You and Sofia can be the seekers."

Mari's eyes lit up, and she seemed to quickly forget all about the older kids' prank. She nodded with excitement at the thought of her favorite game. Soledad rolled her eyes at the little girl's quick change of mood. She glanced up at the clock that was hung up above the old boxy television. Their parents would be home in about twenty or thirty minutes. A game of hide and seek could keep the little ones entertained for just a little while longer. Besides, a fun

game would perhaps make all the children forget about her spooky story. If they had nightmares tonight, Soledad and Fernando would be at fault.

“Alright, are you guys ready?” Fernando asked, a wide grin on his face. Soledad liked his smile. In fact, she liked everything about him. She didn’t want to like him, though. This was an unrequited love. She was certain that he only thought of her as a neighbor, or worse, maybe he considered her to be another little sister. Soledad, the girl with frizzy hair that lived across the street. The girl that he climbed trees with in the summer. She couldn’t find it in herself to blame him, though. When she thought about Fernando, he wasn’t just the young man she had a crush on; he was still the same Fernando who accompanied her to the corner store when she wanted candy. The same Fernando that would lend her his spare change to buy said candy. She watched him now as he brushed his dark hair back behind his ears. It wasn’t quite summer yet, but the days were growing hotter and wetter every second.

Mari and Sofia huddled in a corner of the now brightly lit living room. All the children were looking at her with some disdain; even her sister, Sara, looked at her with a betrayed expression. Soledad felt a little guilty now. They always forgave Fernando more easily than they could forgive her. After a moment of hesitation, Mari and Sofia whispered something to each other and looked back at the older girl.

Sofia nodded, “Listas.”

The other children began to scramble in all directions as the seekers began to count. Soledad took her time to look at the different places for her to hide in. She wasn’t little anymore, so hiding in any cabinet would no longer work. She thought about trying to squeeze underneath a bed, but she wasn’t too sure that she wouldn’t get stuck. Finally, she tip-toed her way to the kitchen just as Fernando was entering it from the opposite hall. She placed her hands on her hips, “What are you doing here?”

“Same as you, Sole” he hissed back.

“Well, I was here first!”

He scoffed, “You wish!”

“I’m serious, Fernando, get out!”

He stepped closer to her, and she was forced to tilt her head back in order to maintain eye contact with him. She huffed and looked away, hoping she could hide in the pantry before he took that hiding spot.

“I’m older. I get this spot.”

Soledad snorted, “But I’m a lady. Be a gentleman, and let me have it.”

Fernando raised his eyebrows, “Hmm...”

Soledad sighed, “C’mon!”

Fernando’s lips slowly stretched into a lazy smile, and his hooded eyes glimmered mischievously, “I’ll let you have it for a kiss.”

Gasping, Soledad barely managed to choke out a strangled sound that barely resembled a “No!”

“Vamos, Sole, one kiss, and you’ll get the spot,” he smirked, “don’t act like you don’t wanna.”

Soledad looked away, wishing that she couldn’t feel the heat in her expression. She turned away, flustered, “Fine, you have it.”

Fernando was silent for a moment, but his voice stopped her before she left the kitchen, “I was just joking Sole... you can have it. I know a better place anyways.”

Soledad whipped her head back just in time to see Fernando replace the dismayed expression on his face with a fake happy one. She tried to call after him, even raising her hand to stop him, but Fernando quickly left the kitchen before she could say one word.

“Ready or not, here we come!”

Soledad had little time to process what had just happened with her childhood friend. She flew into the pantry, quietly closing the door behind her. The little room was cool and dark. She could smell the sugar cookies and facturas that her mom had bought at the bakery this morning. The scent of spices also faintly lingered in the air. She knew that if she stepped a little bit deeper into the pantry, she would be able to smell the dried oregano and basil from her family’s garden. Soledad pressed her ear to the closed door, hoping to hear her little sister and cousin if they decided to walk into the kitchen.

The minutes seemed to stretch by lazily. How long had she been in here? Finally, when she was about to peek her head out of the pantry, she heard the faint tapping of small feet. They seemed to be so close. She was starting to second-guess her hiding spot. It seemed so obvious now.

The footsteps were growing even closer now. They must be in the kitchen. Soledad sucked in a breath, hoping they wouldn’t be able to hear her. Just as the footsteps seemed to be right outside the pantry, Soledad felt something pinch her arm. The ever-so-faint tinkling of a bell seemed to come from inside the pantry.

“Ouch!” She cried out, cradling the injured spot on her arm.

She turned, squinting in the pantry’s dark abyss, unable to make out what was around her. She felt another pinch on her opposite arm, and she jumped back, hitting her head against the door.

“Who’s in here?”

There was no response, only another pinch. Soledad blindly waved her arms around her, feeling nothing but air. She suddenly remembered that Santi had stomped into the kitchen after she had told her story.

“Santiago, I’m sorry! Is that you? Don’t be mad at me, it was Fernando’s idea!”

She shrieked as she felt another twinge of pain on her leg, “Santi, that’s enough! Stop it!”

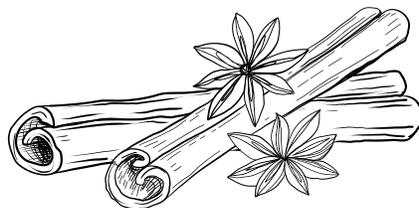
Just as she felt another pinch on her shoulder, her blood ran cold when she heard the strangest little laughter. Suddenly, little fingers began pinching her all at once. Her arms, her legs, even her neck and scalp. Soledad screamed and tried to open the door of the pantry, but she was locked in with the little maniacal voices.

The smell of cinnamon had grown obnoxiously strong in the past few minutes. She felt like she was choking on the odor of the spice.

“Please!” She begged, “You’re hurting me!”

The pinching and laughter continued as Soledad pounded on the door, crying out for help. It was a long while before Fernando finally swung open the door. Concern was clearly marked on his face as he pulled her out of the pantry and into the bright light of the kitchen. Soledad tumbled into his arms, crying hysterically about the little fingers that pinched her. The kids came out from their hiding spots. They had heard the commotion and gathered in the kitchen, Santiago included. Their faces were pale as Fernando tried to make sense of Soledad’s blubbering. He tried to comfort his friend, wiping her tears, and brushing her hair out of her face, but all his soothing words dried up when he saw the tiny little red marks that were up and down Soledad’s arms and legs. He curiously looked into the dark pantry, thinking he may have heard strange, ominous laughter echoing from the darkness. His limbs stiffened when he smelled the strong odor of cinnamon in the air.

Later, when the adults returned, he swore that he saw several small pairs of twinkling eyes staring back at him from the dark emptiness of the pantry...



Youth

By Daniel Galindo

The cool air of Spring breezes by as the workers run in the heat of the day. The land is filled with heavy dirt, trash, and trunks of vine trees that can easily pass off as mini trees. Cars aligned like a herd of cows. The mundane task of filling boxes with vine leaves. Each weighing heavily as the trucks embark on a journey to transport them to another location. Where? No one really knows. We just go about our day. Running, Squatting, Lifting, Cutting, Stacking, a job that fulfills these contractors and agricultural companies.

I first started working when I was seven. I'm currently ten-years-old. I've worked three years now, unofficially that is. I think in the next two or three years I can actually get a job, with my experience in the fields. But America will say no because I have to go to school to get an education and work in the rat race system. Well how would I do that if I'm already working at a job that not even the Americans would want to do. It's not my fault I was born as a descendent of Indigenous Mexicans. It's not my fault my parents had to cross the border for a better life. It's not my fault that I have to work and work to provide when I should be enjoying my youth. Nope, not my fault. It's Society's fault for-

"Pss!"

"¡Ponte a trabajar!" My father shouts as he hurdles sticks at me.

"Okay!" I say in response.

We've been here since four in the morning. It's almost lunchtime. The heat this summer is supposed to be hotter than last year. I mean it's the Central Valley and we're in the fields with all this dirt so it feels like I'm near a volcano.

"Apurale!"

"C'mon Hurry up!" My Dad shouts as he flicks the vine leaves quickly and stacks them inside the boxes we carry on us.

"Okay! Okay!" I shout in fear knowing that if I continue to mess around he'll whip me here and now in front of all these workers.

The cool breeze stops and now the dry and hot air can be felt. Jesus, how can they subject us to this type of weather. Little by little I advance forward while carrying our water jugs. These bad boys feel like weights. Funny really, I'm working but also like working out at the same time. Maybe I can finally get that summer body that Mrs. Swan, my fourth grade teacher rambles about during school. She mentioned something about Chris Evans and how he's the peak form of a man. I don't really get her though, he's just a dude. I re-track, who

wouldn't want to be the "Human Torch" you know, that'd be cool.

Yet, a migrant worker such as myself can only dream of such fantasy. I'll never achieve the desired human male physique. I eat a lot of beans, corn, meat, food that Chris Evans would never eat.

Ugh. darn fruit flies buzzing everywhere. I swear one just flew in my nose, ear, eyes, and mouth. Even with the wrapped bandana and cloth in my face to combat the sun's fire. I still feel it even with all this layering. Who's dumb idea was to use this much layer!

From the back, The supervisor shouts, "BREAK!!!"

A moment of silence quickly turns into a moment of thuds and steps as workers run for food. It's surreal, like a herd of animals being rounded up. It's bad though, to think like that. I have to stop thinking like this.

"Vamos a comer. Llama tus Hermanos y Hermanas. Ahorita regreso voy por unas cosas que dejé en el carro" My father says as he walks towards our minivan.

It's a GMC Safari coated in a mix of blue and green. We've had it since my little sister was born. It used to look nice but through the years it's taken some beatings that it looks like a can of junk now.

I walked towards each row that my siblings were in. It was a total of four rows that I walked to. I kept shouting, "Vamos a Comer!", as I left one of the water jugs that I had to haul earlier. My siblings and I gather in my mother's row as she still cuts with my little sister, who kicks dirt in the back.

"Y tu Papa?" My mother asks as she slowly stops cutting.

"Trie el Lonche tu" she continues as she forces my little sister to grab the food she made for us from her lunch bag. It's a handwoven basket that my mom bought at the swapmeet.

So we ate lunch in the scorching heat. I sat by a grapevine trunk that offered more shade than the rest. Little did I know that that's where a friendly mouse was at and as I sat on the concrete-like dirt the little fellow moved and startled me causing me to drop my burrito.

My siblings laughed at me and my mom scolded me for dropping the burrito.

My Mom was thinking, "Ahora dónde está este viejo?" she begins to pass us the burritos. I reassure her that he went to grab something from the van, convincing myself that he really was when in reality he was with the other workers drinking.

It's a thirty minute break, we're already 15 minutes in.

I grabbed another burrito and split it with my brother as by this point almost everyone was done with theirs. I went back to the same spot and made sure this time that there wasn't a mouse. Thankfully there wasn't.

The next hours go by and I'm cutting and cutting with a new blade that I taped on my index finger earlier on in the day. The previous blade I had slipped out and I accidentally cut myself. Thankfully my Dad didn't see or else I would have gotten a whip. The blood that emerged from my finger earlier dried as I retaped the wound with another blade. It's definitely unsanitary but as long as I can keep cutting the leaves and filling my box I'll be fine, I hope.

The sun has gotten hotter. It's close to four in the afternoon and I'm eagerly waiting for us to be done. I want to go home. It's Saturday.

"Aporale!" My drunk Dad shouts as he moves into my older sister's row to help her complete it.

I'm barely finishing my row while everyone else is already done and helping each other. I think to myself, "Why am I so slow!?"

The distance from the end of the row to me is ten feet. I'm close I think, but the sun has made me so dehydrated. The weight of the box is heavy, I feel like I'm carrying a stone. I can't even breathe right, my nose is all stuffed with the dust and chemicals from the grapevines.

I finally reached the end. I look at the road as the cars drive by. Must be nice that those people are going somewhere and not here. I catch my breath by sitting at the edge of the row leaning heavily on the trunks. I'm tired, when will I go home.

I proceed to my siblings row to aid them in finishing their row. I stumble and fall face-first on the hot dirt. I curse in anger and pain, "Verga!"

My little sister laughs in the back, my brothers laugh, my sisters laugh, my mom laughs, my drunk dad laughs.

"Dumbass!" my Brother shouts.

"Aparate!" my Mother shouts.

We moved onto different rows until the sun had set. The chirps of birds fade. The hot air turns mild. The trucks are gone. Most of the workers have called it a day. My family and I gathered back to the van.

I help load the empty boxes, water jugs, and basket to the back of the van.

I reek of sweat and dirt. My face is filled with chemicals and dirt. My eyes are the only ones that are semi-clean. The bandanas I wore smelled of saliva and chemicals.

I removed most of the layers I had on earlier in the day. As I do, the blade falls off once again, revealing the wound I sustained earlier. Clumsily, I didn't look and realized that my old man was behind me.

He quickly grabs my wrist and examines the wound.

"Maldito!" he shouts as he heaves and whips me with his leather belt.

Tears pour down my eyes. My siblings look at me with pity.

A couple moments later we got settled and drove home. Music playing from the van's radio as everyone is quiet except for me who continues to sniff.

“¡Ya para de llorar!” My Dad shouts.

All I can think about is the pain. The exhaustion of working all day. I have already started developing aches in my knees and back but I can't tell my folks that. They'll give me a lecture about how me and my siblings have it easy.

To lighten the mood my older brother cracks a joke at my Dad.

“Shut Ap” My Dad's way of saying shut up.

My siblings chuckle a bit. My mom joins them. The silence turns to a brief moment of laughter. Except I don't laugh. I look through the windows as we continue driving home. The fast fields in the area seem like there's no end in sight. They're all aligned row by row, lifeless to me. Thinking, will I ever be someone in life? I don't like the fields. I hate it. The hassle of working from sunrise to sunset, it's horrible. I guess that's why my parents are always pushing us to do our best in school. Pushing us for a better future and more opportunities than they'll ever have. As my Dad once said, “ You all have the opportunity to make something of your life better than your mother or me”.

Even in moments of hardship or happy moments, I always hear my old man's voice and his many lessons that he has tried and instilled in me and my siblings.

The drive from work to home feels like a brief escape from reality. Just for a bit, it feels like there's nothing happening. Just admiring the surroundings and thinking of life. We reach a gas station to put some gas in the van. The side door opens as my father, even in his drunken state, pulls it with ease.

“¿Quien quiere algo de comer?” He says as he directs it to everyone in the car. One by one we all get off like soldiers preparing for battle.

Hut one, Hut two...I think as I jump off the side and run to the store.

We all get some chips, drinks, candies, and make our way to the counter where my Dad, with a 3-pack of tall can Modelos waits.

“\$40 on 6” he tells the Cashier.

We make our way to the car and jump inside in a hurry. Not me, I walk slowly. I hear my Dad's heavy thuds with his boots and turn around to face him. He looks at me with a serious face...but...for a moment...I finally see him grin, a small grin at least.

“Súbete en la camioneta” he says with a stern voice.

I grin back at him and run inside...We finally go home.

The Evil, the Wise, and the Death

By Teresa Romero

Many summers ago, I used to spend long days at my Mamá Evelia's house in Mexico, where I would listen to the stories and legends that she grew up with. However, there is one story that has haunted me to this day because it connects a legend to my family. One night around midnight I followed my Mamá Evelia outside to help her lock the front gate. We both heard a tecolote hooting uncontrollably. My Mamá Evelia proceeded to lock the gate and rushed me to return back to the safety of her home. I have never recalled my Mamá Evelia act so nervous or afraid except on this occasion. As we entered and locked the front door, we walked to the kitchen and we sat down to finish our chocolate calientito. There, she told me that she was grateful I was with her and she was not alone within the darkness with a tecolote as company. At that time, with my innocent mind, I was confused as to why she was afraid of an owl. She can see my confusion. The legend of La Lechuza would be a story that would consume me and force me to question what is real and what is a mere story?

We sat in silence for a while and all I could hear were my Mamá Evelia's slow breaths and my old wooden chair creaking. She smiled as she said, "ay hija, what are we going to do about the tecolote? It hasn't shut up since last week. That means something awful is going to happen soon. I can feel it." I didn't know what to think about that. All I knew was that I wanted to see this owl because I had never seen one. I explained to her about my fascination with owls and how I wanted to find one. She laughed. "Mijita, you don't want to go and interact with owls. They are dangerous creatures that are created by the devil himself." This is when she decided to tell me that the legend of La Lechuza is a bruja, a witch, that changes to a tecolote who enjoys to prey on men and drink the blood of children who have not been baptized. They are witches who give their soul to the devil to hunt the men who did them wrong in the past. In doing so, they can shapeshift into owls at will and fly throughout the night to find their next victim.

I, of course, did not believe that owls were such evil creatures. I believed that owls were wise, that they knew everything, and that this was why they have big round eyes. I knew it was a laughable thought to have when I was a child, but I truly believed it. The owls I grew up knowing about were friendly. I used to enjoy watching the Owl in Winnie the Pooh who always offered to share his wisdom with their fellow friends, or the owl in the Tootsie pop commercial who always wondered how many licks it would take to finish a lollipop. Owls, in my mind, represented wisdom and provided insights to those who were seeking it. After all,

they are known to work with Athena in many myths. My abuelita, Mamá Evelia, was very patient and listened to what I had to say. She sighed. “Eres una niña todavía, but one day you will understand.” Understand what? How can a bird be so dangerous to a point you don’t want to be in the same room with it? I kept thinking. So, I told her that I understood the legend but it is just a story to me. There is nothing to be afraid of. “Niña, has your father ever told you what happened to your great tío Pablo?” She asked. I shook my head. “Well, I think you need to hear this story and then you will understand why we don’t mess with los tecolotes.”

One night, tío Pablo decided to keep watch and guard the cattle after the neighbor complained of hearing screams and strange sounds coming from the barn. Tío Pablo did not think too much of it. His only thoughts were that the neighbor might have been imagining or dreaming these strange sounds. His plan was to stay and sleep in the barn with a machete as his only self-defense weapon. At the early hours of the morning, before the sun had risen, tío Pablo was awoken by flapping noises and screeches. The cattle were startled and started to move erratically. Tío Pablo got up from the haystack he was laying on and ran to calm his cattle. He looked around to see what made the cattle behave strangely and was left in shock and motionless when he saw a beautiful woman dressed in black, milking a cow. The mysterious woman did not seem to notice him until tío Pablo got the courage to run to get his machete.

The woman did not react and continued to milk the cow as Tío Pablo held the machete tighter. When he asked her why she was on his property, she told him, “One needs to feed their young.” He didn’t understand what she meant. He was mesmerized by her wide glowing eyes and somehow understood he was in danger, so he started to pray and cursed at the woman. The strange woman started to plead and beg him to reconsider and reminded him that she just wanted the milk to feed her children, but Tío Pablo didn’t believe her.

He continued to pray to all the saints he could remember, especially to La Virgen de Guadalupe. When the woman heard his persistent prayer, she laughed and mocked him. She said, “God is not listening to your foolishness because there is no one up there. I am just trying to feed my children.” He stopped praying out loud. In his mind, he only asked God to give him the strength he needed to face this woman. He felt her eyes on him looking directly at his soul. Without thinking, he told her to take what she needed, then leave.

For his mercy, she granted him a gift. She told him to be wary of the weather and to take his cattle up into the mountains in three days. Then, Tío Pablo saw her face slowly transform into a tecolote and eventually her body. She then grabbed the bucket of milk with her talons and

flew away. All he heard were her wings flapping through the dark sunrise. He was left in a state of shock for he had just witnessed a woman transform into a gigantic tecolote. It was the neighbor who woke him from his motionless state as he greeted him to wish him a good morning.

Tío Pablo was wise to listen to the woman and took his cattle up the mountains three days later. There was a great storm that led to a flood. It destroyed buildings and drowned most of the animals and livestock. However, his home and barn was left untouched by some miracle. Tío Pablo learned that he encountered no ordinary woman but a witch who shifts into a tecolote, La Lechuza.

It was an unfortunate encounter and he was grateful he was still alive for they are known to prey on men. Yet, he thanked God for meeting her for he would not be able to know her message and his cattle would have drowned as well. He never shared what he had witnessed to anyone besides his family. His encounter has now become a story of a warning to be passed down to future generations.

“Now you know, niña. La Lechuza is no mere witch. Perhaps you are right about their wisdom but their wisdom is filled with death and destruction.”

I felt chills when she said that. I didn't know what to say or do. All I knew was that I was too afraid to look at the window behind my abuelita. I feared I was going to see two glowing eyes like the ones my great tío Pablo saw many years ago. After a moment, I finally asked her if the witch ever returned.

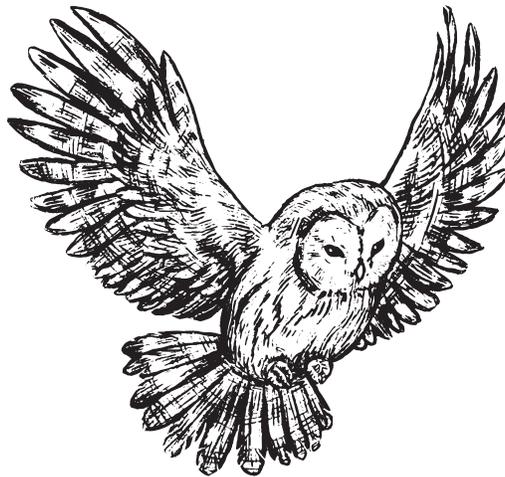
“Claro que sí, hija. Didn't we just hear her outside. She is here to warn us. Someone is going to die soon. La Lechuza is calling a name.”

“How do you know it is not our name?” I asked. She reassured me that La Lechuza was not calling our names for we would have known. With that, she instructed me to go to bed since we will attend mass in the morning. All I could think that night was my fear for los tecolotes. I wondered if los tecolotes were all La Lechuzas. I concluded that night that los tecolotes were creatures to be wary of, but not the owls from where I lived. It was this thought that convinced me to finally find my sleep, for I knew my abuelita would wake me early in the morning.

The following morning, I was awoken by cries coming from the outside. I can see from the window that my Mamá Evelia was hugging and comforting the neighbor, Martha, who always came in to drink café and keep my abuelita company. Martha's son unfortunately died in an accident last night. A cousin found his body against a rock. He fell from the horse and died instantly from the impact.

I didn't realize what time my Mamá Evelia came in. I decided to make myself a café while I waited for my abuelita. Only to be spooked by her entrance and the first thing she said "La Lechuza was right again but now we must pray for the poor muchacho. He was a great man."

I prayed for him like my abuelita asked me. Yet, in the back of my mind, I was glad it was not my name that the tecolote called that night for they're evil, wise, and death.



Our Stories within Memoir

By Isaiah Sepulveda

Him

My stepdad who was a father figure and a leader for me wasn't just any man. My stepdad, Elliot Mora, was an officer in the Marines who achieved the rank of major. Besides being a father figure to me, he was a leader, mentor, and the man I wanted to be and more. After his passing, I went through rough times growing up, but I learned to change knowing that I wanted to continue his legacy, but also challenge myself to become an even better leader than I already am.

The reason why I saw him as a great leader and mentor was due to his strong and honorable background which came with him. He came from a humble background, where he grew up in Placentia, California. As he grew he knew he wanted to leave the barrio as he called it to do something bigger with his life and become a better man than those he saw around him. While in the marines after joining, through hard work he obtained his bachelor's degree at Carnegie Mellon University to then become an officer. Before his death in 2010, he gained his masters degree and was a great leader to all of his fellow marines as a mentor and always did his best to help them. While overseas in his 2006 tour in Iraq during the Operation Iraqi Freedom, he not only helped train the Iraqi troops how to set up their military, but also created an activity center where marines could ease away from their stress. Besides providing training to the Iraqi troops and creating a safe haven for his fellow marines during stressful times, he had received the Purple Heart for his bravery, sacrifice, and survival while protecting those same marines while under fire from a mortar attack.

Attached below is a link to the Hawaii Marines official website which provides the actual events and his exact words from before and after the mortar attack:

<https://www.mcbhawaii.marines.mil/News/News-Article-Display/Article/539468/medal-reminds-captain-of-fallen-comrades/>

While I was born around a military-like environment most of my life stretched into high school and eventually came to end, but not entirely as I continue to carry on the discipline and many other aspects of it with me everyday. I had always wanted to continue what my stepdad had begun since I was a young boy. I remember saying things like, "I want to be just like dad when I grow up!". He was the father I never had, a leader, and a mentor for me to learn from. Most of my life was dedicated to the Marines, the high school I went to was Military and Law

Enforcement based, after graduating, I instantaneously went into college for 5 years straight like a madman to keep a promise I made to my mom. That promise was that I would go to college first before entering the Marines, did I keep my promise? That's honestly a hard question to answer... I believe I did, but others might not see that exactly the same way. After achieving both my A.A. and B.A., I found my way into the Officers program for the Marines, vigorously training nearly everyday with and without the recruiters on my own time. Despite all that hard work, as time got closer and closer to me being able to get shipped out, I had a reality check. What came next had to be one of the hardest decisions of my life which left me a scar which I recently bandaged. Won't get into detail about the bandaged wound, but let's just say I backed out due to reasons which not everyone agreed with, especially those closest to me causing many rollercoaster like arguments for some time. But, although I chose to not leave, life might not be set up and easy peasy for me, but I can confidently say that I'm slowly making my way back up to where I used to be.

WAIT! This is only an introduction, let me stop myself here before I go any further.

Him and I

That introduction was merely just a shortened version of what will start here in a look into my distant past and current future. Growing up, I was always a happy, smiling, and laughing child as you would want for any young boy, but I learned as I got older that life isn't always going to be filled with happiness. Life is probably the most challenging and confusing aspect of the world to even attempt to understand. For example, when I was in elementary school going into middle school, for some reason bullying felt like it was at its highest peak. Bullies to me were basically the ruins of the world which used to be something spectacular. As I got bullied, it made me lose both hope and faith in humanity knowing that this is a situation which is gonna continue on. There's no way of stopping bullying, but there's ways to try and prevent it, I'd hope.

Growing up I never had a father figure in my life until my stepdad came into my life, who was the dad I didn't have. For the four years he was in my life, he made a large impact on my life with each and everything he taught me. Although he wasn't around much due to being in the USMC, when he was around, he was always finding ways to keep me happy, entertained, and always learning something new. For most people, growing up they don't have the opportunity to have a father figure in their lives, I was lucky enough to have one. Nine times out of ten, I was always with him no matter what he was doing, I wanted to be right there with

him by his side. Even when he had to go to base, he would take me with him sometimes and I'd be there with him in my little uniform hearing him yell, which was scary, but funny at the same time while doing his work. Anytime he had to ship out, it would tear me down cause I knew we would be separated for a long period of time, and one of the last times was the time which left me lost. When I found out about his passing, I was quiet and didn't know what to do or how to feel as I was just a kid still. But, to this day I carry every one of the morals he taught me growing up, why? Because if it wasn't for the little bit of help he provided my mom with to raise me, I wouldn't be who I am or where I am today.

If it wasn't for my stepdad, I probably wouldn't have even given thought to the military, but I am glad I at least attempted to follow in his footsteps by almost having a ship date to leave, by breaking my body to train as hard as I did with the Marine recruiters for almost 10 months daily.

Compared to my dad's story, mine isn't really as harsh as one would think. My step dad wasn't any ordinary man, he tried many routes and with each one he fought his hardest to succeed as much as possible. But these routes came with many sacrifices. He knew deep down at the same age that I am now, that the world doesn't have much to give to an individual, so he left the barrio and remaining situations behind to make a step to change his life within the military. Not only did he try and go for blue, but although the blue route didn't go as planned, he didn't let that stop him and he decided to go green, which provided him with a good, giving life.

From the perspective I had growing up with him and observing his surroundings when we'd video chat with him while he was in the war(s), he was the same growing, fighting man that I'm pushing myself to be now. Seeing and knowing all the good, dangerous things he did as a Marine Officer helped me find a route I'd attempt to pursue in this last year, but although it wasn't one which I didn't complete, at least I know I came close to following in his footsteps. But, I also knew that no matter what I choose to pursue now, even if it is being a writer, he is gonna be proud to see that if I'm becoming a leader for myself and others, whether in the military or not. Yes, I know the USMC would've been a complete setup for my life, but for the people who didn't agree with me continuing through with the Marines, understand that CHANGE is a common thing, especially when it comes to one's dreams.

Me

Happiness is a blessing, But can also be a curse...

This is part of a quote I came up with which I've been learning from a lot recently, knowing it taught me an odd amount of lessons on the rocky path known as life. At this point in time, I'm cursed by happiness, in the sense that I'm happy that I'm doing things on my own, but I'm not genuinely happy with my life. Learning more from my mom recently about my dad helped me, but taught me a lesson which I was already learning myself, but one which needed some self reflecting. Self reflection isn't something most people like to do, much like realizing one needs to change themselves to do and be better in life. After choosing to not go through with the Marines, I thought about different things I could do with my B.A. in English Literature. But, what I found in the different options which were provided to me, was that complications come with them because of the fact that I want to do more creative writing, hints this first story I'm currently writing for you, the reader, to hopefully enjoy. Since then, I'm beginning to seek opportunities with the writing skills I've gained from over the years. Of course it won't be easy, but I'm willing to face sacrifices and challenges which will come with my route to become a writer and/or teacher.

Well, here I am, back to writing, today is November 20, 2023. I'm now 24, and life is honestly kicking me in the behind to not give up. I'm still feeling I'm stuck, but that's not going to stop me from wanting to be a writer or a writing teacher perhaps? Who knows, but as far as I know, at least I'm taking the necessary "baby" steps to get where I'm trying to get to each and every day.

Side note: At this point, I don't even know what this writing piece would be considered, but we're going to continue running along with it.

Now, where was I? Oh yeah, if you don't start by taking those much needed "baby" steps, take it from my own personal experience, life will slow you down and everything else going on around you to let you know you're slipping into a loop of confusion. People always think that life is going to be easy peasy, but if you need a reality check that you haven't received yet, here's one:

Don't wait for anything to be handed to you, nothing's given, if something seems too easy, why do it? Fight for the harder things and you'll find the route of success you've been searching for.

I'm not going to sit here and act like my life is jolly, when in reality it's alright at the moment. Most times if I'm alone, I start to reflect on my life and where I'm at, sometimes good, sometimes bad, but at the end of it I'm letting something go each time. But, what I've learned recently is to never go at something alone, even if you lack communication, talk to people, it helps. If I hadn't listened to the people closest to me everyday to this day, I wouldn't have found the strength to keep going. Each and every person who's stood by my side has

fought to teach me that life is NEVER going to be easy, and the only enemy who can truly defeat you is yourself. Learning to let go and live my life again hasn't been easy, but I'm making progress everyday by focusing on all the positive people and memories around me. Going back to the whole idea of self reflection, when it comes to it, I think one of the more important things everyone should learn is to not take anything for granted. Yes, it's always said by people to not take advantage of things nor take things for granted, but recently I learned from my mom that when you've earned important achievements in life which can help you succeed, sometimes you have to in order to push forward. For example, as I'm making this piece right now, when I'm finished, I have no idea how it's going to go as far as getting it published or even just out in general for others to read it. Now I know that writing or being a writer isn't the easiest profession to get into, but writing makes me happy. It's something I can do which puts me at peace and allows me to forget about everything else around me and be in the moment. You see, people always talk about finding and doing what makes you happy, well this is what makes me happy, whether it's equal to a difficult route or not, it's what I'm going for, and why I'm continuing to add on to this first writing piece.

Life isn't meant to be easy, but it's not meant to be hard either. Nobody knows what will come in the next coming days, weeks, or months, but what people can do as individuals is find the light in the darkness and fight to become stronger than ever to make a difference in the lives of others. Since the last time I added onto this piece, I've become more positive as to the route I'm beginning to take as I continue to receive insight on how to become a writing teacher. Although it's proven itself to be more challenging then I would've expected, giving up will no longer be an option when it comes to pursuing goals.

The End

Most of my life I was known as the happy, talkative kid who could make friends anywhere and with anyone. But, as much as everyone hates to try the one thing which is most important for them, I changed. There's nothing more to say about CHANGE. Either as an individual you decide to change and make the best of it, or you continue to live a depressing state of being stuck. Feeling stuck has been the worst phase of my life, I'm slowly breaking free, but it will always be a few steps behind trying to take me down without realizing it's becoming my will power to keep fighting. For me at least, my change was necessary. When I realized I needed to change is when the fear towards myself was created, not only towards myself, but afraid of what my reactions would be to others if I opened up. The majority of my life I've been an emotional rollercoaster, not by choice, but by force. Everyday of my life I fight to

learn how to mask and lock down my emotions, even knowing that is what breaks me down.

In conclusion, I only have one thing to say, happiness is taken for granted nowadays, and so is everyone's trust. Don't become the happiest person, I say this for one important reason. I've always been the nice, happy guy who does the most for others and I came to realize that as the happiest people, we are the same individuals others choose to harass knowing they can't be filled with that same joy we were able to share to others. I might seem like the happiest person, but deep down I'm fighting demons who try to come back and keep me from succeeding.

The Fires of Prometheus

By John W. Horton III

Josh and Michelle hadn't been dating for that long. They sat next to each other on the couch.

"I want to take you some place," she said.

Josh looked at her for a minute not sure what to think but then agreed.

"Ok, let's go."

"Are you sure?" asked Michelle.

"Yeah, but you got that look in your eye."

Michelle smiled got off the couch and grabbed her coat. She motioned to Josh to do the same.

Josh looked at her and came towards her.

"Something tells me that this is not what I think it's going to be."

"Don't be a square!" She said a little assertively.

He looked at her again not sure what to do.

She opened the front door to her apartment, and they went out.

Josh followed her not knowing what to expect, closing the door behind him, making sure it was locked.

It was a cool fall night. Michelle wore a black turtleneck sweater and a short brown skirt with two large buttons at the top near the waist. She reached out to hold Josh's hand.

"How do you feel?" She asked smiling.

"I'm ok but I feel like if I ask any more questions I might get in trouble." He said starting to have doubts.

"Trust me!" She said turning to him and looking him in the eyes.

They continued to walk across the campus. Large maple trees had leaves that were turning a golden orange, and some were falling to the ground. One hit Michelle on the head. She smiled and kept walking and pulling Josh behind her.

Soon they came upon the Chemistry building.

"What?" Said Josh a little perplexed.

"Don't worry!" She said trying to reassure him again. "Do you know the story of Prometheus?" she asked.

"What?"

"Prometheus!" She repeated.

“Pro-me-the-us?” Josh said slowly.

“According to Greek mythology, he gave fire to humanity. He stole it from the gods at Olympus. He was punished by having his liver eaten over and over again.”

“Ok, but ah... what does that have to do with us?” Josh asked getting a little bit more concerned.

“Just follow me.” She said with a mischievous grin.

They entered Titan Hall. She still held tightly to his hand. Josh had never actually been in the hall in all the years that he had been on campus. She led him down to the end of the hall. There she stopped and checked to see if the door to lecture hall 451 was unlocked. Pulling at the door slowly, she could see that it was open, and they entered the lecture hall.

“Wait a minute,” said Josh, “you dragged me all the way down here to enter this lecturer hall in the middle of the night?”

Michelle was silent and tugged at Josh’s hand and led him down the middle of the aisle to the front of the room and there on top of a small stage was a desk.

“My chemistry professor sits here, at this desk every day and gives these boring lectures!”

“Ok, and ...?” Josh said still confused.

Michelle sat on the desk with her back facing the front of the lecture hall and pulled back her skirt.

“I want to do it here!” She said sternly.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Josh said startled.

“I want to f.. here. I want to make fire here!”

“You want to make what!” Said Josh. “You’re making fucking trouble is what you’re doing!”

“If you don’t do what I want I’ll scream.” Said Michelle seriously.

“I thought you were crazy but now I really know.”

“I’m going to scream Josh!!!”

“Ok. Ok. We can do it here.”

“Will you hurry up!”

Josh unzipped his pants and leaned towards her. It was just then that Michelle pulled out some phosphorous that she had hidden in a metal container, tossing it into the air. Then she kissed him. The phosphorous ignited into a bright light that illuminated the entire lecture hall.

“Holy shit!” yelled Josh.

Michelle grinned at the spectacle.

“Josh, I love you!” She said pulling him toward her.

The phosphorous emitted a bright blinding spark as she threw it into the air. They closed their eyes but not before Michelle kissed Josh. The bright chemical reaction of the phosphorous hit the air and quickly dissipated. Anymore would have burned them. The heat was intense for the small amount that Michelle had unleashed with the chemical reaction, but it had achieved its affect.

“Josh, I always wanted to do this.”

“You’re fucking crazy.”

“That was great!”

“I want to do it again!”

“NO, we got to get out of here, were going to get fucking expelled!”

At the front of the hall near the door a flashlight could be seen at the door that led to the lecture hall.

“Don’t worry I closed the door and turned the lock,” said Michelle. “I have a way out.” Josh pulled up his pants and Michelle pulled down her skirt and they ran through a side door behind a curtain and out of an exit door and ran across the campus and hid in a grove of trees. They were both sweating.

“Wasn’t that exhilarating?” Michelle asked pushing her hair back behind her ears.

“No, it was dangerous and stupid and ...”

Before he could finish saying anymore, she kissed him passionately and pulled him down to the ground near the trees and got on top of him.

“Remember in Bradbury’s Fahrenheit 451 when Clarissa asked Montag if he was happy?”

“Ahh, I think so,”

“Are you happy Josh?” She asked Josh. Looking at him with that mischievous grin again.

Josh looked worried.



The Monster Inside Me

By Ray Páramo

tono [ˈtōn-ō], noun – spirit animal; animal soul.

There is a monster inside me.

In my youth, it sometimes took the form of a velociraptor on a remote island where genetic experiments had gone awry, where I'd escaped my containment, a hyper-intelligent carnivore hunting for prey.

Or a zombie shuffling through a post-apocalyptic city, weeks after society had fallen to a world-ending plague; I was infected with an urge to infect others, to claw and bite and devour.

Or a spider queen on the far-away planet of *Arachnus-9*; I was the defender of my home from human invaders, trapping them among the trees of my web-filled forests, where I would tickle them into submission. (“Why are you tickling us?” they asked. “Why won’t you stop?” They were red-faced and reeling among the dead leaves of the forest floor, the laughter wrung from their lungs. “Well,” my monster said, “because it’s fun.”)

The monster inside me used to *mean* fun. It meant freedom too. Because I could curl my fingers and gnash my teeth and *ROAR!* without worry; I could run and holler and chase the boys down Cosecha Street as they chased the sun.

Past the base of the billboard facing the highway—*New Homes Coming Soon!*

Past the newly planted palm trees.

Past the ritual ring of orange lampposts at the cul-de-sac.

The monster inside me made me stand out. It garnered a preference for books instead of baseball, music instead of monster trucks. (“Boys will be boys,” said the adults around me. “Not I,” said my monster, because I was the boy who wanted to be a “Bush Baby” in the school play, not knowing that the part was only reserved for girls. Well then, “you *act* like a girl,” others would say. But “are you sure?” my monster would scoff, referencing my love for trains and dinosaurs, and my distaste for the color pink.) I talked a little differently, sure, but not *too* differently. I liked to walk with a *little* flair, but not overtly so.

My monster, it seemed, liked to mingle.

It would play tricks too.

Confuse me.

Sometimes make the world just a bit harder.

It was my monster, I believe, who first turned my eyes to my swim instructor when I was just a boy, made me stare with intrigue at his tan chest, his strong hands, his large feet just a *little* too long, made me feel a bit funny as I learned to tread water in his arms.

My monster eyes. The eyes that would remain with me from then on. The same eyes that fluttered shut when I shared my first kiss with the boy from church camp, the same eyes that cried tears of pain during the heartbreak that followed; these were the monster eyes that rolled into the back of my head when I first felt the touch of another man around the length of my sex, the eyes that wrinkled up with laughter during long-distance phone calls with the British boy from across the sea.

My monster giveth; my monster taketh away. For a long time, my monster believed that it was white masked in Brown. It spoke only one language when I should have known two. It hated the people who looked like me. It wanted to be someone I was not.

My monster was envy.

My monster was falsehoods.

My monster was privilege.

My monster was pain.

It was not until my monster stood in the presence of other monsters that its instincts began to shift—*awaken*, perhaps? My monster was not *predator*, but *prey*. It did not feel safe in the world for which it longed. *Frankenstein's* monster? Bewitched and tormented by the proverbial pitchfork or flame.

I have learned that my monster is a sensitive one. Always has been. Became even more sensitive once it was among its own kind. (Once I was among *my* own kind.)

The imaginative.

The free.

The girl-boy/boy-girl.

The queer.

The brown skinned.

I learned to talk to my monster. Listen to it. I looked inward to find my monster, find myself. Explore the recipe of my blood and the depth of my roots. My monster calls out to the spirits in the objects around me. But its cries are often dampened, deemed “savage” by my “rational” self—it is a *MONSTER*, after all.

My monster.

The monster who channeled these words through me, who brought them to the page.

Who are you? I ask. WHAT are you?

Spirit animal!

Shadow creature!

The *tono* that resides within the cells of my body, between the joints of my popping knees, my crooked back, behind the allure of my smile.

Where are you? I ask.

You're everywhere.

Nowhere.

Between—because the monster inside me *still* likes to mingle.

(“You will,” it assures me. “You already have. Keep searching.”)

Otomí Creation Myth

By Jasmin Cruz

One: The Cave, Her Last Home

Gisela Mondragón looks out to the horizon leaving her father's town in Hidalgo, Mexico. As her uncle's old, tattered Tacoma drives her away from the town and into the desert, she takes in the view of an urbanized landscape being swallowed by the bright, late morning sun and scattered greens like cacti and bushes hunching close to the desert ground. In the truck sits Gisela, a Phd candidate in anthropology, focusing on compiling a concise history of her father's people, the Otomí, and their beliefs before colonial times. In the passenger seat is her uncle's neighbor and one of her main informants, Julio Salas, and next to her in the backseat is Julio's wife, Melitona Ramirez de Salas. When Gisela first met Melitona, she insisted that Gisela call her Meli, as a way to establish a bond between them. Gisela struggled with feeling like an outsider when she landed in Mexico, but everyone was so welcoming and happy to see her. It helped that her family here is respected and well-loved.

Gisela's uncle, Rosendo, stops at a run-down shack and parks the Tacoma underneath some shade. Apparently, this is where travelers can stop to rest for the night. Gisela wondered if this was safe for regular use. The shack was in the middle of nowhere. She thought it was surprising there weren't squatters here, it wasn't used as a dumping ground for bodies or drugs, not even thieves were scoping out the place to ambush weary travelers. Gisela voices her paranoid ramblings to Meli, but she assures her that they are safe. Surrounding the shack are vibrant and rich flowers like dandelions, marigolds, poppies, and morning glories. Though the shack is in need of renovation, the offerings are fresh. It smells so sweet and the amount of flowers invites a welcoming breeze to the group. Julio and Meli tell Gisela that the whole town works together to gather offerings, but a volunteer group of about four or six people drive together to assemble the altar on a bi-weekly basis. Scattered through the bouquets and bunches of flowers are religious candles, baskets of fruit, and bread. Most of the offerings are concentrated near the door, but the rest sprinkle the perimeter of the shack.

“La Virgen del Desierto nos va a proteger” Meli squeezes Gisela's arm as if to comfort her and smiles as if she herself is excited to be here. Gisela reciprocates the action then slips off her backpack to take out her camera. She also places her phone in her shirt pocket with the voice recording function on. She multitasks by taking pictures of the offerings and asking her informants questions.

According to the Salas', there is a spirit inhabiting the desert. Her uncle and informants, like many of the townspeople, believe she is the Virgin Mary watching over their little town. Some write her existence off as a figment of the imagination. She is just someone who a dehydrated traveler saw as he was losing consciousness. Although, even some of the naysayers admit to her existence, they think she's just a hermit woman, not a spirit. Even if her existence could be easily explained away, no one is willing to start a fight and challenge the town's beliefs. She first appeared sometime around the 1910s and 1920s. During times of unrest and tragedy, the people saw her as an omen to bring peace. According to Meli, she first appeared walking into the town square. Her presence was unimaginable. It was a blessing to have seen her. She gave the townspeople newfound hope and cemented their beliefs in God and the Virgin Mary. Accounts of her physical appearance and purpose of why she showed up in the town vary. Some saw her as a traditionally dressed Otomí woman, possibly to reflect the dress of the people at the time. Others saw her as the Virgen de Guadalupe that appeared to Juan Diego during the 1500s. Some people thought she was Zäna, an Otomí moon goddess. Eventually, the people of Chicavasco and other towns close by began to associate the two entities as one, thus the name La Virgen del Desierto.

"Los dioses de antes también viven en el desierto y en las cuevas de las montañas," Meli wistfully comments.

"¿Todavía creen en esos dioses?" Gisela inquired with a twinge of doubt in her tone.

"¡Claro que sí! Sólo tiene sentido. Si La Virgen del Desierto existe, de seguro los demás deben existir."

"¿Rezán a esos dioses también? ¿Construyen altares como este?"

"¡No, es un pecado! La Virgen del Desierto no es una diosa, es la madre de Dios. Pero si creemos que esos dioses son más como espíritus. Son como almas que están atrapadas en la tierra. No pueden ir al cielo y vivir en paz."

The Virgin of the Desert and La Virgen de Guadalupe, or The Virgin Mary, aren't separate entities it seems. At least, according to Meli, as she continues to explain, it's more of a term of endearment the people of Chicavasco have given her. It's a way to confirm she is there to protect them, to love them. The thought of Mesoamerican gods existing in exile intrigued her. She thought she could take some pictures of these caves and add a tidbit about this belief in her research paper. She asks Meli if they could take her to see these caves, but her uncle shoots down the idea.

"No, no! We don't take you too far in the desert! Too dangerous."

"Tío Rosendo, please!"

“Be done taking your pictures and we go home!” Rosendo tries to hide the shakiness in his voice, “wind is not predictable and there are coyotes! Is not safe to walk farther. Hurry up, please.”

“*Pero tío*, it’s not even noon yet! Please just for a minute and we leave.”

Rosendo stares thoughtfully at his niece, torn between supporting her but keeping her safe.

“*Por favor*, just some quick pictures! I think it would be really important for my research project.”

“*Está bien*,” Rosendo turns to face Julio and Meli. “*Ustedes dos quédense en la casita de la Virgen. Julio, ten mis llaves*,” Rosendo hands his friend his car keys.

“*No, amigo-*”

“*Yo insisto. Por cualquier cosa que pasa, regresen al pueblo.*”

“*¡No podemos abandonarlos!*”

Rosendo takes Julio’s hand and places the keys in his friend’s palm, “*Se quedan con el coche. ¡He dicho!*”

Rosendo turns back to his niece and puts his firm hands on her shoulders, his voice deepening to stress the gravity of their unexpected adventure, “Walking to the caves will be one hour. *Una hora al ir y al regresar*. You have water in your pack-pack?”

Gisela and Rosendo double check that they have enough water in each of their bags. They begin their trek and leave behind a worried Julio and Meli praying for them. With the day reaching noon, the sun is at its strongest and cruelest. The sun mocks them even though they are appropriately dressed for it in loose long sleeve shirts, cargo pants, jeans, and sombreros. The heat and sweat makes Gisela feel like the sun is punishing her for going out on this detour. Part of Gisela is disappointed that her uncle didn’t take the Tacoma, but she figured it would make more sense to save gas for an emergency since there was enough for to and from the altar.

The pair walk for almost an hour, almost reaching the anticipated caves, the wind starts to pick up. At first it was a refreshing, much needed breeze, but it quickly becomes a harsh, dry and dusty wind that forces Gisela’s hair into a dry and dusty tangled mess. She puts her sombrero between her legs and ties her hair up in a ponytail, but the elastic snaps apart. Frustrated with no elastics left, Gisela just bunches up her hair in a bun and keeps it trapped in a fist on top of her head as she swiftly adjusts the sombrero back on her head, being careful enough to not let any strands escape her grasp.

“*Ahí está*,” Rosendo points to the side of the mountain about 50 feet away from them.

“*Apúrate*, take the picture! But from here, don’t go closer!”

“Tío Rosendo, it’s fine!” The winds grow stronger and the sky quickly gets covered in heavy, gray clouds. Rosendo is urging for them to rejoin Julio and Meli. He stops shouting when he hears howls and yips. A pack of four coyotes appear in the distance. Gisela is frozen in place. Her grip tightens on her camera. The coyotes stalk toward Gisela and Rosendo. Rosendo arms himself with a rock and tries to get Gisela away from the cave and run back to Julio and Meli. She’s too scared. She won’t listen. Then the coyotes pounce. Rosendo throws his rock at the coyotes, but he manages to hit one of the coyotes’ shoulders. The hit incapacitates it for a moment, but it’s back up and running. Blinded by adrenaline and fear, the pair separates. Rosendo runs back to where the altar is and believes Gisela is right behind him, but Gisela shoots for the cave.

When she reached the cave, the last thing she could hear her uncle shout was, “*Vayanse! Vayanse! A la- AHH!*”

The winds whistle and sing louder inside the cave. Gisela hides behind a boulder near the mouth of the cave and squeezes her head in between her knees. She rocks back and forth, trying to ignore the desert’s rage. She hears scuffling and whimpering. The coyotes followed her in. Oh, why didn’t she listen to her uncle? She just didn’t want to be frightened away by some little wind. She can hear the animals sneak closer and closer. She looks around herself. There’s nowhere to run away to. There’s not even a decent sized rock to throw at their heads. What if she jumps on the boulder? Make herself seem big? Before Gisela builds up the nerve, she hears a voice. It’s a woman.

“What are you all doing here? Out! Get out of my cave!”

Gisela stands up but presses her body against the wall. The boulder still protects her from the coyotes spotting her. The coyotes whimper and whine, as if to beg to stay inside. They cower and fold their ears back, but the woman is unmoved. She stomps closer to the coyotes and Gisela gets a good look at her. She’s tall. Unusually tall. She wears a traditional Otomí dress, but it’s floor length. It’s white covered in vibrant, rainbow-colored motifs of desert animals and plants like birds, coyotes, and cacti. Every step she takes looks like she’s floating through the air. She has thick, long, black hair pulled into a low ponytail. A multi-colored shawl covers her shoulders. A white, fuzzy haze outlines her silhouette.

“*Virgen Maria, madre de Dios,*” Gisela whispers. It can’t be, can it?

The woman manages to shoo the coyotes away, but her head snaps in Gisela's direction. Her face is sunken in. She looks young and old all at once.

“What did you say?” The woman demands. “Who are you?”

Gisela does the sign of the cross and gets down on her knees. “*Virgencita, ¿Por favor ayúdame!*” Before Gisela could get into the specifics of her situation, the woman rolls her eyes at Gisela and scoffs.

“Please, spare me.” The woman begins to walk away from Gisela. “I am not the Virgin Mary. You want to see her so bad? Drink a river full of pulque and get out of my cave.”

Gisela, confused, allows her curiosity to get the better of her and follows the woman further inside the cave. “Then who are you? Why are you in this cave?”

“Oh. My. Sun and Moon. You humans have never stopped being so nosey, have you?”

“You humans? What does that mean? “No. There’s no way!” The woman stops and turns around to raise an eyebrow at Gisela. “I mean, the townspeople have said the ancient Mesoamerican gods still exist. That they reside in the mountains. But it was all a myth.”

“Myth?”

“Y-yes?” Gisela considers backing away. She’s inside a cave, stranded in the mountains. Her uncle and informants must be long gone. There’s no way they would be able to search for her in this weather. Either she’s hallucinating and thinks she’s speaking to someone who’s not there or she’s invading a hermit’s territory. The woman glares Gisela down but decides she’ll welcome any company that isn’t a bird or a lizard.

“None of us are myths,” The woman sighs. “Every god, every deity, every spirit that has ever been worshiped has existed until their believers stop believing.”

Gisela realizes she’s been frozen since the woman began speaking. If the woman is real, if what she is saying is true, then it contradicts everything she’s come to know about her faith. Her god was the only God. The true God. It was only Him that could ever exist. Not for a second did she think she would see, let alone speak to, an old Mesoamerican god. She came here to document what people used to believe, what some still believe. She thought she would see some old ruins or more altars or offerings people still make in honor of the old gods. She needs an offering. Gisela slips off her backpack and reaches in for food she packed. She doesn’t know how to present an offering when a god is standing four feet in front of her. She didn’t get to that part in her research. She deserves respect, though. No matter Gisela’s beliefs and doubts, she is in someone else’s domain.

She takes out a pupusa covered in aluminum foil, filled with goat cheese and fried beans. She raises her arm toward the woman and bows her head, “Miss, my name is Gisela Mondragón. I am an anthropologist, researching the beliefs of my father’s people. I offer this pupusa as thanks for allowing me in your cave and as permission to speak to you out of curiosity and for the purposes of my research.”

The woman eyes the pupusa and looks Gisela up and down. The woman forgot how ridiculous humans look when presenting an offering to her. She forgot how humorous she found it. She reaches over and takes the pupusa. The pupusa sitting on her palm, the woman covers the top of the pupusa with her other hand and both of them begin to emit an orange glow. It's warm. Really warm. Gisela can feel the temperature change from the woman's hands. She's heating up the food.

"It is good to know some humans still have manners." The woman unwraps the pupusa. She savors the sight of it, from the moisture dripping from the napkin within the foil to the tiny, charred spots and crunchy appearance of the edge of the pupusa. She takes a careful bite, making sure to get a mouthful of the filling. Gisela waits for an opportunity to speak. "My name is T'ixu Axahai or The Earth Daughter in your language," the woman pauses to take another bite. "I am the daughter of Zāna, Sacred Mother on the Moon, and Hyadi Dada, Sacred Father on the Sun."

"T'ixu Axahai, I am honored to be in your presence today and I ask if it would be possible-"

"What is an anthropologist?" T'ixu Axahai sits down, crossing her legs. Her back straight, she stares at Gisela until she gets the hint and sits down as well.

"Um, i-it's a person who studies parts of human society from the past and the present."

"What do you mean 'parts of human society'?" T'ixu Axahai inquires with a mouthful of beans and cheese.

"Like their beliefs, the food they eat, how they dress, how they're being persecuted by stronger forces."

Is that what you were doing then? At the altar with those villagers?"

"You were watching us?"

"Yes, of course. It is my desert."

"So, if your name is T'ixu Axahai, then where is The Virgin of the Desert? The one who the altar is dedicated to?"

The goddess's body tenses up at the mention of The Virgin of the Desert. Despite trying to drive the humans away with the storm, she's enjoying having the company of this human. Before deciding Gisela's fate, T'ixu Axahai will hear her speak. Maybe to vent a couple centuries's worth of grief. Maybe to hear what the humans have been up to since she last reigned. Even though the mention of the name "The Virgin of the Desert" makes her want to boil up with rage. Even though she would rather suffocate the human by ridding the cave of oxygen for uttering that dreaded phrase. Even though she knows the human doesn't know any better. T'ixu Axahai takes a deep breath and lets it escape her chest.

“Those people, the descendants of my believers, call me The Virgin of the Desert, but it is not me. They think I am some combination of the Virgin Mary and Z-” The goddess stops for a moment. Her voice catches in her throat. She gulps it down before speaking again. “My mother, my creator, Zāna. The Sacred Mother on the Moon. They think I am both of these deities. They think I am a mother. I am not! I am T’ixu Axahai! I am the Earth Daughter! I am commander of this desert and all of its creatures!”

The boom from her voice echoes through the cave, nearly blasting out Gisela’s hearing. A prolonged high-pitched sound rings through her ears. Gisela massages the backs of her ears to try to soothe the ringing away.

She’s still rendered speechless by the goddess’s outburst but manages to blurt out, “The Virgin Mary isn’t a deity. She’s real!” Gisela continues to spout more nonsense which denies T’ixu Axahai’s existence when the goddess throws a fistful of dirt and gravel at Gisela’s face.

“Ow! You got my eye!” Gisela rubs the irritating specks of earth out of her eyes.

“You deserve it,” T’ixu Axahai retorts.

“I’m sorry. I’m- I’m just shocked. I didn’t think you existed. I didn’t think I would be talking to you,” Gisela takes a brief pause. “Unless I’m hallucinating... or... or”

T’ixu Axahai busies herself with finishing her pupusa while Gisela stumbles through different stages of shock and denial. She finds the human quite funny when she’s not insulting the goddess.

“Can I ask...” Gisela begins. “Can I ask why you are living in this cave? Is it true what the townspeople are saying? Are the old gods living in exile?”

T’ixu Axahai stays silent while she finishes chewing the last bite of her pupusa. Even though she is a goddess and can live without eating, she misses the food of her believers. These days, cooped up in the cave, she’ll munch on a rock, a lizard, or a spider that foolishly finds its way in the cave. Sometimes, she’ll sneak off to the altar of The Virgin of the Desert and snatch some fruits and rolls of bread. It may not be made in honor of her name, but the townspeople did make it in honor of her appearance.

“In a way, we are living in exile. We’re dying.”

“Gods can die?”

“It was an oversight during the creation of the universe and the humans. We are immortal with the condition that our believers are alive and abundant.” T’ixu Axahai observes Gisela’s confused expression. The goddess almost can’t stop herself from venting to this small human. Centuries of grief and bottled up emotions are threatening to burst and shatter all over the cave floor.

“We- we can still live... If our believers are dwindling, we can continue to live if we transfer into the belief system of the next powerful gods. If we do not, our death is a long, excruciating one.”

“Okay, I think I’m getting it now. If you wanted to, you could “transfer” to Catholicism and you would officially be The Virgin of the Desert?”

“Almost.”

“Almost?”

“I would have to transfer into whichever role the primary god gives me. My mother... Zāna. The Sacred Mother on the Moon transferred into the role of the Virgin Mary. To your god, it made sense to fuse his lower deity and my creator into one, since they are both mothers.”

“Lower deity?” Gisela can’t stop herself from trying to defend her Virgencita.

“Yes, lower deity! You enjoy gambling with your life it seems!”

“Right! Right... sorry. What about your father? Did you have one?”

“My father, Hyadi Dada, Sacred Father on the Sun. He never wished to transfer. His dominion is the Sun, not on the Earth. Before my believers were conquered, my father was able to travel from the Sun and to the Earth whenever he pleased. Now he is stuck there.”

“And you haven’t chosen to transfer.”

“Never. I have had offers, but I never thought it was worth turning over my identity and my powers into a new one. I have only ever known myself. Now I suffer the consequences for that choice.”

“What if your believers...start believing again?”

“They are devout Catholics now. It is not possible. I will not entertain the thought.” T’ixu Axahai, finished with the conversation, pushes herself up and stretches her limbs. She dismisses the human with a wave of her hand and begins to walk away, further inside the cave.

“Wait! Hear me out, please!” Gisela clumsily gets up and follows the goddess. “I’m an anthropologist, see, and not only is it our job to study and document cultures but we also work to revitalize them! Help them recover from colonization and rebuild!”

T’ixu Axahai halts so abruptly that a burst of wind gets knocked out of the cave. The wind dries and cracks Gisela’s lips. The goddess’s head snaps to the side and she glares at Gisela from there.

“You think I need your help? You think I welcome your help? You think I need to be saved by a human who did not believe I ever existed?”

“Please, I just want an interv-”

“No! Out! Out of my cave or I will crush you under the weight of this mountain!” T’ixu Axahai is facing Gisela now.

She slowly raises her arms from her sides, making the cave tremble with the intensity of a volcanic eruption. Gisela falls on her butt but quickly gets back up and runs away. She pleads with T'ixu Axahai throughout her escape. Reaching the mouth of the cave, Gisela trips on a rock and slides, belly first, the rest of the way out. Gisela tries to get up again and get away from the mountain but boulders and slabs of rock continue to come crashing down. They block her every attempt to run and she twitches, flinches, and freezes everytime a shadow comes near her. Finally, the shaking stops. Gisela turns around to look at the mountain and realizes she's barely ten feet away from the cave entrance. Or...what used to be the cave entrance.

The cave was gone. Completely covered up by the broken and loosened pieces of rock. Gisela finally realized the true gravity of her predicament. She is lost in the middle of the desert. She gave the goddess her only source of food. She has a Hydro Flask filled at only halfway. Her backpack, once filled with research tools, now serves it as a deadweight she has to carry back to town. By herself. No compass. No sense of direction. She's regretting convincing her uncle to bring her here. She comes up with two options: She can start walking and get even more lost or she sits still and sets up a shelter somewhere until a search team comes looking for her. Well, the only shelter she knows of is the altar for The Virgin of the Desert and she doesn't know where that is either. The sun cooks her skin, forcing her to come to a decision. She faces the mountain with a newfound, false confidence. She plants her feet firmly on the ground and rests her fists at her sides. Her chin is up.

"T'ixu Axahai!" Gisela begins. "I'm sorry! I didn't mean to upset you! I just got excited and I only thought of myself! Please, I beg for your forgiveness and permission to interview you!" The coos of some doves nearby are the only ones to give her a response. "T'ixu Axahai! Consider this, even if your people won't believe in you again, don't allow your history to be erased! There are still ways for people to remember you even when you are long from our world! Allow me to be the one who is blessed enough to record your existence!"

Silence. Gisela, truly feeling like she's out of options, lets out a whimper. She starts her journey to find Chicavasco or, at least, the altar when she feels rumbling. She tries to keep walking, but the pile of loose rocks she's walking on shakes and makes her lose her footing. The sound of someone clearing their throat makes her turn around, once again.

Two: Creation Story of the Universe

T'ixu Axahai, glaring at Gisela for an uncomfortable five minutes, concedes to Gisela's wish for an interview. She will cease to exist when the last of her followers are gone. Whether they

convert or pass on, she cannot live without mortals believing in her power, respecting her, loving her, or fearing her. She wants to live and knows she can continue to live if she were to transfer herself into a different, existing, and more powerful belief system. However, she has long denied the Aztec gods' offer to transfer her into their pantheon as a lower-level deity or spirit when their people conquered hers. She spit at the light of God when He offered to transfer her over by giving her a corporeal body to then be canonized as a saint after proving her worth to Him by spreading his word. She threw bisnagas at the devil's face and groin when he crept into her cave, trying to tempt her into becoming a demon and taking revenge on God. She closed off her cave after that. After four hundred years of grief, T'ixu Axahai just wanted to be left alone.

One hundred years she spent huddled up in her cave, T'ixu Axahai longed to see humans again. She missed being worshiped. She missed teasing humans and dangling her power over them. She missed caring for them. She opened up her cave and stepped out in search of them, but the atmosphere felt different. The desert felt different. Dry. Wilting. The desert felt the same as T'ixu Axahai had been feeling for the past couple of centuries. When she came upon the humans, they looked different. They dressed differently. Lived differently. They even spoke differently. It took a moment for her to register that the humans were speaking Spanish and not much Hñahñu. That day when she left her cave, she forgot to change her appearance to blend in with the humans. When the humans noticed the strange woman of godly stature, some were scared, but some were happy to see her. Few recognized her as one of the old Mesoamerican gods. Most mistook her for the Virgin Mary or *La Llorona*. She took insult to the mistaken identity and sulked back to her cave.

She couldn't stop herself from watching the humans, though. She would watch from far into the desert or at the mountaintops. Until today, she hadn't closely interacted with a human for centuries. She kept herself at a distance. The humans knew her from a distance. To the rest of the world, she was a myth. A thing of the past. She never existed for all they cared. For thousands of years, she was a respected, revered deity. At her prime, it was taken away from her with bloody invasions and conquests. After all her time on Earth, she decides she can't vanish without a trace. There should be some record of her existence. Her strength. Her history.

T'ixu Axahai leads Gisela back inside the cave but continues to walk deeper into it. The light from the outside dims as the two walk further inside. Gisela takes out a flashlight when she struggles to see, even though T'ixu Axahai's hazy, white outline provides some light. Gisela begins to second-guess herself. Even if the old god agrees to be interviewed, would Gisela be able to record it? She can't get any signal on her laptop this deep inside the cave. If there was

light, would her camera be capable of recording a supernatural being? Would her voice recorder pick up the god's voice? The last thing she has to be able to record anything is her notebook. Even if her technology would work perfectly, Gisela could lose her credibility. She would be accused of mocking the Otomí people's beliefs by faking evidence of a Mesoamerican god. The interview could be seen as a desperate attempt to finish her degree. All of these doubts begin to plague Gisela. She considers running away, but it would anger T'ixu Axahai and Gisela could get hurt.

Maybe she'll get through this interview and just leave, unscathed. Hopefully, her family is out in the desert looking for her.

T'ixu Axahai stops and kicks a woven mat to Gisela. She turns her face to the left and touches the cave wall with her left hand. Her hand emits the orange light again and it circles the interior of the cave. Then it disperses and provides a white fluorescence throughout the cave. T'ixu Axahai moves to sit cross-legged on her own woven mat and waits for Gisela to do the same. Gisela sets her supplies out in front of her and tests the electronics that are capable of working without a signal.

"Ok, um- Normally, I would use my laptop and camera to conduct an interview, but I don't have Wi-fi or data here. So... Let me just see if my voice recorder and camera can even register your presence."

T'ixu Axahai raises an eyebrow, confused at the strange words Gisela is saying. She knows humans have gone through many changes, so she deduces that the strange contraptions Gisela is taking out of her bag must be one of these changes. Gisela looks around and realizes that there isn't a place to prop the camera down. She considers awkwardly holding it between her knees and T'ixu Axahai finally speaks up.

"Is there a problem?"

"Eh- I have nowhere to prop this camera up and I have to-" A slab of stone shoots up from the ground next to Gisela, interrupting her. T'ixu Axahai raises her arm, palm face-up, and gestures toward the stone resembling a small table.

"I do not understand what kind of tool that 'camera' is, but I believe you want to point it at me, so there you are"

Gisela thanks T'ixu Axahai and begins testing the camera and voice recorder. With both of them pointing toward T'ixu Axahai, Gisela tells her to wave at the camera and introduce herself.

"My name is T'ixu Axahai or The Earth Daughter. I am the daughter of Zāna, Sacred Mother on the Moon, and Hyadi Dada, Sacred Father on the Sun." She lets a moment of

awkwardness slip by her when she waves at the camera, unsure whether she should wave at Gisela, because she's right in front of her, or at the camera because Gisela told her to. Silence grows louder than Gisela's rustling of her papers as she stops to check if the devices were able to record the old god. The smile on her face grows quicker than weeds growing in between the cracks on pavement. It was a success. Gisela can hear and see the old god as clear as day. Now all she can hope is that the files won't end up corrupted on her way back.

Gisela switches both of the devices on to record and readies herself with a pencil in hand and notebook on her lap.

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Title: Interview Part One

Interviewer: Gisela Mondragon

Interviewee: T'ixu Axahai, The Earth Daughter

Setting: Interview is conducted in a cave outside of Chicavasco, Hidalgo, Mexico

Date: May 14, 2012, Exact time is unknown, Approximately early afternoon

GISELA: Alright, so- Let's officially start now. First, we introduce ourselves. Hi! My name is Gisela Mondragón.

T'IXU AXAHAI: I am the Earth Daughter. My name is T'ixu Axahai. I am the daughter of Z-

GISELA: Oh, just your name is fine.

T'IXU AXAHAI: You said to "introduce ourselves".

GISELA: Yes, it's just the third time you're saying your whole introduction. I thought it would be less annoying with just your name.

T'IXU AXAHAI: Annoying? **static noises** I will say my name however I choose to say it. You do not determine what is or what is not "annoying". You may be "recording" me for this project of yours, but I am allowing you to do this. This is my cave! My desert! I do not care what is convenient for you. You will respect me! You will respect my creators! And you would do well to not defy me.

GISELA: Y-yes. I-I'm sorry.

T'IXU AXAHAI: Bow down. Kiss the floor. Or forget your interview.

GISELA: **shuffling noises**

T'IXU AXAHAI: Good. **deep inhale** Hello! I am the Earth Daughter. My name is T'ixu Axahai. I am the daughter of Zäna, Sacred Mother on the Moon, and Hyadi Dada, Sacred

Father on the Sun. I rule the desert and all its creatures. My believers are the Hñahñu people.

GISELA: I'm very pleased to be speaking with you today, T'ixu Axahai. My first question for you is: How is it possible for us to be communicating with each other at this moment?

T'IXU AXAHAI: What do you mean? Oh, I have the ability to make myself visible or not visible to the human eye.

GISELA: I mean language-wise. I speak English and a little Spanish, but the Otomí speak mostly Spanish and some still speak Hñahñu. I would've imagined that you only speak Hñahñu, but we are both speaking English. How is that possible?

T'IXU AXAHAI: I am not speaking English. You are understanding me in English.

GISELA: Uh...

T'IXU AXAHAI: Language is a human invention. We, the gods, gave you the ability to communicate. Just as we did animals, plants, the earth itself. All connecting pieces in nature are capable of communicating with each other. A dog can learn to communicate with a cat. A capybara with a crocodile. But humans... You all look the same. We gave you the same tools to communicate with each other. But you created language to connect with each other. To connect with your gods.

GISELA: **scribbling noises**

T'IXU AXAHAI: To better answer your question, in order for a human to speak to a god, they need to believe in or see the god. Humans can either open themselves up to that or I make myself seen. The language the human speaks does not matter.

GISELA: What about atheists? Non-believers? What did you do with them?

T'IXU AXAHAI: If I was particularly angry or bored, I would punish them. Play with their mortality. Other gods have their methods, but humans mostly did the work for us. I am sure you know this.

GISELA: Can you repeat what you said earlier when we first met? When I called you a "myth"?

T'IXU AXAHAI: Every god, every deity, every spirit that has ever been worshiped has existed until their believers stopped believing.

GISELA: What does that mean? Did we create our gods? Is that why there's so many different belief systems?

T'IXU AXAHAI: Sun and Moon, no! **heartly chuckling** Please, do not believe humans to be that powerful! **more chuckling* *cackling* *sighing** There is a story that accompanies my answer. We have our own creation story with our own creator. Just as the humans have a story that explains their existence and the gods that created them.

GISELA: Is it just a story? Is it true?

T'IXU AXAHAI: Yes, it is true. I was not there for it. I have three creation stories I can tell you. Creation of the Universe. My birth. Creation of the Otomí.

GISELA: Please, tell me!

T'IXU AXAHAI: Some details will sound familiar. Some gods took pieces of their creation story to make it seem as though they created the world, the universe. This was to make the humans believe we were their whole world. They had to trust us because we were their whole world. For they had to understand we had complete control over them. Let me start now. In the beginning, there was total darkness. There was a small beam of light, slowly it grew longer until a silhouette appeared. It grew and it groaned until it woke up. Alone in that darkness, in so much space, it started to create.

GISELA: What is "it"?

T'IXU AXAHAI: The Being. For as long as I can remember, it was always called The Being.

GISELA: Did the Being immediately start creating the gods?

T'IXU AXAHAI: No.

GISELA: Oh, okay. Can you elaborate on The Being?

T'IXU AXAHAI: The first creations it made were explosions of gasses and vapors. It created vibrant colors of nothing. Eventually it started to make stars, comets, asteroids and everything else in space. It established the universe and began making galaxies. Sometimes, it remained still to admire its creations. It watched its planets, stars, and asteroids take on lives of their own and react with each other. It decided to make the first gods. At first, they were all faceless, formless, transparent smaller beings.

GISELA: Where did it create the gods? On Earth?

T'IXU AXAHAI: In this galaxy. The Milky Way. I have no way of knowing what The Being did on the other galaxies. No god has tried leaving this galaxy. The Being only gave those gods awareness of the Milky Way, we are now limited to it.

GISELA: I see.

T'IXU AXAHAI: The Being gave the first gods territories on each of the planets they were created on. It gave them permission to create whatever they wanted. These gods wanted to be like the Being, so each one claimed certain parts of Earth and space. Some wanted dominion over the same things, like the Sun, or the oceans, or the Moon. The gods asked The Being to settle their disputes and The Being told them to simply share. They figured out how to change their appearances and molded them based on their chosen dominion.

GISELA: What else? When do humans come in?

T'IXU AXAHAI: Humans weren't created for a very long time. The gods played with different climates and terrains. They created small animals and large ones. For the most part,

they watched their creations exist. They observed how their creations could evolve based on their changing environments. They began to manipulate the evolution of all these plants and animals and played with scarcity and abundance to see how they would react. Throughout this time, The Being was watching the gods create and play. Eventually, it got bored of watching and left its creations to rule the Milky way. It left to create more galaxies and continues to expand the universe.

GISELA: Oh, wow. I didn't know there was a creation story that explains the expanding universe. Very interesting, thank you T'ixu Axahai.

T'IXU AXAHAI: That is the end of the story of the original creator. Do you have more questions?

GISELA: Not on that, no. Let me just stop this recording and start a new one for the next two stories.

End of Transcript One.

Three: Otomí Creation Story

FILE: **gmondragon_interview_trnscrip_otomi_201202_docx.**

Title: Interview Part Two

Interviewer: Gisela Mondragon

Interviewee: T'ixu Axahai, The Earth Daughter

Setting: Interview is conducted in a cave outside of Chicavasco, Hidalgo, Mexico

Date: May 14, 2012, Exact time is unknown, Approximately early afternoon

GISELA: Alright, great. I just checked the recordings to make sure they didn't self-combust or anything-

T'IXU AXAHAI: Sun and Moon, are your tools explosive? **shuffling sounds moving away from recording devices**

GISELA: Oh, no! Sorry, I was being dramatic. I just meant that I need to check that my files don't crash or malfunction. It's just what we recorded that I'm checking. The "tools" themselves won't malfunction unless they're old or poorly made, which none of them are! Alright, how about we get started on the next creation story?

T'IXU AXAHAI: The creation of the Hñahñu people. The creation of humans. Your creation begins during the time when the gods were playing with mortal creatures and evolution. The

gods realized they wanted to be worshiped, respected, and feared the same as The Being. They gave animals awareness of the gods and, for a short time, it satisfied them. Then, they wanted more. Each god wanted their own set of worshippers. By this time, The Being was long gone, so there was no one else but the gods could settle these issues. They knew they did not want to share anymore. Some gods, who lived in a land across the ocean, took notice of a little creature that began to stand on two legs. Soon, it exclusively traveled, hunted, and lived on just two legs. Those gods kept playing with that creatures' evolution and these creatures, with awareness of the gods, began to develop practices more...advanced than those of other living creatures.

GISELA: Such as?

T'IXU AXAHAI: Well, many animals live in packs. The early humans did the same thing. At first, all these sorts of packs just layed around, hunted together, and taught their young to hunt. A god gave you fire and you used it to hunt or to warm yourselves. You gathered around a fire pit then a god gave you a drum made out of animal skin and a sanded down, hollow log. You figured out how to dance.

GISELA: I see.

T'IXU AXAHAI: Humans liked to move around a lot. Not many animals moved around as you did. Each pack had their own travel patterns. All of them had awareness of the gods. They began to ask us how to worship us. The gods, the ones who first saw the humans' potential, took claim of those first humans. The rest of the gods were jealous and wanted their own set of worshippers. The gods, who had no humans to play with, began to play with the evolutions of the creatures near them. None of them came out right. Someone had the idea to use clay to mold their own set of humans. It always made more sense to create something new from the dirt, instead of trying to create something new from an already existing creature. Is this making sense?

GISELA: Yes...sorta.

T'IXU AXAHAI: By this time, there were several types of humans. My creators did not like many of them. The look was not right. My creators have established their dominion by this point. Mother on the Moon and Father on the Sun. They chose this land here to rule the Hñahñu people. The creation story, according to my creators, starts like this.

GISELA: **papers rifling**

T'IXU AXAHAI: Zäna fell from the Moon and landed in the valley. She was confused and alone. She looked up at the sky and waited for something else to fall. Soon, Hyadi Dada fell from the Sun and landed in the valley. They looked at each other and smiled. They took each other's hands and danced in circles. They created plants and animals from the dirt and gave

them roles. Plants were to give nutrients to the soil and shade to the animals. The small animals were to eat the plants, bigger animals were to eat the small animals, and the biggest animals were to eat the bigger animals. Zāna and Hyadi Dada ruled the land, the weather, and time. The land became out of balance. They admitted they couldn't take care of their creations and the land by themselves. First, they made humans out of clay. Father took a mound of clay and put it in Mother's palms. There she stood while Father made a human shape. He made them similar to his and Mother's likeness. They made several until they came to life and set them on the ground. They gave humans their own roles. They were to take from the land and its animals as long as they took care of the land and its animals. They were to pray before and after every hunt. Pray at every daybreak and give thanks to Zāna and Hyadi Dada for protecting them throughout the night.

GISELA: **silence**

T'IXU AXAHAI: That is the end of the Hñahñu creation story. Next is my birth story.

GISELA: Please.

T'IXU AXAHAI: After the humans had been created, they began to think too highly of themselves. They abused their power and brought scarcity upon themselves. It saddened Mother and angered Father. Father was set to rid the land of the humans, but Mother stopped him. She said they need help from someone. Someone who was below them, but above the humans. They decided to make smaller gods. Instead of taking from the dirt, they took from each dominion that needed a ruler. From the clouds, they made the Man of Wind and Rain. Plucking leaves from the trees, they made the Son of the Forest. From the carcass of a coyote, they made the Woman of Death. From the rocks in the mountains, they created me: the Daughter of the Earth. I rule the desert and all its creatures. I control the weather in this part of the land. I make harsh winds and the sun's rays as scorching as possible. My brothers and sisters concerned themselves with the natural phenomena of the land, but I served as a direct line from the humans to the gods.

GISELA: Great! Is that it?

T'IXU AXAHAI: Yes.

GISELA: This is good! I have what I need for now.

T'IXU AXAHAI: For now?

GISELA: Um.

End of Transcript Two.

Four: Finale, Her Wrath

Gisela turns off her devices and starts packing them into her backpack. Throughout the whole time she's been in T'ixu Axahai's cave, Gisela keeps putting her foot in her mouth and

angering the goddess. Somehow, she keeps evading T'ixu Axahai's true wrath but continues to push her limits.

"Yes, for now. I appreciate that you've allowed me to speak to you, but I also run the risk that no one will believe that a goddess showed herself to me, let alone interview one."

"I understand. It might have been a waste of time, after all. A waste of time for you, not me. Though time on this land is limited for the both of us, my time is infinite compared to yours." Her voice sounds cold, distant. The atmosphere shifted to a sinister feeling.

"Yeah, well...I guess all we can hope now is that your former believers will accept this evidence of your existence and, who knows, they might worship you again."

T'ixu Axahai offers Gisela a soft chuckle, "Yes. You may leave."

"Um, just one more thing?" T'ixu Axahai's expression hardens at the thought of another request, but she maintains her composure. Gisela continues, timidly, "Can you tell me the way back to town? Or, at least, the altar?"

"Oh! When you exit the cave, walk slightly to the left and keep going straight. You will make it before sundown."

Gisela thanks T'ixu Axahai one last time and makes her way out of the cave. When she's back in the open air, it feels like time hasn't changed for one second. The sun is equally beating down on her as it did hours ago. She drinks out of her Hydro Flask, but it does little to quench the thirst. The trek feels longer than it did earlier in the day. Gisela figures it must be because she's going in blind, hoping that she followed the goddesses directions correctly. After an hour, but it felt like twelve hours, Gisela sees a little shape in the distance. She empties out the last of her water and she quickens her pace. She drags her feet at the same time she tries to speed up. She tries to run like she's running in a dream. Almost like her brain is sending signals so she won't get out of bed and hurt herself, but her unconscious mind is trying and fighting to get to a destination. She reaches the altar. She thinks she reached the altar. Her body gives out and her face meets the ground.

After some hours...or maybe minutes...or days? After some time, Gisela tries to wake up. Her eyelids try to flutter open, but they're glued shut. Or maybe her eyelids can't understand she wants to wake up. She can see some light. Maybe they're giving way. She hears voices floating in and out earshot.

"Is she okay? ¡Ay, bendito sea Dios!"

"¡Ay, mi pierna! ¡No! ¡Ow, ow, ow!"

"No te preocupes, Rosendo. Viene pronto la curandera."

"¡Es mi culpa! ¡Por qué la llevé a las montañas!"

The voices stop talking. Finally, Gisela opens her eyes and she's welcomed by a woman's face.

She can't make out who the woman's face is. Meli. It must be Meli.

"Your uncle is hurt."

"Meli?" Gisela groans.

"No. Your friends are outside. Your uncle is asleep on the other side of...this small space." Gisela's eyes focus and she sees T'ixu Axahai, their faces merely inches away from each other.

"What are you doing here? Where am I?" Gisela tries to stretch her arms, but she can barely move.

"Do not exert yourself so much. You are dying, anyway."

"What?"

"You are dying. I made you sick with the water."

"Why?" Gisela squeezes her eyes shut then opens them again, trying to force some moisture into them.

T'ixu Axahai begins to explain herself. She had been fighting with the choice of playing with the human's life. Yes, she loved having company. Yes, Gisela was the first person T'ixu Axahai got to speak to for the first time in decades. There was one little thing that kept bothering the goddess. She knew, deep down, the human wanted to save her. She hated how presumptuous the human was behaving. She saw how she was behaving even before she stumbled into the cave. The desert is her domain and she can see all that goes on in it. She saw how Gisela begged her uncle to take her further into the desert, despite his reluctance. She saw how he managed to fend off the coyotes, but he hurt his leg. She saw how he noticed Gisela wasn't actually behind him. She saw how he made the decision to get help, instead of going back to find Gisela. She sees how he developed an infection from his injury. She saw how Gisela caused a lot of pain today. It angers T'ixu Axahai how one little human can do so much and still think she can save a god from dying.

Gisela begs and pleads with the goddess. She insists it wasn't her intention to cause so much trouble today. She understands how she can get carried away sometimes and she didn't mean to insult the goddess.

It isn't enough to move T'ixu Axahai. Instead, she continues to watch the human. Maybe she'll decide at the last second to show mercy. Or she won't.

"*Oye, ¿quién eres tú?*" Gisela and T'ixu Axahai turn their heads to the other side of the room to see Rosendo sitting up. "*Gisela, ¿quién es esta señora?*"

"Tío, please be- believe...believe me when I tell you this. *Ella es la Virgen del Desierto.*"

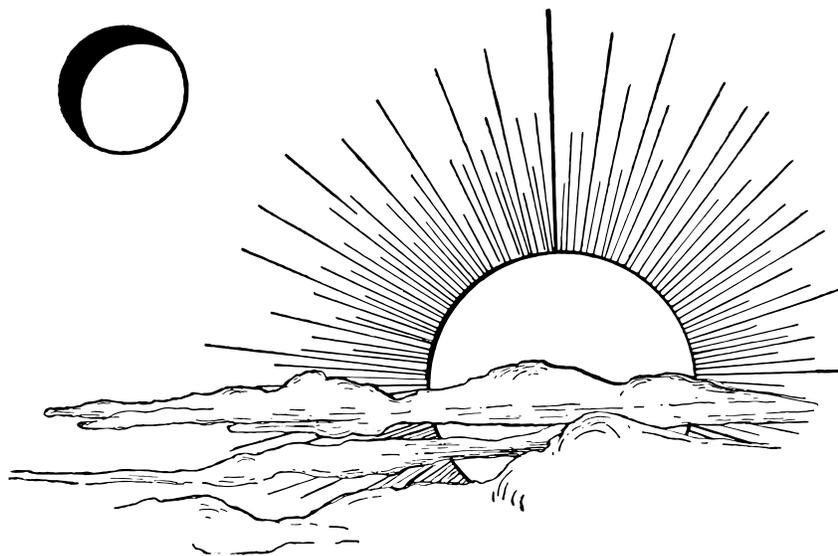
The tables turn and T'ixu Axahai is faced with a decision. She can prove her power and her wrath to one human or show the townspeople she is not the Virgin of the Desert.

Fin.

***GLOSSARY:**

- Otomí: Indigenous American group residing in the central Mexican region
- Hñahñu: Language variety of Otomí, also known as Otomí Valle del Mezquital, primarily spoken in Hidalgo, Mexico
- Zäna: the moon, moon goddess of the Otomí, associated with La Virgen de Guadalupe
- Hyadi Dada: fictionalized deity
- Hyadi: the sun
- Dada: father
- T'ixu Axahai: fictionalized deity
- T'ixu: daughter
- Axahai: throw dirt

*Provided by the writer, to be included with the published short story.



Beneath the Ice
By Alexa Martinez

My name is Qayat, I am 13 years old. I live in a place called Kodiak, located in “Russkaya Amerika” as they call it. For many years, my family has lived here. My parents’ parents have lived here, and even before them, their parents were here too. Although, the land had a different name then, and no Russians were there. My emaa tells me it was a little more peaceful then, and we had more of my favorite animal– the otter.

But I know that there’s more to here than the Russians, something far scarier that lies within the water. With the arrival of the Russian men, it stays hiding beneath the ice, only emerging once most people are away. My emaa says it’s called the Qalupalik, and I’d better stay away from the icy shores alone. Apparently it has long dark silky hair and sleek green skin. She tells me that the little kids are its favorite. She never told me what happens to the kids, and to be honest I don’t think I want to know.

My fear of the Qalupalik has lessened over the years. Maybe it’s because I’ve learned to keep my distance from the shores, or maybe because the Russian men have dominated the waters for fur trade, leaving little room for the Qalupalik to roam and look for wandering children. But that doesn’t mean it hasn’t been spotted. Over the course of maybe 2 two weeks, there have been numerous instances of the colonizers reportedly seeing some dark and slimy water monster. They were out catching otters on their boats when one of the men saw a flash of the Qalupalik. Since then, the legend has been circulating like wildfire. To them, it’s funny. They have no idea the monster they are seeing is real! Let alone a real monster, not some figment of their imagination. But we know the truth, my people. And I am very scared of what’s to come.

Today I saw a boy creeping along the shore. Instead of the tall, mature fur hunters I am used to seeing, this boy is small and seemingly careless. Younger than me probably. It started when I was playing with my suaruaq when I heard a giggle outside. The giggle startled me, and caused me to quickly hide the toy, for I am not to have it out right now. Mamaa and emaa would get angry if they knew I was playing with toys during winter. After hiding my suaruaq under a wool blanket, I peak my head outside where I then spot the boy.

He’s all alone, and I can’t see any adult Russians nearby. Where is this boy’s mamaa? I know other Sugpiaq are in their homes, but I doubt any of them are currently observing the boy as I am. I squint my eyes, confused on what the boy’s intentions are. I peer over the rigid wooden

edge of my windowsill, intently watching his every move. I can see him leaning over the edge of the ice, and looking into the water. He slowly begins crouching down with his arm extended out to touch the chilling waters.

But then something terrifying happens. The Qalupalik peaked its head up above from the water and stared at the boy, surely for only a few seconds. My heart dropped when I saw it. If I was so frozen in fear, I couldn't imagine what that boy felt. But the Qalupalik acted fast. In a flash it came up and grabbed that boy as if he were as light as air, and swiftly took him down under the water. The only things I was able to hear was the slight splashing of the water, and a gasp emitted from my own mouth.

The Qalupalik went back down under with the boy just as quickly as it did when it came up. The entire ordeal was surely less than five seconds. The boy didn't get much time to yell for help before he was dragged under the ice. It took me a few minutes to realize what had happened. Both mamaa and emaa are gone working for the Russians, so I really don't know what to do. Suddenly, there's yelling and footsteps outside that rip me away from my dazed state, and back into lucidity.

Cautiously I glance outside. I see it's a group of men, shouting in Russian. I can hear them repeating the word "Dima" over and over again. I never learned Russian, I never felt the need to. Why would I learn the language of the men who took my home? But I think I know why they're here. I bet they're looking for the boy. That poor boy probably heard the story of the water monster and got curious, deciding to look for it himself. I go to hide, but they see me looking out my window and begin to approach me.

I cower down when they come close, avoiding making eye contact. One of the men asks me questions with a thick accent and an aggressive tone, repeating "Dima" just as he was before. I don't know what you are saying, I'm sorry! I yell internally. I've never actually had to talk to one of these guys. I sheepishly look up, and he looks down. After a moment or two of non-conversated eye contact, he waves his hand at the rest of the men, signaling it is time to go. I see them turn on their heels to walk to the next house in the area, presumably to ask those people the same thing. Once again asking about "Dima". I could only assume he's asking about that boy, what else would it be?

I look back to the frigid waters and a chill runs through my spine. Dima is gone.

A Tale of Solaner the Artificer

By Jake Bellah

Solaner slowly walked towards his tent. Fashioned out of scraps from a polyester-polyurethane carport covering, and assorted other unidentifiable scraps of undecaying plastic material. He stacked the logs of firewood from today's expedition outside his humble shelter. With a prolonged sigh, he dropped himself down to the fire pit and prepared a little teepee of kindling to start a fire. Stacking new deadfall and logs in slowly increasing size, the gluttonous fire ate it all, and flared larger.

Now a sizable flame, he retreated within the shelter to fetch an implement to cook with. Grabbing a saucepan, he crossed the little forest clearing of his camp, to the stream that was flowing nearby and filled the pot with water. The pot had unfortunately captured a small frog. Gazing down, Solaner glared at the creature. It was a little guy, probably a juvenile. It was swimming in frantic circles in the pot. Solaner extended a dusty hand into the pot and fetched the little amphibian out. He muttered to it,

“You little rascal! Don't go pokin' your head round my pot, mister!”

The frog made a croaking noise, and hopped off of Solaner's hand back into the stream below.

Placing the pot onto the flame, Solaner perused his small garden for ingredients in his stew. An ear of corn, a plump tomato, and an onion would be suitable. Solaner picked each, dusted the tomato off on his pea coat, and tossed each in the pot. Reaching into his pack, he grasped a singular bullion cube. To many, worth its weight in gold, and lobbed it into the mix. A few minutes and a stir resulted in dinner. Solaner settled down into his chair, a ragged bean bag (missing most of the beans within) mounted on top of a dining chair, grabbed a bowl and ate his bounty. It wasn't the best stew in the whole wide world, but it would do.

Finishing up suppertime, Solaner rubbed his soup-stained lips on his jacket, beat out the fire, and headed into his tent. Tired as ever, he sluggishly took off his clothes, detached his prosthetic arm, and settled in for bed. But sleep would not come quick enough, before he heard a noise in the distance, SWOOSH.... CRASH!

An opportunity like this rarely presents itself. Hastily almost throwing himself out of bed, knocking over his bedside table on his way up, He grasped for his prosthetic arm, clicking it into his shoulder, the gears within started clicking and its internal RTG nuclear battery hummed to life. Throwing on his jumpsuit and jacket as fast as possible, he then grabbed his rifle and slung it over his shoulder. Racing outside, across the sky he saw a streak of white

smoke descending further into the thicket of the woods, a reddish-orange flame was flickering through the trees. He sprinted towards the woods, frantically loading his rifle, a few cartridges slipped through his fingers as he neared the site of the crash. Ducking into cover behind a boulder, rifle held firmly, he peered over the top to get a good look at the site of impact.

A once sleek cylindrical capsule had now been reduced to a much more banged-up and dented version of its former self. The shining brass-titanium alloy it was composed of had protected whatever stuff was inside from impact, but something was off. A shining patina had formed on the outside of the capsule. Approaching the meteoric visitor, Solaner noticed this peculiarity. Some of the space junk that falls from the sky is simply ancient satellites deorbiting, others may be cargo drops from any wayward unidentified craft that unfortunately descend onto this planet. Most of it though, is reduced to a sizzling hunk of melted metal by the time it reaches the surface, melded together into some amalgamation of whatever material it was composed of due to the thick atmosphere of this world. It was exceedingly rare for Solaner to encounter an object that survived impact in any regard, let alone arrived “graciously” down to the planet’s surface.

The unknown visitor was burning white-hot on the bottom, scorching the dirt beneath it. Upon further examination of it, Solaner noticed that the pod was riveted together, a subtle clockwork *tick, tock, tick* emanating from within.

“What ar’ you-”

A screeching, piercing scream emanated from deeper within the cedar forest glade. It was nearly pitch black, the only light for miles around being the glowing hull of the cosmic visitor, and the small forest fire it had created. Undeniably, this had attracted the attention of the local scavenger groups. Bands of crazed people that had lost all semblance of sanity, now roaming in a loose confederation that’s only driving force is the forced acquisition of others things. Solaner had encountered these folk many times before, their confrontations usually resulted in the scavs losing their looted bounty, or their lives.

Solaner knew the scavs were approaching fast. It would be hard to miss the wailing, and Solaner was not going to lose this cargo to any odd scavenger. He brought his rifle to his chest. A Winchester Model 94 lever action, an ancient design, it has seen many battles and held fast against the test of time. One issue, though; Solaner’s arm. A brass contraption, although robust, requires power. The RTG battery within was malfunctioning. As he aligns the sights into the undergrowth, a gear in his arm slips, the alignment breaks. His arm falls limp as the battery contained within its brass frame blinks orange.

“Damn,” He mutters to himself.

The scavs present themselves from within the forest. Not fully surrounding Solaner and his cosmic visitor, but blocking his escape nonetheless. The scavs are a 10 strong band of miscreants, clad in scrap metal implements, wearing coveralls, crude painted face coverings. One man brandishes a great hammer made of an electronic heat sink, crudely welded, or perhaps melted to a curtain hanger. Another carries a weapon commonly called a whistler. A curved sword called a Khopesh, covered in terrible serrations that howl in the wind as the blade is swung. It's a weapon not meant for a swift kill, but to eviscerate any unfortunate soul on the wrong side of its blade.

Solaner has a contingency plan, however. Sewn into the lining of his jacket is a special type of grenade, one of his most prized finds, a v4 Military Stunning and Suppression grenade. A great tool, its variants used by many militaries, but this version was hand modified by Solaner, designed to release its whole payload at once. He dropped his rifle to the ground, pulled his jacket off of his shoulders, and ripped the bottom part off in one fluid motion. The scavengers grew close, the one wielding the whistler-blade let out a grating screech as he lunged towards Solaner. Solaner brought the grenade into his hand, it's a gray plastic cylindrical tube, almost like a flare. Twisting the top, and pulling the cap off he threw it straight up into the air and made his best attempt to cover his ears. A brilliant purple flash emanated from the object, it hung in the air for a moment before exploding out a shockwave that knocked and concussed the approaching scavs. Their eardrums ruptured by the blast, as they attempted to rise to their feet, Solaner was now brandishing his rifle, the barrel staring down the scavengers. They pleaded for their lives in scavtongue. A horrid language, described by many as the sound it makes when a piece of silverware scrapes the bottom of a ceramic plate, mixed with the screeches of a dying animal. Their pleas fell on (literally) deaf ears, and Solaner brought his finger to the trigger. But something stopped him. The scav staring him down had only half a crude war veil covering her face. She had to be about only 13 years old. Solaner thought to himself, *I can't... I just can't do it...*

“SCRAM! GET OUT OF HERE!” he yelled at the girl.

She struggled to her feet, yelping as she ran away into the forest.

Solaner now stood idle in the clearing. He sighed,

“Goddammit... all for what! For this... thing...”

He attempted to extend out his defunct prosthesis towards the capsule.

The capsule's only response was a simple *tick, tock, tick, tock*.

His arm unfortunately failed to function at a task as simple as that. With a broken appendage, and lack of trump card for any scavs in the area that doubtless heard the cries of their brethren, and the loud bang of the stun grenade, there was no point to hanging around here. Solaner took up his torn jacket and fashioned it into a crude sling around his shoulder to support his broken arm. He slowly walked back towards camp.

The embers of the fire were dwindling into ash, his little tent stood, same as it was, awaiting its owner for the sweet release of rest. Solaner stumbled into his home, its plastic and canvas walls subtly blowing in the wind. Taking off his jumpsuit for the night, he descended into his simple bed. Finally, some sleep...

Awaking to sublime sunlight, Solaner groaned, and with a stretch brought himself up sitting on his bedside. As he looked into his little tent-house, he took a much better examination of the torn jacket hanging on the wall beside him. It was his favorite, and the grenade had been sewn into the lining of it to be used in a truly emergent situation. His mind drifted to the capsule. What could be in it? What was so important to have been able to survive impact? Could it be a way off this planet? no, that was too far fetched. A simple bronze canister-lookin' thing couldn't be a spaceship. But that curiosity hung in his mind. He sat down at a small wooden work table he had set up inside his home. He placed his broken arm onto the table and opened the outer cage-like casing. Inside was an intricate set of gears, cogs, pistons and other little bits of intrigue. He got to work realigning the machinery within to properly function again.

Some time had passed as he was working on his arm. Each tiny component needs to function nigh perfectly for his arm to work in its intended way. The major issue was the battery. It's an RTG, or Radioisotope Thermoelectric Generator. A power generation device that uses the decay of plutonium-238 to generate power. The problem was that his battery was running out of power. Solaner had crafted this battery himself. Scavenging old abandoned reactors yielded enough of the volatile material required to craft a battery that he wouldn't have to worry about replacing for a long time. But a long time had passed since he first crafted it, and now it was finally reaching the end of its lifespan. For now though, he would have to manage. After repairing his arm, Solaner decided it would be a good time to head outside and make lunch. But walking outside, he remembered about the cylinder.

It wouldn't hurt just to go on a quick expedition. Plus those scavs probably already stole it anyway. Might as well go check. Solaner thought to himself. He rushed back into the tent to

grab his adventuring bag. A cross body canvas bag that had contained within anything he'd need to deal with salvaging the cargo, should it still be there. Venturing forth into the woods, he followed the path towards the crash site. Upon approaching, the capsule had lost its hot glow. It now shimmered in the light of the clearing it had carved for itself. Solaner grew closer. The outside of the capsule was pretty rough, it was covered in tiny dents, those probably wouldn't have come from reentry into the atmosphere. It must have been sitting in space for a long time to accrue that many micrometeorite scars. Upon the top part of the capsule was an inscription:

ЕСЛИ НАЙДЕНЫ, ПОЖАЛУЙСТА, ВЕРНИТЕСЬ В ОТДЕЛЕНИЕ ФИЗИЧЕСКИХ
ИСПЫТАНИЙ БЛИЖНЕЙ СКОРОСТИ СВЕТА.
СССР, 1964 год.

He slung open his pack and dug around inside and brought out a thick little book. It was a translation atlas, he flipped through the pages looking for the mystery language. Syntharic, Zentari, Ancient Galactic Common, Lunaric, Mandarin, Arabic. Nothing came up, he flipped to the back section. "On Denoting Typefaces." It read. Shuffling further through the different systems of writing, Aldeon, Serketi, Chinese, Latin, and finally there it was: Cyrillic. Translating the inscription, it read:

IF FOUND PLEASE RETURN TO NEAR LIGHTSPEED PHYSICAL TESTING
DIVISION
USSR, 1964.

Running his hand along the capsule, its familiar, *tick tock tick tock* was rumbling the whole outside of the capsule. It was a reverberation that passed into Solaner's hand and made it feel almost numb, like it was falling asleep.

Seconds later, the capsule begins to rumble. One by one, the rivets holding the front plate of it begin to fly off with a huff of steam escaping out of the holes they once occupied. Solaner jumped back, and after all the rivets flew off, it was silent for a second. Then, the whole brass colored plate shot off the front of the capsule. The interior was enshrouded in a thick milky yellow haze that slowly crept onto the ground beneath it. Inside a shrouded figure slowly materialized into view. A man, clad in an orange spacesuit was sitting upright inside of the capsule. His suit was covered in many indecipherable technological implements, the sun

protection visor on his helmet hid his face from view. Like a pharaoh rising from a sarcophagus, an arm sticks out and grasps the side of the capsule. Another arm shoots out, grabbing the other side of the capsule. The man hoists himself forth. One foot falls to the ground, knocking the haze aside. He turns to face Solaner.

“Какой красивый экземпляр! Ух ты, ты даже почти не понимаешь-”

The man stops with a pause, and raises his wrist mounted computer up to his helmet. Solaner takes a step back, staring intently at the spaceman. The spaceman twiddles a few buttons on his wrist computer, and speaks again,

“Кхм, прилло my friend!”

His voice is turned from fluent Russian to a somewhat robotic translation conducted by his suit.

“Allow me to repeat myself, I appear to have returned from a successful voyage, could you provide me with data to locate your nearest city or telephone!”

Solaner stares, dumbfounded at the cosmonaut. What kind of guy hitches a ride in a drop pod?

The man in the suit takes a more confrontational stance.

“Uh.. Hello? Do you speak?”

Solaner lets out a distended sigh. Why, why of all the things to fall out of the sky did it have to be some idiot who decided a drop pod would be a good idea to travel with?

Solaner's expression shifts from confusion to irritation as he processes the situation. With a resigned tone, he says,

"Congratulations on your 'successful voyage,' spaceman. You've landed in the middle of nowhere. This planet is the junkyard of the universe."

He gestures towards the vast, desolate landscape surrounding them, emphasizing the cosmonaut's predicament. The cosmonaut's robotic translation device attempts to process Solaner's words, producing a garbled response in the spaceman's native language. Frustrated, the cosmonaut fiddles with his wrist computer once more, attempting to adjust the translation settings. Solaner watches the futile attempts with a mix of amusement and annoyance, wondering how he got stuck dealing with this space buffoon. As the cosmonaut continues to tinker with his equipment, he peers back into the capsule whence he came.

It was pretty bare on the inside, covered in technological gobbledygook. Random displays flickered with strange readings and measurements. A solitary leather seat and harness rest in the middle of the capsule. Those might do nicely to replace his unfortunate chair at home. But one more thing catches his interest. On the spaceman's back sits an EVA pack, used to provide oxygen to the man inside. It's marked with a symbol, a radiation warning. An idea pops into Solaner's head. What if this man's suit contains the required material to fix his arm?

Before he continued daydreaming, a loud drumming rhythm emanated from deep within the forest. War drums of a scav clan made booming echoes through the trees. Solaner mutters, "Scavs.."

He gestures to the spaceman, "Hey tin can!"

The spaceman looks up from his computer and looks at Solaner, "You wanna live to tomorrow right?"

The spaceman attempts to say something, but before his translator can finish processing, Solaner cuts him off, "Then start running!"

Solaner pulled the spaceman by the arm and started to dash towards his camp. The spaceman trudged behind

"Hey tin can!" Solaner yells at him

"What the hell is going on!" The machine voice sputters back

"Alright tin can, lemme give you the low-down! There are bad people who want you and your pretty suit! Do you have a weapon?!"

The spaceman shakes his head.

Solaner says with strained breaths, "Well, you're gonna need one!"

As they arrive back to camp, the scavenger war drums grow even louder.

Solaner runs inside his tent and ruffles through his equipment. He pulls out a crude machete and throws it to the spaceman. He fumbles the weapon in his hands. Solaner grabs a handful of ammunition and stuffs it into his jumpsuit pockets. He shoves aside some assorted junk on his desk to grab a key inside a rusted coffee tin. He quickly whips around and plunges the key into a small safe hidden behind his bed. The screeching of the scavenger army now drowns out any other noise. Solaner grabs a small trinket from within the box. It's a smooth metallic sphere with many wires flowing from different random parts. A socket sits on the top.

Solaner rushes outside, the spaceman closely following behind. The scavengers have them surrounded. Solaner yells to the spaceman, "Hey buddy! You're gonna wanna duck!"

The scavengers slowly begin to walk forward towards the center of the camp. Solaner throws himself back first into the ground. The spaceman follows closely behind. Solaner opens the

cage of his arm and sees the RTG contained within. He pauses for a moment, then rips it out, his arm sputtering and falling limp as the battery is removed. In the other hand, he takes the sphere and aligns the socket with the RTG. Electricity jumps between the two, sparking through the air as Solaner brings them close together. The RTG battery magnetized into the slot of the sphere. A recessed display starts a 5 second countdown within the sphere. Solaner hucks the grenade straight up into the air. The scavengers, brandishing their signature whistler blades, sprint towards the duo on the ground. The timer ticks down as the grenade flies through the air. One of the scavengers lunges into the air, another follows suit. The makeshift grenade's counter ticks down. The instant it reaches zero, a horizontal, head level blast of ultrahot plasma flies out in all directions from the center of its detonation. In a millisecond, the heads of all the scavengers are seared clean off their necks. The ones flying through the air are split in twain. The nearby trees are cut clean off their stumps, and fall to the ground in a burning mess. The top of Solaner's tent is scorched clean off. A wild mess of conflagration occurs in less than a second, and it's only survivors, the spaceman and Solaner.

Solaner and the spaceman rise to their feet.

“What's your name tin can?”

“Nikolai”

“Good stuff, Nikolai”

The pair shake hands and stare at the burning forest near them.

“Welp, Nikolai” says Solaner “Time to get a move on!”

Nikolai nods.

See you next year!
Thank you for sharing your stories with us.



Keep an eye out for our 2025 call for submissions!
You can email your work or questions to:
enjambred.submissions@gmail.com



“I am the eye with which the Universe
Beholds itself, and knows it is divine;
All harmony of instrument or verse,
All prophecy, all medicine, is mine,
All light of art or nature; - to my song
Victory and praise in its own right belong.”

-Percy Bysshe Shelley, “Hymn Of Apollo”