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UNDERGRADUATE JOURNAL OF THE ARTS

Spring 2024

This issue is dedicated to Rebecca Schultz,
with love and adoration.

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FOREWORD

This issue of New Forum was printed with the health of our planet vividly in mind, and for this we chose California Green Press. CGP uses 100% Post-Consumer Waste (PCW) recycled papers and soy-based/vegetable-based inks with low Volatile Organic Compounds (VOC) output. We intend to minimize our carbon footprint and ensure the materials we produce are as sustainably made as possible. It is our hope that publishing undergraduate creative work can be sutured with a continued sustainable practice.

New Forum wishes to thank The Green Initiative Fund for their generous contribution. For their advice, encouragement, and support, the editors also wish to thank Elizabeth Allen and Rebecca Schultz.

EDITORS' NOTE

On Nakba Day, May 15th at 1:30 p.m., students, staff, faculty, and community members gathered before Rowland Hall, demanding that UC Irvine disclose and divest their fiscal support of the genocide in Gaza, and to provide amnesty for student activists suspended for leading the call for a liberated Palestine. There was no violence at this rally. No obstructed walkways. No threats to safety. In fact, organizers asked those present again and again to make space for the expanded encampment—which while short-lived, was beautifully coordinated. Some organizers dragged tents while others moved green plastic or wood barricades. A banner was hung from Alex Odeh Hall.

Shortly after honoring this Orange County martyr, a zotAlert notified all of campus of a "violent protest," followed by a litany of notices to avoid the area. Such flagrant misinformation is a dangerous use of rhetoric. Chancellor Gillman knows this and wasted no time spruiking a false narrative, deploying real weapons as well as words to suppress the truth. 23 police departments responded to the university's call for mutual aid, appeared in riot gear to brutalize peaceful protestors and clear the Gaza Solidarity Encampment, which up until then had been seventeen days strong. All remains of the encampment, including the student art it housed, was power-washed the next day—as if 47 arrests didn't just happen here. As if when university admin-

istration actively violates the safety of its student body, we're supposed to look away.

As a journal of the arts, New Forum condemns the university's silence about its ties to the ongoing genocide of the Palestinian people. We also condemn the university's attempt to silence pro-Palestinian efforts by targetting student organizers with disciplinary action. LESS THAN ONE WEEK after Nakba Day, UCI suspended all arrested students, severing their access to campus and all University housing facilities. Students who have suffered the most violence from police and administrative aggression are now at risk of houselessness because UCI refuses to choose people over profit. We support UCI Divest and other organizations in their rightful demand that the university DISCLOSE, DIVEST, DELINK, REINVEST, PROVIDE AMNESTY to student protestors, ABOLISH CAMPUS POLICING, and CORRECT THE NARRATIVE.

We recognize that it is a privilege to have a space for student creativity when there are no more schools in Gaza. Our hope is that this statement only strengthens the force of so many others denouncing UCI's actions. We call on our readers, contributors, and friends to show up where they can in support of a free Palestine. Boycott companies complicit in Israel's genocide, contact your representatives and professors, engage with resources such as @ucidivest and @sjp.uci. ALL EYES ON RAFAH.

In solidarity,
New Forum

SAMMY MERABET

Mulch

The flower shop was fixed to an uphill, stoney spot in downtown San Francisco—two trolley transfers away from the Tenderloin, and close enough to Union Square to keep business seeping towards it. This held true even as summer came and took with it the last vestiges of holiday—not many freaks buying flowers for Fourth of July—and left, in their place, heat, the 80°F that slicked the shoes and jeans of your average San Franciscan with sweat each time they ventured out for drinks, or work, or flowers. Shouldering into the shop's walls were a boutique and a bakery, and on either side of those were a convenience store and some apartments, and past that didn't matter: a spread of buildings whose insides would be plucked and weeded and replaced with something equally as pretty and unremarkable as the last, all planted in the same, no-good soil.

Out of that dirt sprang the shop's own walls: brick-layered, dusty, left in a cube. It was smaller than the rest. Its brick was chipped, though not faded, still as red and spiteful as the day the shop opened. A sign in a tacky, faux-Parisian font read FLOWERS FOR TATA just above two glass doors that had the same sprawled across them. Underneath FOR TATA on the right door were the store's hours: Saturday – Thursday, 10:00-5:00; Friday, 12:00 to 3:00. Underneath FLOWERS on the left door was a clip-art outline of a ponytailed woman.

Though it was just a silhouette, Hanifa Hayes couldn't help but read some amount of mocking, or pity, or something in the emptiness of the decal as she stood outside the shop, having just

gotten hired as the store's first and only assistant.

Her hand was still recovering from the grip of the shop's owner—her new boss—and still outstretched, too, as he had scurried her off and out of the shop just after giving her the job. Had he slammed the door even a second sooner, he'd have taken her hand with him, and then what would he have done? Asked her to clean it up come Monday, she supposed, because hand or no, she was not planning on heading back in there until it was time to clock in. Not after being pushed out like that. Too awkward.

She found herself, and all her twenty-five years, staring back in the glass of the guillotine door. A tie her father had lent her was tightened around the collar of her white button-up, tucked into some black men's pants that she had thrifted—she liked the pockets. Had it not been for her undercut, or her piercings, or her skin, she would have looked just like a Mormon boy, really, which made her chuckle. She giggled in the door until she felt the dull pain from her feet that she had been ignoring the past hour suddenly cry for attention. The night before, she had spent hours cleaning her one decent pair of sneakers in preparation for the interview. Decent is what she called them—she had gotten them a year ago, and from the closet of a girlfriend who had gotten them from some other girlfriend. During her cleaning, she had scrubbed and picked off what little was left of her soles, leaving the shoes a painful exercise in put-togetherness. She had done this at least twice a week for the past three months, each failed interview getting her to scrub a little harder, as if that could make up for bad luck, or brown skin, or butchness. Their hard, rough interiors were exposed, now, and they scraped against the back of her feet as she walked and kept them from recovering as she stood. She couldn't afford to buy new ones.

Fuck. Thank God she had gotten this job. *Hamdullah.*

Hanifa turned to leave, but stopped herself. She looked past her reflection and towards her new boss. Nabil. That was his name. The exchange of his name and hers took up about half the interview. The other half:

You are Arab, too.

Yes.

Right. Come in Monday, then.

He was looking away from the front door, placing vases along shelves in the back. It made for easy spying. He was large, with bulky, toned arms (Did working with flowers get you that built? She had something to look forward to, if so.), but a beer gut like her dad's. He seemed about his age, too. Draped over the gut was a pink apron, with the same clip-art as the door.

Was it mocking that Hanifa read into that silhouette? Warning? Or was it a welcoming? She struggled with reading people—especially low-res, first-page-of-a-Google-search facsimiles of them—but it never stopped her from trying. She stared at the back of Nabil's head, hoping he'd turn around so that she could get a sense for him. A hold for her aching-feet and her worn-out shoes to climb onto, so that she could prepare herself for the man that'd she'd be giving the better portion of her week over to. But he never gave it to her, staying steadily fixated away from her eyes until she left.

Nabil did grant her some info on Monday. He taught her how to use the register, and all the rusty spots on it to avoid, since he couldn't cover a tetanus bill (or a lawsuit over one). He taught her about vases, and about the materials that made them. He taught her which ones were heavy, and told her to call him if she needed to lift them. She showed him that she could lift them just fine, thank you, and could even get two of them, if needed. He nodded at that, knocking her out of her boast with a seriousness she hadn't expected; then, he turned her to a different set of even heavier vases. Told her that he'd call her if they needed to be moved. Muttered something about his back. She laughed. He turned away, and let out a deep, hearty giggle. Three of them. They were rough, with hard consonant sounds that blew out and hit his upper teeth before falling flat to the ground. Old guys laugh weird. That was something. He was an old guy who laughed weird.

And, yes, he taught her about flowers.

To do so, he pulled out a sheet of paper, and began to unfold it, before asking: "Arabic? You speak Arabic?"

"No," Hanifa said, pausing a beat-and-a-quarter too longer before adding, "Well... A few curse words?"

She threw out her seeds of a joke, but fucked it up by doubting herself. She realized that her boss might not be the type of guy to find the fact that you can say *Go fuck your mother!* to be amusing. As a kid, she had found out that it was about 50/50 on which of her uncles would find it funny, and which would give her a lecture about ladylike values. Never mind that it was her mother who taught it to her. Her mother, who could read Arabic better than any of the men of her family. Her mother, who had thought about teaching Hanifa, but had thrown out that idea about the same time airports got a bit more annoying—about the same time that she had settled on the last name Hayes as a safe, inoffensive pick.

Anyways. She threw out the seeds. Bad harvest. No weird laugh.

Instead, Nabil tucked the paper back away, and pulled out another one. This one was folded a bit more messily. As he shoved it into Hanifa's hands, she saw the creases splitting at a slight diagonal. But the sloppy folding was a feint; inside were rows and columns of various printed images of flowers, each annotated with detailed notes (seasonal timing, suggested pairing options, one-word meanings ascribed to them by some blog or textbook or Ancient Greek mythos) in beautiful, inked strokes. Each letter was so marvelously aligned, leading and kerning ever-so-consistent. It wasn't cursive, because it didn't need to be. There was a practicality to it. It was made to be read, first and foremost. To Hanifa, whose letters sunk and rose out of line at will, this note felt refined, holy.

Was the other note the same, but in Arabic? She thought of asking to see it, but felt embarrassed that she wouldn't be able to read it. What a shame! She had always admired Arabic calligraphy. At a TSA line's distance away from it, at least.

He ran through the list with her, pausing every so often to talk

seasonality: how marigolds would bloom during the summer if the Bay's clouds cleared out, and how their stems would give out as they hunched over to pick up petals that they had lost to the heat or the cold, their pigments faded to reveal worse, uglier pigments that had always been there, but had been outshone by youthful vigor; others, he said, would grow on—perennial. He said to run through the list a few more times on her own, or just check it as she needed. The rest of her floristry lessons would be on how to sell the flowers—more important than the flowers themselves, since Nabil would handle that, apparently growing a few (roses, hyacinths) in his own garden and buying the rest. For most of the rest of the week, Hanifa would watch from a stool behind the register, while Nabil stood and sold.

She picked up a lot in that time; Nabil would send her to fetch a vase for this customer or that bouquet. Customers never seemed to come one-at-time to Tata's. The shop would be empty, and then every married man in the Bay would flock to Nabil, and he'd handle them slowly, with a small, self-satisfied smile. He never had them get into lines, allowing small crowds to grow in front of him. Never first-come, first-serve. He knew their needs better than they did, and ordered them accordingly. First, fathers buying flowers for children—usually adults, but sometimes there'd be a man looking to buy his toddler a sunflower or two, which Nabil seemed to appreciate. Then, funerals. Condolences. For siblings-in-law, or parents. These conversations took time; his suggestions were always similar, but he listened to the specifics regardless. He'd nod, and close his eyes, and think on it, before handing over the same bouquet he gave to the last dead second cousin.

He saved the men looking for anniversary and birthday presents for last. They got feisty, at times, being made to wait so long, but never left. Hanifa soon figured out this was because he appeared to have a perfect record. Internet reviews raving about how he saved their marriage, or making stupid jokes about the nights they had because of him and his flowers. During many shifts, men would burst in, gripping cash tight into their fists. Hanifa would

burst in, gripping cash tight into their fists. Hanifa would think they were a new customer, but Nabil would greet them with familiarity. They'd throw the money down into the tip jar, and some would even hug Nabil. Some would hug with no money to tip at all. These were the only ones Nabil ever hugged back.

He worked these married men skillfully. Then, when women entered the shop (and there were a few), he'd have Hanifa take the lead. She'd stutter and blush her way through taking the customer's order, and type it into the register, and they'd leave. It never seemed to be as spiritual of an experience as Nabil, but he always patted her on the shoulder afterwards. Then, on Hanifa's third day, a girl her age walked in, looking for flowers for her fiancée. Hanifa suggested a bouquet of pink zinnias that she had seen Nabil recommend a half hour prior, which felt like cheating. On the sheet, zinnias meant "goodness" and "memory." *Is any of this shit even real*, she thought? It didn't feel like flower-making to mindlessly pull from buzzwords—not any more than it felt like anatomy to, as a kid, learn that a certain shape colored red meant "heart"; not any more than it felt like emotional experience to have learned that "heart" meant "love."

Hanifa almost went to grab the zinnias, but just before she moved from the register, she saw the woman's engagement ring—jet-black and smooth. She complimented it, having never seen a black engagement ring before. And Hanifa knew then that pink zinnias weren't right for her. Instead, she turned to their stock and, after a moment, grabbed a bouquet of anemones: whose white petals laid and layered on-top-of-one another, all circling dark clusters of anthers and stigma at the center. Hanifa had not known that they were anemones, or what buzzword or feeling they were said to be. But that center—black and jutting out of petals holding one another—seemed to be of the same material as the ring and its owner, and, more importantly, their counterparts. The woman seemed to agree, and she cussed a bit out of excitement. And she eagerly paid for them, and she tipped, and she left, and Nabil patted Hanifa's shoulders twice that time, instead

of just once.

He gave her all the tip, too. It was $10. She thought about using it to buy lunch, booze, or new shoes. She took out her phone and calculated what her paycheck would be at the end of the week. She typed it in again, and then once more. She tucked the bill into her wallet, and went hungry and sober, her heels still scratched against the deteriorating backs of her shoes.

With all white customers, regardless of gender, Nabil introduced himself as Bill. That, the "Tata" of the shop's name and the font it was written in, and the random Bastille Day sale sign he had put up the other day—no sicko is buying Bastille Day flowers in America, and if they are, they should be shot dead—clicked together. He was leaning into the French thing. But why?

Hanifa knew passing. She wasn't herself, but she knew it. Nabil was not passing. No French person spending most of his day inside tanned that dark, not in San Francisco. His hair, though retreating up North like a *pied noir*, was still curled, and tangled with his thick eyebrows. He wore a bronze *hamsa* charm on a cheap necklace chain around his neck constantly, and always quick to mutter something in Arabic, white people around or not. He must be, then, from the Maghreb. Some of Hanifa's family held onto French a bit stronger than others.

So, at the end of her first week, she decided to ask. She had gotten comfortable enough with him that words and conversations were no longer as hard to sow as they had been.

"So," said Hanifa, as she sprayed some Windex onto a vase. "How much French do you speak?"

"Hmph? Oh." He let out a husk of a sigh, and then looked up for a moment, thinking. He took enough time that Hanifa was able to figure out that the answer could have been *Not that much!* Instead, he returned, and, in a quiet voice, said "*...Merde. Connard. Nique ta mère.*"

"Huh?"

"Just that. *Merde. Connard. Nique ta mère.*"

"Oh."

She wiped down the vase. She shuffled a bit to the left, and sprayed the vase next to it.

"Well, then what part of the Maghreb are you from?" It was an assumption, yeah, but the sort she felt confident taking as a given. "My family's from all over, but my parents are from Tuni—"

"I'm not from the Maghreb," Nabil said, dumbfounded. He was staring blankly at Hanifa now, like he hadn't even imagined her thinking that. Then, he got sheepish, realizing he cut her off. "Sorry. Your parents? Tunisia, it's a nice country."

"No, it's fine—I mean, it is a nice country, better than fine, *you're* fine for, uh, cutting me off? But..." She meant to explain all of her reasoning for him being a surefire Maghreb, but it all seemed to crumble under the reality that he, apparently, was not. Explaining her misunderstanding would have taken more energy than just letting it wither away.

Wipe. Shimmy to the left. Spray. One more approach.

"So, uh, *where* are you from, then?"

"*...Oh!*" Nabil crossed his arms and slammed them into his chest, which seemed to push out a great laugh, louder than any other noise she had heard him make yet, full of life, and age, and the pleasure of knowing something that she did not. "I am not telling you that. Yes, no, I am not telling you that."

It was Hanifa's turn to be quiet, now. She returned to work as Nabil continued to laugh. She sprayed every vase, and the register, and the counter, until all she had left to potentially spray was Nabil, which, admittedly, was rather tempting, as he had evolved into a full guffaw seeing how confused and angry he had gotten her. She took a deep breath, dropped the Windex, and turned to him.

"Syria."

It took him a second to realize what she was asking, and another few seconds after that to slow his laughing down enough to answer, "No."

"Egypt."

"No."

"UAE?"

"No."

And this went on like that for the rest of the shift: Hanifa listing Arab nation after Arab nation, and Nabil refusing each one. Sometimes, she'd list one, and he'd stop laughing and react in the most visceral disgust before breaking down laughing once more. She cursed herself for not knowing enough about geopolitics to take these moments as clues. Eventually, she'd listed all the ones that she could think of—knowing that she had missed a lot and repeated more than a few. She groaned.

"Come on," said Nabil, tears in his eyes. "Your parents never taught you?"

"Taught me what, exactly?"

He leaned in closer to her, and put on a serious face. "How to *smell* it," he whispered, miming out looking around, like he was afraid of getting caught, before he continued, "How to *smell* the Arab on someone." He grimaced, and theatrically huffed out air from his nose. Then, he started to laugh again.

That quieted her again. *Smell*. A worry of hers that had been shrunk inside a hard little coat, unbeknownst to others and forgotten by herself over seasons and years. This little exchange with Nabil (which, though she had certainly gotten heated during, had been *some* amount of fun, as getting mad can often be) soaked it in humiliation, and cracked it open. And now, germinated, it pushed its way out.

She *couldn't* smell it. Her parents had never taught her, but she always knew they could have. She saw them do it themselves. Her mom would bump into some Arab stranger and instantly know what to say to them to get them happy, or outraged. Her dad could tell what country an Arab was from by smelling their food a block away. He would take her to the market, and ask, *Can you smell that? No. That cinnamon smell, it's Moroccan. Can't you smell that?* Nope. He'd be sad, for a minute, but would cheer back up eventually. Because he would be able to smell it, and that was reason to be happy by himself. But she wasn't ever able to. She

couldn't.

And she couldn't smell flowers, either. She had begun to get worried about that, over the week she had been working there. She could never do it before, but assumed that something in her nose or brain would kick in. It didn't come, though. The shop always smelled like wet grass. Fresh? Sure. Different? No. She wanted it to smell as different as the petals, thorns, leaves, stems, pistils, stamen, and litter made them look. She wanted to smell where Nabil was from, if he wasn't going to tell her. She wanted to smell those dishes her father would bring her by, that she knew now, if she returned to those markets, she'd be unable to afford.

She pursed her lips, and dug her nails into her cheek, and looked away, and didn't say anything for quite some time. Somehow, Nabil eventually managed to pick up on one of these subtle signs of sadness, and stopped laughing. He stood there for a moment and made a micro-motion to reach out to her, but stopped. He turned around to go back to work, but stopped. Finally, he pulled out an envelope, and tossed it in front of her. It was her paycheck

"If you don't have any other answers, Arab always works fine," he said, and then looked away, adding. "Or Oriental."

It managed to get a smile out of Hanifa. Both because of its absurdity, and because rent was due soon, and, God, she needed the money.

She had hoped that her mom could offer some explanation for how he had acted, and so she ranted as the two hopped on and off the trolley, entering bookstores and peering into tea shops, passing by parks where kids jostled into one another and bars where day-drinkers did the same. She kept talking, pausing once to let her mom point out a new book, and again when they passed a tech-guy taking a loud phone call as he walked by—partly to eavesdrop on his conversation, partly to make sure he couldn't eavesdrop on hers, and partly out of shock for his outfit: an expensive-looking suit coat over a t-shirt for some kitschy-looking startup. Pick one, asshole. Pick one. No one else here gets to pick.

So, pick one.

When she finally had told all that had happened, she let out a sigh. She had left out how she had gotten sad, instead jumping straight from his smelling comment to his Oriental-paycheck maneuver. She looked at her mom, expecting her to either completely understand what was up with Nabil—Oh! Of course! The old Arabic tradition of fucking-with-you! Were you not familiar?—or be just as perplexed as Hanifa was. But, instead, her mom pursed her lips, and scowled.

Finally, her mother asked, "How much was your paycheck?

"What?" she looked at her, and her mom did a little nod to emphasize what she had already asked. "It's minimum wage, but about the—"

"He needs to pay you more," she interrupted. "Ma cherie, he needs to give you a raise." She spoke as if Hanifa controlled her own paycheck, as if Nabil had buried himself in her eyes and was underpaying his employees from there.

"Sure, but…." she said, feeling odd now. She'd like more money, sure, but this was about culture. About Arab-ness. "…The country thing. Isn't the country thing weird, maman?"

"Worry about the country when he pays you more," her mother said. "For now, you're in America. In America, bosses take money, *habibti*. That's what you have to worry about. That's what stays."

"It's just weird. It's just—"

She stopped. As they had been walking, they had turned along whatever directions caught their attention. In this, they had managed to wind up on the street of the flower shop, at the top of its hill. She saw Nabil exiting the shop two blocks down. She began to worry that he had heard them, somehow—not just for the past few moments, but throughout their entire walk in the City.

"It's just weird." She turned around and walked in the opposite direction. Her mom stopped, unsure of what had happened. She glared down the street for whatever had scared Hanifa. Not finding anything, she turned to follow her daughter.

Seven months later, Hanifa began working on her first custom

order: a set of floral arrangements for a wedding later that evening. The groom was an old friend of Nabil's, so it was especially important to get right.

"Why start me with this one, then?" Hanifa asked, looking over the notes on the couple's order that Nabil had jotted down in his handwriting, as pretty as ever. "We get tons of orders. Why not give me, you know, a more fuck-up-able one?"

"Pressure helps," answered Nabil, who was beginning to cut the flowers to size for the vases they'd go in. "Stress helps. Helps teach."

Hanifa looked back at her florals. Some time back, she had started giving up her Saturdays; she needed the hours, and Nabil needed the help. Her friends were headed down to the Castro that night and had invited her. If, at the end of her shift, she wasn't too exhausted—-she would be—-and had any money to spare—-she wouldn't— she'd go down, too. Roses were, at least, easy to work with. A classic— stereotypical, but people like to see them, so it's hard to make something completely ugly. And, moreover, looking at her creation, she had made something very not-completely-ugly! As she got into the groove of making these very not-completely-ugly-things (after all, she'd have to make twenty-three more, one for each table of the reception and a few extra, in case one spilled or fell or was thrown in the typical drama of a wedding), she continued to chat.

"You know, *tata*," she said, pointing to the flowers he was cutting with her head while her hands posed the roses. She had begun calling him Tata at some point. She couldn't remember where, or why, but she thought it'd be cute, and he hadn't immediately fired her. It is Flowers for Tata, after all. There should be a *tata* involved, especially if every other French aspect of him was a ruse (one that she had by now accepted, though she still did not know why). Her goal was to get him to call her *habibi* in return. He said he'd consider it, and sometimes times almost did, getting that first syllable out, but he'd almost coward out by saying her name, instead. "You should really cut those under some water."

He scoffed. "Oh, is that so?"

"Yeah. It is." She had read an article about it the other day—more of her free time appeared to be going towards her job, even when she found herself away from it. "It's the water column. The water sticks to itself, and to the walls around it. If it's under a bit of water, the column keeps going, and the water keeps pulling more water up. If you don't, the whole flower dies quicker."

"Dies quicker," he grumbled, and resteadied his grip on his knife to give a more feverous slash, causing Hanifa to wince in fear for his fingers. "Dies quicker! I am a florist all my life, cutting like this all my life! But, sure. You say it dies quicker?"

"Yes!"

"Bullshit!"

"Not bullshit, science! Science shit! Our shit!"

Nabil always had these long, heavy roots that kept him planted in whatever hill he wanted to die on that day. It frustrated Hanifa that, even though she truly believed that Nabil knew she knew shit, she'd never hear him admit it—unless it had nothing to do with any domain of life that he decided sprouted out of his mind, specifically.

Then, just as Hanifa was about to launch a scorched earth offensive on all of Nabil's stupid hills, a man walked into the shop. He was closer to Nabil's age than Hanifa's, though still a solid handful of years younger. Mid 30s-ish. He had messy, dark hair pulled up and tied via Scrunchie into a loose ponytail, strands of which fell back out onto his face. Soft sideburns led into softer-looking stubble. He had large hands, and hair on the backs of his knuckles and on his shoulders, which peaked through his tank top. Underneath the tank-top was a binder.

Hanifa, of course, didn't notice any of this—aside from the Scrunchie, which was cool, and the binder, which was cooler. The man asked for directions to the nearest MUNI stop. Hanifa walked out and pointed him towards it, and he went on his way. Then, she heard Nabil yell in pain from inside. She ran back into the shop to find that he had accidentally sliced across his hand

while cutting the flowers.

It was a shallow wound, thankfully, but blood flowed out of his arm and onto the roses, whose stems had only been half-cut. Hanifa, worried, ran to grab a towel, and shoved him off towards a sink to rinse off.

"*Tata*, you good?" she asked, pulling out a roll of gauze that she had pressured him to buy two months back, after an incident with the register, the step stool, and a few-too-many vases in her hands. "What the hell happened?"

He didn't answer, which told her that, yes, he was good. The man could be stoic and silent, but not when he was in pain—physical pain. He washed his arm in silence, and then grabbed the gauze out of her hands. She looked out the glass doors—she could see the man at the MUNI stop as he got on his bus. Oh. Hanifa, wanting to embarrass Nabil, moved back to her work with the florals. Then, he began to mutter:

"Joseph, Joseph..."

"Hm?"

"To call him Joseph, here! Can you believe that? *Oh, Yusuf!*"

She couldn't have known what he meant; yet, she did. She didn't know this Joseph, or Yusuf. But she knew the want in that cry. It was the desire, deep-rooted and hardy, for that man to come back into the shop, and hold his hand up to his lips—where he could bite off the gauze, and pull blood-pulling blood out of the walls of his arm and up towards his mouth.

It was the same desire, of course, that made her want to go the Castro, and do the same with her friends, or with an ex, or with a stranger. It had been so long since she had gone, and she would not go that night, as she had so many more florals to do, now, and would have to cut the rest of the flowers, in Nabil's place—though she would at least do it under a bit of water.

The wedding went well. They enjoyed the flowers, and it pleased Nabil to see his friend join the married men satisfied by his shop. This pleasure held true, even as he stood alone in the darkness of Flowers for Tata. Cold, 40°F. It made the walls, lined

with pots and vases, feel sterile, infertile. Many people enjoyed the flowers. They slapped him on the back to tell him so. He told them it was his assistant who worked on them. But she had not come to the wedding. He had said that it was shyness.

Across the floor and counter and makeshift workstations that the two of them had set up with old boxes in the closet were the vestiges of their preparation for the wedding. Flowers that were not pretty enough to keep in the arrangements were left across the floor. Hanifa had plucked a few of them out of her own work, doubting herself. Nabil had plucked most of them.

She had finished cutting the roses and preparing the florals. She had kept the two of them on schedule, despite having taken on twice the work. Nabil felt his hand, gauzed and un-pulled. *You know, tata, I've been here a while.* Yes. *You know, tata, I've been doing good.* Yes. *You know, tata, custom orders were not totally in the job description. But I did it.* Yes. *So, No. I was wondering if,* No. He looked at the middle vase on the shelf. Shouldering into the vase were two other vases, and two vases past that, and past that didn't matter. *I really need the* money. And no-good soil. *I've needed the money.* And walls, proud and spiteful and mocking and welcoming. *Please, tata, give me a raise.*

"*Habibi*, let's not do this," Nabil said, as he pushed buttons at random on the cash register. "*Habibi*, let's not. I'm hurt," he said, as he wrote notes on nothing in particular on any piece of paper he could find. He had said it, because she had wanted him to say it, and because being a tata had made him happy.

Oh no, she had said. *Don't you habibi me. Don't you fucking habibi me.*

"*Habibi. Habibti. Merde. Merde.* Fuck."

None of those! Fuck! None of those!

"Hanifa—"

Not that either! Not if I'm worth shit. Not if I'm less than shit. Change your mind next time I see you, or go fuck off!

The next day, Nabil called out sick for the first day of his life. He had Hanifa open the shop by herself. She considered not showing

up at all, if this was going to be response to what happened—a stupidly literal interpretation of how she ended their cordial negotiation session. But she went, in part out of obligation and in part out of opportunity. For the first time on a shift, she scrolled her phone, and listened to music, and took longer breaks whenever she needed to.

And, yes, she sold flowers. Really, the geezer should consider her a saint for not completely giving up. Some part of her enjoyed selling flowers, to married men and engaged women and friends of neither gender that dropped by mid-shift to say hello—she had never had a visitor, before. As she was talking to one friend, their phone alarm went off: it was time for their estrogen. As Hanifa began to prepare a bouquet—strings of lavender framing a set of alliums of the same color—she got to see her friend take off their backpack and pull out a syringe, a vial, some alcohol prep pads, and a bandage. They were the least flower-related things that had entered the shop in some time. Yet, as they propped up their leg on a stool and pinched together and pushed in the needle, Hanifa could not help but feel that this, more than any word on a prettily-written sheet, was what arrangement was about.

As Hanifa was closing up—which she did merrily, as her friend from earlier had invited her to a dinner at their house—an old Arab man walked in. At a glance, she had thought it was Nabil, coming in to beg, or give her a raise, or fire her. Instead, she was greeted by the groom from the wedding the day before, who, having seen her absence and heard of her floral work, came to give her a slice of wedding cake (and a lecture about how it's no good for young people to be shy, not in this world). She smiled big and dopey, and thanked him, and dug into the cake as she chatted with him. The man was Lebanese-American, she learned; it turned out that some people just *willingly* shared that information.

The conversation inevitably turned to Nabil, which annoyed her, though she understood it was hardly this man's fault to talk about his friend to said friend's employee (employee—had she ever thought of herself as that, before?). The groom, a bit older

than Nabil, told her stories about how he was always quiet, even as a kid, always just a little bit antisocial. At first, Hanifa nodded along and gave a rhythmic smile every so often to pretend she was listening. Then, she actually listened, and realized in the middle of a story of Nabil in the second grade the implications of what she had been hearing.

"Oh! Nabil's Lebanese, then?"

"Oh, no," said the groom, who fiddled with his new wedding ring as he spoke, "That man's family is from everywhere. Father, Morocco, mother from Tunisia, a Syrian grandma…"

She cut him off, confused. "But, you knew him as a kid?"

"Course I did! Both of us were born and raised in the City! Not too far from here, actually." And he kept talking from there, though Hanifa couldn't possibly try to hear him.

Nabil was American. American. He was Arab, yes. But he was as American as her—no, more. This flower shop was American. Those paychecks and those hours were American. He had taken their cultural connection, their nicknames, and her, and her life, and made it all into mulch for the shop, which was American. And she had fallen for it, because she was Arab, and because she was American, too. And she didn't have the sense she needed to avoid it. And he could never have given it to her, because why would he have, in his position? In his American position?

The groom chattered on and on, and eventually his wife came to pick him up and head out to SFO for their honeymoon in some country, somewhere. Hanifa sat in her stool. She could smell so little inside this seedy flower shop, but she felt it become so terribly perennial.

RYAN TRANG

To the Mariscos Restaurant on Valley

I remember the corner booth
The rounded one, shaped kind of like a C
Picking at the old pleather
Holey, and plastered with aquamarine

The mariachi played on Saturdays
In the corner with Mother Mary
Playing cheerful ballads before
The venerable mother, so caring

The ceviche came out in a tall glass
And we always noshed on the saltines
Apps 'fore the main course: a delicious
hamburger.
A stupid, greasy, all-American burger
In a mariscos place.

I could've been more accepting.
Why wasn't I more diverse?
I want to remember you for something,
Pescado, octopus, just something with more worth.

Yet you're still gone nonetheless.
Wiped from earth, if not for a distant memory.
A derelict relic from bygones--
You're now just a Waba beside a Mickey D's.

So what are you. Really.
What are you to me?
Beyond Temple, beyond Garvey,
El Monte, what are you to me?

Why do I still decree
Your relic name, a name I should let rest and be
Why does my everyday incorporate you in me
When your name is a far cry from where I chose to be?

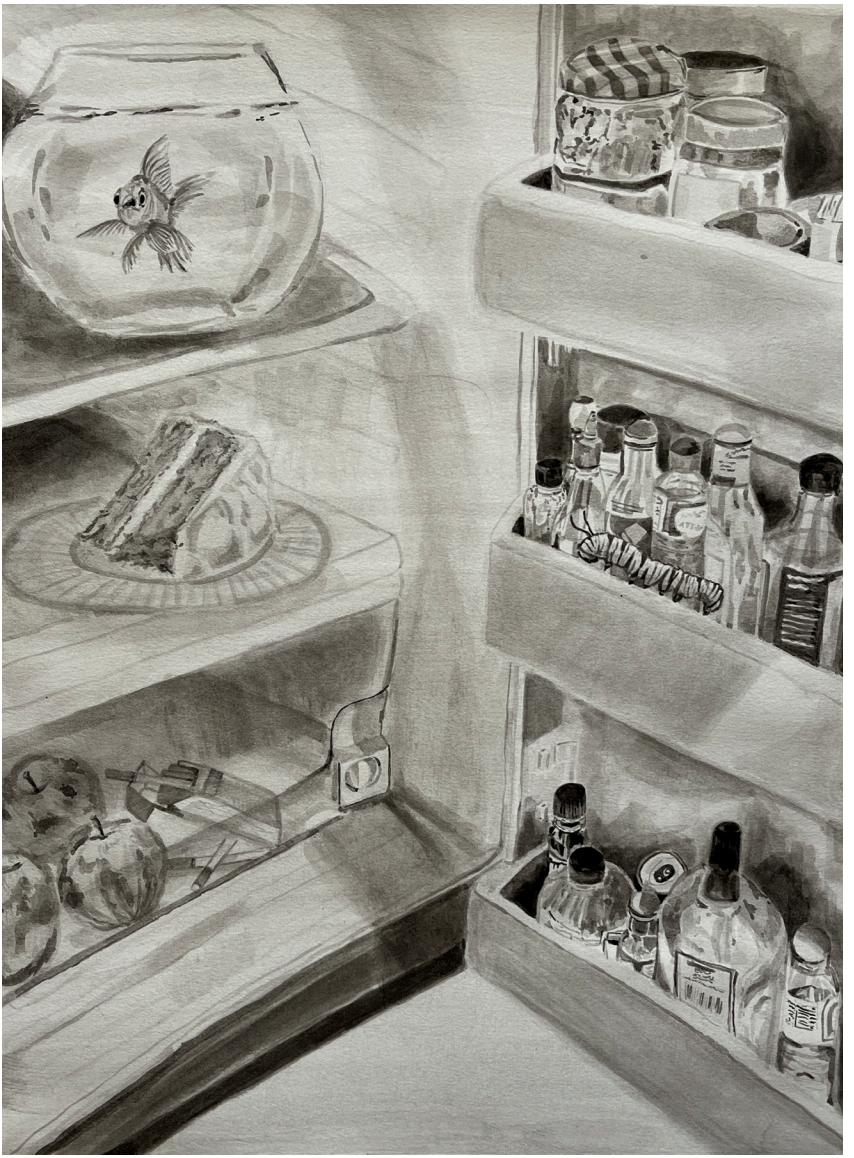
You're living with Great-Auntie on Durfee;
You're placing hand paintings next to the big screen;
You're skateboarding disasters and Gamecube parties;
A dream, a dream, a champagne-colored dream.

But that's not what you're supposed to be.
You should be broken windows on the SUV.
You should be an ailing school system, next to no prestige.
You should be a city of industry, and the fumes are hard to
breathe.

And yet you've always just been El Monte to me,
Pronounced, at the end, like "T"
Defined by every aspect that you should and shouldn't be
Tinted like a rose, my verisimilitude memory
A marker in my grand scheme of a short history.

So to the mariscos restaurant on Valley,
Disassembled, disarrayed, rearranged, and re-displayed,
It was wrong of me, that burger that I always craved,
But thanks for being my nostalgic masterpiece, and I'll try not to
go astray.

ADORA CHEN



Reflections in a Fridge

Reflections in a Fridge

While a fridge may seem like an ordinary object, I believe it is a powerful reflection of a person's personality and lifestyle. What is inside someone's fridge and how it is arranged can speak to several aspects of a person's life. Whether it be for breakfast or a late-night snack, going to the fridge is an everyday action that we constantly perform. For my piece, I wanted to capture a moment of opening the fridge and viewing it as a glimpse into somebody's life. There are several objects of interest, a prominent one being the goldfish. This is meant to illustrate that this fridge belongs to a single occupant - isolated from the world while living alone. A viewer can speculate as to what the other objects mean in terms of the fridge's owner. The piece is not meant to be interpreted as a literal depiction of a fridge with odd objects in it, but rather a conceptual and symbolic representation of the person that the fridge belongs to.

SARA TIERSMA

Mayflies

24 hours.

That's all a mayfly gets. 24 hours to fly, reproduce, annoy some mammals, and die. A flurry of life events all crushed into the time it takes for the moon to circle the Earth, to complete three needlepoint pillows with cliche sayings, or for Mrs. Parsons to realize that her husband was missing.

"George! Did you shut the screen door? There's a swarm of those darn mayflies hogging my light, I can barely see my stitch."

Mrs. Parsons sat in the living room on her cream brocade loveseat, the one with carved walnut embellishments, head bent over her latest needlepoint creation: a purple throw pillow with careful, black letters that would say, "life is beauty," surrounded by a field of colorful flowers. On the small table next to her sat a lamp, which sure enough had attracted a tiny swarm of a dozen mayflies making the darkening room flicker each time they passed through the light. Next to the lamp was her needlework kit sitting with its top open displaying every color of thread imaginable within easy reach. Every other surface in the room was covered with her work. Pillows of all shapes and sizes with precise lettering proclaiming that "everything happens for a reason" or "the best things in life are free" or any other short saying she had memorized from lifestyle magazines over the years were piled on arm chairs, end tables, bookcases, and even filled the large bay window at the front of the room.

"George?" Mrs. Parsons looked up from her work for the first time in what may have been several hours or perhaps longer, her

trance broken.

The room was silent except for the subtle hum of the mayflies. While she had been working, the sun had gone down and was now nothing more than a sliver of apricot showing above the cornfield, tingeing the gray sky outside the bay window. Getting up, Mrs. Parsons flipped on the large overhead light. From the living room she could see into the rest of the downstairs of the house, but George was nowhere to be seen. The breakfast nook and his handmade oak desk sat empty, even his gardening equipment sat untouched by the backdoor.

Heading through the kitchen, Mrs. Parsons began to slowly climb the wooden stairs up to the second floor, taking each step stiffly as a body unaccustomed to making the climb more than once or maybe twice a day. Along the stairs were dozens of framed pictures acting as a timeline of her life with George. At the bottom she passed by their wedding photo from 41 years ago, when their faces still shone with life instead of sagging with the despair of old age. Farther up the stairs started the baby pictures. First was Stella, born only 7 months after the wedding, followed by Mark just over a year later. There were photos from the first day of school, birthday parties, trips to the lake. Then there was Mae, the third child who completed their family even though her conception was yet again unplanned for the couple. There were momentos from the child's early days, a hand knitted sock, the worn corner of a rose colored baby blanket, an inky blue footprint on cardstock displayed on the wall.

Now halfway up the stairs, Mrs. Parsons paused to look at the photo placed alone in the center of the timeline. It was the last complete family photo taken only 17 years into the marriage. In the picture, the couple sat on plastic chairs at the side of a hospital bed with the two oldest children standing grimly behind them. In the too-large bed lay little Mae smiling her biggest ignorant smile with her frizzy golden curls creating a halo around her head. The memory reminded her of the pain, but it was the last photo she had of her youngest child taken on her fourth birthday. She had

always looked fine, healthy even. Mrs. Parsons certainly hadn't ever guessed that her child's bones were being eaten away by cancer. At least not until it was too late. When she was born they had lovingly called her their little "Mae-fly," but they hadn't known how accurate the nickname would end up being. That birthday was her last.

Mrs. Parsons touched her fingers to her lips, before placing them over the young girl in the photograph, then she turned and continued her trek up the stairs. She didn't bother to look at the photos that lined this part of the stairs, the graduations, weddings, meeting grandchildren. When she looked at herself in those photos, the memories just felt numb. George had been the one to hang the photos insisting it was a necessary chore. None of it mattered as much to Mrs. Parsons after Mae had died, everything was always just incomplete, but still he had taken up the duty of keeping the timeline current. Though he, like her, struggled keeping up with the other children. And when Stella and Mark had both moved out of the house as soon as they were able, the couple hadn't minded. They also didn't mind the occasional letters, rare visits, or non-existent phone calls.

Finally reaching the second floor, she took shuffling steps as she went from room to room, searching for her husband. All of the rooms were undisturbed, appearing like impersonal stock photos of unused spaces.

Mrs. Parsons didn't linger long in each empty space, rather she tried to remember when she had seen George last. It had been at breakfast. Of that she was sure. Though she couldn't decide if that had been this morning, or perhaps the morning before. To be honest, they didn't see much of each other anymore. The house was big and she was busy. Besides, after Mae, they had become more of cohabitants than spouses. They both struggled with the unbearable pain alone and dealt with it in different ways. She had her needlework. It required little thinking and there was something calming in the rhythm. The needle goes in, goes out, turns around, and goes back again. And again. And again. When she

was stitching, she found it was easy to lose track of time, thoughts, and even emotions. She could work for hours without so much as a break, stopping only to take care of her most basic needs.

And George. George had his work. He would spend each day puttering around the house fixing this or that, building some new contraption, tending to their garden, or even the neighbors when they would let him. He spent every waking moment devoted to one task or another. The only awake time that the couple spent together was every morning at breakfast when they shared a ham and cheese omelet and a couple minutes of polite small talk usually about the weather or a new project. It was always so predictable that she had difficulty differentiating the mornings they spent together, as soon as she began her needlework the conversation was gone from her mind melting into the accumulation of other days.

Yesterday morning. Yes, that was when she had last seen George. She mentally peeled the conversation from the conglomeration in her brain. He had mentioned something about the growing number of mayflies in the area. He had wanted to get up earlier the next day to get outside and tend to the Azaleas before the insects began to swarm. He told her not to bother waiting for him, so they had skipped their daily breakfast together. Instead, when she had awoken alone in bed that morning, she had turned immediately to her needlework. Mrs. Parsons' stomach awakened as she thought about the forgotten meal. She had been so entrenched in the new project that she had begun that day that she hadn't even realized her hunger, but that could wait a little longer.

Turning around she began to make her way back down the stairs, back through the timeline of her life. Mrs. Parsons headed to the kitchen as quickly as her stiff gait would allow her, but then paused.

She had come down here for something important, of that she was sure, but somewhere on her path down the stairs the purpose had left her mind. Ever since she had started the mind numbing needlework, thoughts had become hard to hold on to. She scanned the room hoping that if she saw what she had come for

she would remember her purpose. Her eyes fell on the cupboards on the opposite wall. Ah yes, that was it. She headed over and opened up the top row. Inside lay the phone number directory which Mrs. Parsons took off the shelf and set it open on the counter while reaching for the landline attached to the wall beside the cupboard.

Her fingers perused the pages before landing on the number of the local sheriff. The phone rang once, twice, and then on the third ring was picked up and a polite receptionist voice said, "Bolson County Sheriff, this is Shelly speaking. How may I help you?"

"Hi, dear. It's Sue Parsons. I think someone is missing. I'd like to file a missing person's report."

"Of course, ma'am. Who is missing?"

"My husband George. I haven't seen him since breakfast yesterday."

There was a pause on the other end of the line and the scratching of a pen could be heard as Shelly wrote down the information. "I'm so sorry to hear that, but don't you worry. I'll have the sheriff out there in just a jiffy."

"Thank you, Shelly."

The sheriff came and went quickly. He looked around the undisturbed house and asked a few vague questions. When he passed by the timeline on the stairs during his search, he asked about what happened to little Mae though she didn't understand why.

"She didn't make it," was Mrs. Parsons' response.

He told her he would file the report, but there was nothing else that could be done. Her husband had likely just left her. He had seen it happen all the time, especially to couples like them. The sheriff called it a marriage of despair.

And so Mrs. Parsons returned to her place on the couch and resumed her stitching. In and out. In and out. But she couldn't drown out the incessant buzzing of the mayflies as they flew around her head. In and out. In and out. Inandout. Inandout. Her needlework became less precise as she began to move faster, urged

on by mocking noise from the bothersome insects. Her needle stabbed the cloth, InAndOut. InAndOut.

"Shit!" She yelped in pain. She dropped her work and stared at her weathered finger as a shiny drop of red blood welled up on the tip. "Shit. Shit. Shit."

Suddenly emotion flooded her senses violently. She was angry. No longer did the interminable stitching work to avoid the thoughts and numb her feelings, it couldn't even drown out those goddamned mayflies. Mrs. Parsons' head had been full of fog for so long, but now she remembered and she was angry.

Mrs. Parsons looked down at the nearly complete needlework in front of her, "life is beautiful." She reached for the pair of thread snippers from the needlepoint kit open on the table and began to brusquely tear out the stitches. She pulled at the threads rapidly sending fuzzy snippets of color flying through the air.

Letter by letter, the quote was undone. After nearly half an hour of destruction she paused to take a look at her handiwork. No longer did it read, "life is beautiful" in a sea of flowers, instead all that remained was, "life is." Life is. Life is. Life is?

Mrs. Parsons certainly didn't know what life was, but it was not beautiful. It wasn't beautiful when Mae had died. It wasn't beautiful when her marriage was left with a gaping rift. It wasn't beautiful before George had left and it wasn't beautiful when he left. And it certainly wasn't beautiful now, with those pesky mayflies still bothering her.

A tear slipped from her eye as she swatted at the insects circling her head and looked around at the other quotes that surrounded her on their cloth and thread canvases. "Everything happens for a reason," but she had found that everything seemed to happen for no reason. "The best things in life are free," but so are the worst, breaking apart her life and leaving her without so much as an honest good-bye. Her heart squeezed tight, pumping out the overwhelming emotion it held.

She continued her destructive task, ripping out thread after thread. When she finished the pillow in front of her, she immedi-

ately moved on to another. The sound of the mayflies egging her on as they seemed to buzz, "life is, life is, life is." She worked well into the night and just as the sun began to appear again, the beat made by the small swarm of mayflies began to falter. One by one they started to fall away from the light and drift down slowly to the carpet. As their agitating sound faded from her ears, Mrs. Parsons' hands slowed as well without their buzz goading her on. The adrenaline caused by her anger was wearing off and the constant motion of snipping the threads was causing her fingers to become stiff. The unfamiliar movement was more than what her muscles were used to.

She was surrounded by the carnage of her once beloved needlework pillows. A mix of fluffy white pillow innards, shredded fabric, and bits of yarn were strewn across the loveseat and spilled onto the floor. Bits of rainbow fuzz stuck to her clothing and decorated her graying hair. It looked like the battlefield of an unknown war and Mrs. Parsons sat alone in the center of it, hands struggling to keep working. It was more than she could take.

It was just before dawn when at last the final remaining mayfly floated down towards the wreckage on the ground. The fluttering twirl of the insect's body as it fell caught Mrs. Parsons' heavy gaze and she watched it descend. When it softly came to rest on the floor, her hands finally stilled and an absolute silence fell on the house.

ELAINE VINH

the light pollution in los angeles

makes it so I cannot see the stars at night— not that I go outside
but there are times where I do want to see the stars in the los angeles sky
and when I say los angeles I mean anaheim I miss the moon. I
miss the way it makes me feel cold and warm at the same time I
miss the way he was cold and warm
but now he's just cold
and far away. I
believe he is the moon in the sky
but others say he is a star
which makes no sense to me
because why would he be a star—
I can't see anything.
then again, sometimes I don't see the moon but how would I know when
I don't go outside
I should go out more
with friends and be happy
as we have a conversation over tea
while the sun is shining down
perhaps he is the sun.
no, that makes no sense
nothing has ever made sense
I look up at the sky when that happens and when I gaze at the dark heavens
time passes with no stars to see
I cannot hear the moon
I cannot hear him. I want to say

time passes with no stars to see
I cannot hear the moon
I cannot hear him. I want to say
the light pollution in anaheim
makes it so I cannot see him but
I know how that's not how it works.

SAMMY MERABET

Behavioral Homeostasis

You are every degree that drops lower.
Every hobble of cold sliced by the fan
and left splattered across my empty room
and its walls

On the first day of winter—or some freak day
of summer—you are that which makes me
strip my coat, present, so I can feel you, all of
you.

And, on this day of winter—a summer,
too—I find myself just as reluctant
to pick out a coat, or cover. Let's spot
the difference:

In the first, you've left me for so long, and
a t-shirt or skirt means hugs, hi's, touch.
The second, you've left me again. I want
to feel it.

CECILIA QIU

Counting Sheep

Counting Sheep

I often struggle to fall asleep because I tend to overthink the events of the day. As soon as I lay down, my mind embarks on a journey. In this art piece, I aim to contrast the dark surroundings of my room with the dreamlike, chaotic places my mind wanders to. While counting sheep is said to help one fall asleep, I want to ironically depict how my imagination doesn't calm but instead spirals into increasingly chaotic and imaginative scenarios.

JADEN CHUNG

my bed

light and heavy, the comforter, it's weight on me forceful even though i was the one who pulled it forward. i know that soon, it will become an unconsenting warmth, but i let it happen. i let it cover me. shield me, protect me, press me against its body, banish the intrusion of winter and bring warmwth to the dim yellow shadows. go on, match the tenderness in which i colored. amber. the mirror kneeling on the ground, my books leaning full-body against the walls, envelop me until it feels like home again. i rub my arms together, speeding up the process, feeling my shoulders, the grips of my fingertips cold, but my hungry body freezing and even more desperate. i drag them over the waves of my stomach and along and across the narrow ravines of my chest. i caress the places unreached and this. yes, the friction of cotton chaos and the unwavering mattress, how it guards under me. they all compete with the kisses of my garments. you call this violence, but to me, it is love. call this love but it is the sanctuary's touch. i let it all go carefully and beg to be swallowed and dissipate until i am repulsed by the day coming in which i must leave my bed again.

JADEN CHUNG

each

The each of us. The separate us.
The each of them. The them without the them.
But instead their singularity
Their ascendance to the heaven's reach
Dancing among the swallows but within their own waltz
How delightful the each of them
The each of us.
And the melodies that drift between
Though we cannot hear them
In their eachness
They are there.

DJOLIN SUTJIAWAN

Peach Trees

[Fogelsville]

Nothing's ever the same. But right now it is. I'm sitting on the railing of the wooden porch of my childhood home. My bottom protrudes over the edges. My hands are too rough to be splintered anymore. Whenever I'm brought back, it's always to this place. And now that I'm here, I realize it never was a place. It's a feeling.

The picture in my head holds an arrangement of certain ojects in a certain place, but the real place I go to is so hidden and obscure that sometimes I can't unlock it. And all I'm left with is the picture in my head. But when I can, I go from looking at an old picture to being the picture. It's hard to distinguish between a feeling and a place. In many ways, they are the same thing. The porch overlooking the backyard was a sunlit, open space,where we'd drink fruit punch and swat flies and squint in the sun or because Shea told a joke no one could resist laughing at. The trees' foliage would shake and sway, and so would the leaf-shaped clusters of shade they cast on the porch. At night they'd protect us from the ugly forest creatures.

Peach season, which was mid-July to the end of August, was when I was most conscious of life on the orchard. Peaches grew full and round, and took on a bright red sunset hue. Ma would collect the overripe peaches and leave them for me and Shea, and we'd make peach cobbler. Our peach cobbler, with its experimental measurements and substitutions, was so different from Ma's perfect simple syrup and balsamic glazed peaches, but it was my favorite.
I think I liked making it more than eating it. Shea probalbly did too. By the end of July, the heat of the sun carried the scent of ripe peaches that seemed to marinate in the varnish of the cherrywood floors and stay, however faintly, until next summer.

It was my birth month, January. The peach trees were bare. The entire orchard was bare. I gazed at the still life before me. The wind blew yet nothing shook. I didn't remember winters in Pennsylvania being this cold. I also couldn't tell if I was imagining the scent of peaches.

[**New York City**]

Stand-up is the opposite of improv. Nothing is spontaneous. Everything, down to a millisecond pause, is planned. Improv is an exercise in self-discovery. Stand-up is an exercise in self-deception. I loved stand-up from the moment I saw that open mic on Bleecker in that musty basement of lone drinkers. I loved it in Boston in front of crowds of tuxedo-clad, updo-ed socialites and I love it now, on Ma's peach farm. It is the only thing I can say I have loved fully and honestly in this life.

By the time I reached New York, I had had a streak of failed attempts at keeping jobs. I blamed it on my 24 years on a rural peach farm, but Shea's success prevented me from fully believing this sentiment. Ma's peachery brought in sufficient funds for me to loaf around for several years after college but by the summer of 2003, my jobless interlude was growing to test her. I resolved to move somewhere she could be unaware of my idleness, and thus the offense of pilfering away my days would be dampened.

I was not the insatiable artist New York was invented for, but amongst the unemployed, uninspired, and unsure artists it absorbed and spit back out, I was able to disappear exactly as I'd hoped. My days were reiterations of each other, each filled with the same few activities. Borscht and meat pierogies at Veselka on 2nd and 9th, walking through St. Marks to East Village, and sunsets on a bench on the Upper West Side of Central Park.

The memorial benches lining the walkways of the park were identical, each a continuation of the next so it looked like one massive long bench that stretched miles. I always chose the one with the view of trees hanging above it. The tiny plaque read: "For Alisa & Lilian Kogan. To enjoy and share always, with love from Mom and Dad. 1998 A.D." There was a specific moment I'd catch some days, where a magical light bathed Central Park, right before sunset when the sun no longer cast shadows but faintly illuminated the trees and gave the grass a warm glow. I'd lean my head back, gaze upwards and feel home. Wherever that was. I never questioned it too hard.

It was just when I had accepted unemployment as my fated path and not a pilot episode of my life that I had my discovery. I leave this vague because I am unsure of how to categorize the winding path of uncanny events that became my life.

It was my birthday. I spent it alone because Ma and Shea were hundreds of miles away and because I refused to spend it with anybody else. I slipped out that night to grab a fifth and some air. The ground is damp and uneven, and the streetlamps are too bright. My phone rings. I know it's Sheila, calling to wish me a happy birthday. I duck into the nearest bar, hoping it's filled with people I can misconstrue to be friends.

"Hi Shea." The bar is perfect. Not too rowdy, but not too mild.
"Right on the dot, aren't I?"
"Yup. We just started celebrating." I looked around the room of strangers and prayed my act was convincing.
"Do I know them?"
"Just some friends. Gotta go. Gotta cut the cake."

I figured a drink was a drink and made my way to the basement of the bar. The basement of Fat Black Pussycat was pitch black except for the small stage at the end of the room, but somehow it contained all the aliveness of New York in barely 400 square feet. As I took a seat on one of the cracked leather wall benches, the man at the open mic pulled a silver of paper out of an upturned hat:

"Reed?" Silence. The man at the open mic scanned the room. "Reed." It came out as more of a statement this time. My hands shook as I reached out to take the mic from him.

[**Boston**]

I keep that night, the first of many at Fat Black Pussycat, like a snowglobe on my nightstand. I replay it, shake it, watch the pieces of plastic snow fall into place. It was eventually revealed to the Pussycat regulars that my name was Breanna, not Reed, but I still got called Reed from time to time. I'd pretend to be upset about it, but really I liked it. It reminded me that nothing about me was set in stone, that I was limited only by how brave I was willing to be.

I was convinced that first night had been an outrageous fluke, that my ability to ignite a room of 40-somethings and turn them into a room of children, doubled over in laughter, was a gift that had expired along with my 29th birthday. I would never be 28 again. Perhaps my going back the next day was an act braver than filling in for Reed the night before. And each day, my going back was braver and braver until one miraculous day I caught myself in the peculiar state of thinking nothing of it. Habit is a force stronger than anything else. Stronger than fear, even.

In the small crowds I grew accustomed to performing for, I became wary of a spectacled man. It was not his appearance that threw me off, but his expression. His gaze was a physical force, cast by blue icicle orbs behind thick black frames. There was nothing passive in his presence, I could almost hear the mechanical whirring of an environment being created, searched, and deciphered in real time.

He approached me after, what was unbeknownst to me then, my last gig at Fat Black Pussycat.

"I see greatness. More than this." he gestured towards the torn leather seats and beer-streaked floors. Under any other circumstance, I would've thrown a fit at such contempt. But strangely, his words hung around me. Maybe his words were derisive, but maybe they were true. I wanted them to be true. His eyes brimmed with belief and humanity.

Within a week I was whisked away to Wilbur Theatre, housed in a tiny studio at the intersection of Charles and Fayette Street, and booked to open comedy shows from 7 to 8, Friday to Sunday. Boston would suit my thirties better anyway.

I had an influx of free time since moving - New York was a city too bright and too alive to allow for this, but Boston accommodated slow mornings that crescendoed into soulful afternoons, which waltzed into quiet nights neatly wrapped up with lemon balm tea and a drawing of the curtains. I enjoyed Monday mornings, which were usually spent at Haymarket on Hanover Street. Given the minimal structure a three hour work week provided, the farmers market became a weekly landmark - it was my only effort at consistency. I remember living through this period of my life with the strong conviction that planning things ruined them. The only way to live truly was to live without thinking about living. Anything was possible, every direction was viable, and nothing was determined. So as life stretched in infinite directions around me, I let paths choose me and I was more alive than I had ever been.

I suspect that at the root of this untethered state was something sinister. As each show's curtains closed, I became painfully aware of the fact that my career was doomed to peak at my first performance. Wilbur Theatre had none of the intimacy of the Pussycat's low popcorn ceiling, the electricity of air dense with condensation and whispers hissed across tables and the top notes of cheap perfume. I had no faith in my future self - who I'd be on Friday at 7pm and how I'd feel closing the Sunday show. And so I reconciled that the best was over, and every farcical attempt to relive it strayed further and further away from it. I regretted every show I did and I regretted every show to come. There was a pit inside me that stank of mold and neglect, it made my skin feel translucent and my voice sound dim. I was withering. In spite of or because of my drinking? This question felt pivotal yet unanswerable.

I was at a particularly low point at the time of Shea's surprise visit. There's a certain comfort in vagueness, in ill-defined lines and boundaries with edges that fade like puddles in cement. Denial was the celebration of this vagueness. The weight of my reality was balanced on a toothpick and I drank to forget this. It took more and more to keep this vestige of time from eclipsing.

I didn't lock my doors - it was a hassle I did not see the point in. There was a knock, a pause, another knock, and a click. I was reclined on the couch, in direct view from the doorway. I can still remember the recognition that flashed across her face as the bottle slipped out of my hand and rolled towards her. For a minute the only movement in the room was the slow rolling of the bottle. It was almost comical how long this silence was prolonged.

It hit the cracked door with a hollow clink and rolled back under the couch.

The bottle was gone and my shame was splattered across the walls, it was thick and viscous and bitter and it bubbled up to my throat and every word I would say after would taste of it and every breath was replaced with it. She let us sit in the silence. I wanted her to turn around, to leave and forget the matted velvet of my used couch and the chipped cream paint in my doorway and the jarring grate of each revolution of the glass on hardwood. She stepped forward and closed the door behind her. I think love is a willingness to be hated.

It is a strange idea, even now, but I felt relief. I peel back the layers of the memory, the skin and flesh, the denial and shame, and the relief is there. Maybe it grew as time passed, but it was always there. At least the seeds of it. Relief that one person cared to yank the bottle out from under the couch when it was so much easier to let it stay.

[With Shea]

Ma died during my third stint in rehab. Shea was waiting for me outside the gates. We drove to the farm in silence, and I sat on the porch like always.

In a few minutes she'd hand me an iced tea, in the same glassware we used as children. The Venetian tea sets in the cupboard, the clawfoot dresser atop the tasseled rugs: these objects were part of the house, as immovable as the house itself. She'd sit to my left, and we'd feel like children again. Except age is not some faraway event that allows itself to be forgotten. Age is the wrinkle above her chin and struggle of my arthritic fingers gripping a small glass handle.

Sheila got a record player for her eighteenth birthday. I would've been twelve or thirteen that summer. I'd lay in bed and hear Jeff Buckley play in her room, and on some days a sixteen bar cut would be the best minute I could imagine. I could not see the vinyl but I loved feeling it spinning, each note spilling like a perfume oil that diffused into every corner of her room and mine. Shea's own enjoyment of the lyrics was somehow profoundly more satisfying than anything I could put on.

Jeff Buckley played again. It was a song I had heard a few times since that summer, but you can always hear a song; it's rare that you feel it. It was astonishing how much life a progression of chords held. That summer and the years following that summer had been wound up in my mind, and now, like a toy car, they began their release. That strange mix of control and powerlessness I felt on stage started to creep up. I thought of the white tulips Shea used to put in my bedroom vase when I left for class, I thought of the cities home to my youth, how the New York skyline grew fuzzy and the F train shuttling down the Brooklyn Bridge against this backdrop of pinks and streaks of fiery crimson. I thought of the odd crowds I ran with, buying white tulips from Haymarket, and the hazy fragments of twelve step programs and Nurse Niki in her Russian accent, "the opposite of addiction is not sobriety, it's connection. A-deek-shun. Ko-nyek-shun. The words bounced around in my head.

I'm here, the kitchen window's sheer curtains dance the way they did thirty years ago. A bunch of white tulips sit on the kitchen sill, still wrapped in craft paper and still wet with dew droplets running down the soft petals. The wind blows hard and settles cold. I take it all in. Were we too late? Or were we right on time? Right on the dot, Shea's voice echoed. I turned around. Through the kitchen window with the dancing curtains, her back was to me, she was mixing a raspberry mint cooler. All that was left to do was to sit and forget about the too lateness, to let life's events resettle and make sense. No matter how long it takes, the story we tell ourselves has to make sense. And I could feel it starting to. We'd stay here for a definite amount of time, but it would feel indefinite. And so would we. I felt it.

LOAN TRAN

Lemongrass Etiquette

The phenomena of wanting his children to address him by his name, always.
Formalities!
Ha...ha...ha.
Three ha's for the three children.

Bô Ha, not Bô.
Always making concoctions with the help of the internet:
pungent and punchy perfumes invade the house.

It is TIME to drink the lemongrass water with the tyrannical
    kicks of garlic that supposedly "support the
    immune system"—
drink it now, he loves you.
Wandering, passive eyes as the mix asserts itself,
taking over the throat.

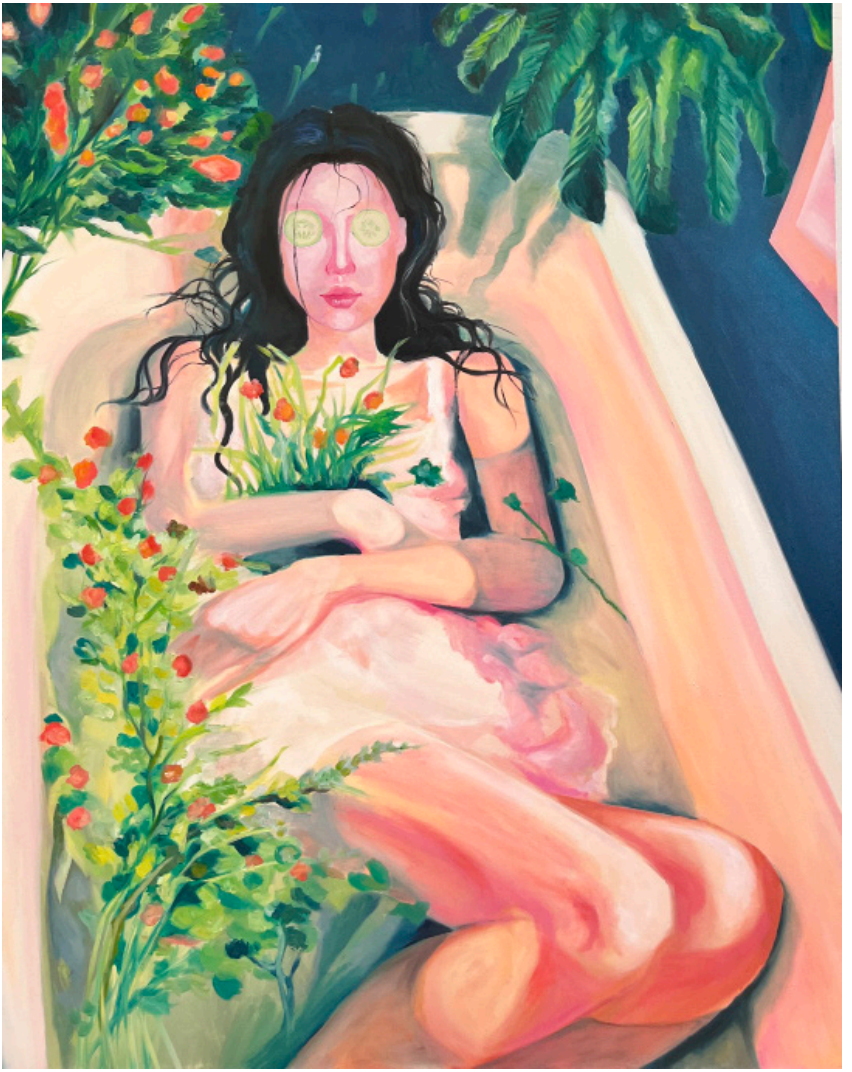
Just a moment,
the nostrils detect and deflect.

A blockade: breathe in through the mouth and exhale the same.
An arising of the sinful stench of garlicky lemongrass
annihilates the temple.

Deadbeat dad who lives 5 minutes away,
denied $700 and custody.
No one pretends to care anymore,
dogs are his friends now.

Talk about Toyota one more time,
party while you are still here.

CECILIA QIU



Bathtub Mermaid

Bathtub Mermaid

This piece explores the theme of self-care. After a long day, the most relaxing activities are taking a bubble bath and applying a face mask to rejuvenate. I use pink tones and warm colors to depict the figure's flesh, contrasting it with the background to enhance the narrative. I hope my viewers will feel a sense of playfulness in this piece.

CLARI GAO

mermaid aubade

i.
at dawn, light rivers us pond creatures,
you: bundled
in sleep, me:
shifting mornings,
mourning shifts.
mermaids must
find god
this way —
between gaps of sun, wet breath in soft dark
shades — heavens bless us with snow days like
the ice age.
flood us
ocean away

ii.
i come back to you
human, too
legged, split-

ribbed. every
day work
dog door
flung wide,
arms emptied
bags spilling
on the carpet we discover
gravity the only way
gravity reveals itself: together
colliding, this was how the meteors gave us
sea: this is how:

CLARI GAO

mother moth

you are crumpled
on a rich family's bathroom tile: damp, ogling
a small brown moth trapped in the ceiling light swimming in
its drug: wonder
why moths hurtle themselves towards fire. if not warmth then
        what
if we use light
to orient ourselves: the pale moon is
                above so
below me there is always another what if
you use fire to know
        your place
        in a jittering little body drinking up
stolen white wine dripping from marble countertop the direction of
        gravity is a finger accusing
                you of blind dog-
ma, you, far, confused
by the glittering of the sea rolling under the plane, everything
        and nothing like another
shore the violence of a street lamp glaring
white the cult of the angler-fish wants the bodies below

Angel Island poetry
is the steadiness of traffic lights becoming a new
God. what
is the flash of a hand-grenade to a moth? a promise
buried, land sold for
a dollar bill sliding from pocket to hand to bra
to the unmopped floor asking why did you come to this God-drenched
place yourself
fluttering towards the stars
in a bathroom ceiling light.
wanting. closer.

PATRICIA RACELIS

YEAR OF THE CARRION

"I think of a horse somewhere
In some pouring rain,
His heat steaming, his skin bathed cool,
Of my dog giddy in puddle water,
Of sparrows and their tweet and flutter
On a bird bat; of an empty lair,
The hairy hotbed of the deer,
Who trots off through the green lane
To the knife-cold edge of the pool,
Meeting his bowed shadow there,
Tongue and throat drenching, slaking
In the drowsy forest"

— Edith Tiempo, "Wandered Far"

In Santa Corazón the foxes scream like daughters at night. They're so loud when I come home that you call me, sure that I can do something about it. How do you know I've returned? Did you spot me leaning out the window of my childhood bedroom earlier? Watch me cradle a cigarette between my clumsy fingers, only to drop it into the gutter? I burnt my knuckles on the front gable roof trying to catch it. If you watched me then, I hope you saw me flinch.

October is the mother of the second summer. It nurses an impish heat that canters over turf and pavement to press its grubby hands against your collarbones, the crooks in your limbs, leaving butterfly rashes everywhere July has forgotten to burn. In Santa Corazón, it only retreats with the fall of the sun.

Maybe that was when you spotted me, outside, looking for my litter, finding it in the curb. When I dipped my toe into the run

off, a marriage of cheap beer and rainwater punished my nailbeds. I kicked the cigarette, dirtied and bent, into the storm drain and thought about how, before this, I've never discarded anything without a soul.

After this I listened to the wailing of the vixens, their mating calls, shrill and piercing. All this weeping for love—I needed to leave to understand it. I sat out there hoping you would drive by and see me, roll your window down, call out to me. I'd put everything aside to run to you, say Theo, I'm sorry I left but I'm here now, let's forget the last fifteen months, let's forget we missed each other's twenty-first birthdays, let's forget our daughter is dead.

When you called me, over the phone, I couldn't hear you above the foxes, so I kissed the speaker to my cheek. There was a hoarseness to your voice I could have matched if I didn't drop that cigarette. *Faline, the screaming is so loud, I can't stand it anymore. Come over, please?*

Because a small town is a world writ minor, a street is a country I cross. I walk from my mother's house to yours. The road hugs a range of redwoods, nestled in between advancing hills, swallowing our neighborhood. Picky eaters, playing with their food until it goes mad.

When I arrive at your house I show you the foxes under your porch. You're scared one of them is gone, but you release a breath after I let you come to your own verdict. But you are right—one of them is dead, tucked into a crevice by its weeping mother. You don't know it, because you fail to notice the stillness, how the vixen tucks her body around her kit as if her warmth might revive it. Oh, you're a man, a good man with honest hands, but you would look at a lesion and call it a sunspot.

You invite me in and make me food. We've spoken often in my self imposed exile, though far more painfully and far less present, so our catch-up is brief. What I'm really catching up with is space. Every house on this side of Santa Corazón has the same herringbone tile kitchen, the same solitary ghost light dangling.

Usually you keep the lace curtain parted halfway and the window propped so that evening spills into the room, an overflowing laundry basket.

I can't help but notice that, this time, you've shut us in.

NBC tells us about a dog learning to speak, a crown fire cartwheeling through the Sierra Nevada. You touch your withering basil plant and it shoots up, fixes its posture. I think I resent you for this, and I resent myself for resenting you. If you can mend after you've culled, you frighten me.

You haven't asked me about my gift since I told you it was the animals. Irregular moons, swarming. If they're not following me I know where to find them, where they graze, where they sleep. A redundant gift in a town full of people with their eyes on everything that moves.

What I don't tell you: the inconvenience is the easiest part.

I eat your food, and it's good. Everything you do is good. You put on Garden State because the news reminds you of Miriam, and I fold my legs under yours on your pleather couch. The movie isn't excellent, but its emptiness sings to you, so we leave it running. Andrew Largeman is talking about the ellipsis when you lean in.

The last time we spoke before I came home you told me you had a dream about a me you could touch. With what little power I have I let it come true. You put your hands over mine and loom over me, drinking me in for the first time in fifteen months—are you wondering whether I'll love you like a stranger as much as I look like one? You ask me if we're really doing this, and I tell you to stop asking and start doing, start making me out of thin air again, start reminding me how it feels to be full.

You do. I tangle my hands in your hair, coal and coarse, and think about how birds could nest here. Whenever you show me what you remember, I reward you. Whenever you kiss me I kiss you back, and you're all sweet, all smoke. When someone stabs you, don't you become the knife? When someone shoots you, don't you bleed?

After we're done you fall asleep holding me. I wait until you snore before I twist myself out of your skin, and slip into your old jersey. You blamed it for our first time, how I looked in it at the homecoming game when we were fifteen. It clings to me, a net, when I open the door to step outside, inviting the sound of mourning back into your home.

I wonder how you've never thought about the foxes. Sometimes they kill their own young. I met a woman who told me that, before I decided to drive back to Santa Corazón. We talked by her gas pump about how she'd secured an internship next summer at a museum in the city, to do with taxidermy, the business of preservation.

As she shimmered with movement, recounting her success in a way I've only ever seen you do before, I let her happiness move through me. Sometimes I know what it is like, how it shines, but it never stays.

My gift doesn't stop at the animals. Actually, it helps me to know where they are. It means I don't have to go looking for them before I kill them, and I kill them whenever somebody is dying.

I kill them so I can take their corpse to the Scavenger, and help somebody die later.

The Scavenger never comes to me in the same form it did last, but it always appears the same way: oddly and without welcome. When I got back into my car, it appeared to me in the body of a vulture swallowing itself, baring guts then skin then guts again. Its feet and its heart took turns thrashing against my dashboard as it told me the woman I met would not live to see her internship, and if I wanted to make sure she saw the end of October, I needed a fox.

There are no foxes where I went. I made sure of that.

So I came back to Santa Corazón, back to you.

Outside your house, lampposts press orange film to the evening air with flat palms. They peel the night at every flicker, splintering it with uncertain fevers. As a kid I learned Morse code so I could receive their inconsistent warnings.

I slide my hand under your porch, and pry the wood loose. Spruce fibers splinter beneath my fingernails, bitten half-moons. The Scavenger folds itself into the world surrounding me, a murmuration of dragonfly-winged eyes, dipping around high voltage lines.

It watches me deliver.

When I fulfill a bargain I make sure to keep my eyes open. I make sure that when I untangle the dead kit's brother from its corpse, and its russet body gloves my wrist, I meet its glowing gaze. I snap its neck like the wishbone we shared over dinner, and its ratty head falls limp into my palms.

It shrinks in death. It reminds me of the space a soul takes up, the space it vacates when it leaves. I stroke its fur with my thumb, the corner of its still moist, leathery mouth, and wipe away a bubble of blood. I close my eyes for the next part, for the swarm descending, for the Scavenger and its ruthless demands, because I have drunk my fill of remembering.

But the fox's mother will scream upon waking, and I will remember anyway. October, after all, is the month for seconds.

You and I were born in the Year of the Horse. I remember you golden, knee-deep in the dirt in the community garden, bringing everything you touched to life. We missed each other for years until you saw me on the roof. We were fifteen. You thought me alone, I knew myself not. The Scavenger wanted a dog for your baseball coach, and you didn't know. "Not a dog, or a cat, or a thing that bleeds," I pled with it. "I'll give you a hundred beetles, or fifty lizards."

Its body, a net of swelling neurons blanketing the garden you worked so hard to cultivate, spread like a disease through the roof of the school building. "You think a hundred beetles is worth one dog? Fifty lizards, one dog?" It turned the wind a devil, and snapped my head in your direction. "How many of *him* do you think is worth *you*?"

If I had known then—a strand of hair, I would have said. A

strand of his hair is worth all of me.

The Scavenger disappeared when you came, returning to me Santa Corazón's misty morning, its yawning sky. But it wouldn't have mattered if the monster stayed. You wouldn't have been able to see it, and I have yet to meet anybody who can.

You wore a gray shirt that clung to your flushed skin, and your hair fell in front of your wiry glasses in a mess so beautiful it was unfair. Santa Corazón is a town full of forever neighbors, so we knew each other then, but not like we know each other now. I knew you were Theodore Dimalanta, golden boy with a green thumb. And you knew Faline Caringal was nowhere near golden, everywhere near haunted.

You came to me. You didn't care about what everybody said about me, about what you must have heard. You talked to me like I was a girl, like I was a person. I forgot how devastation teethed at my skin. I discovered how the sun touched you. You told me you liked the view from where we stood, that everything is forest green, topographic. You can even see the horses, bobbing under canopies, dappled by light. But you didn't babble on too much—you asked me, do you come here often?

I say no, I don't, but I might, if you do.

That night I thought of you when I went to the shelter. I thought of you when I slid into a kennel, abetted by death, and waited. An old marbled sheepdog, crammed between a layer of filthy hay and a shelf of mushrooms, turned to me and whined. When I sat down to give her my hand she put her head on my shoe. I pressed my cheek to her chest, flat against her matted curls, taking in her stuttering pulse.

Rot, an abscess, held her leg hostage. I put her out of her misery, and two weeks later instead of one, your baseball coach had a heart attack.

I wash my hands in your kitchen sink. Like I've done for most of my life, I cover the smell of carcass with the smell of you.

Midnight curdles on the counter, algae on a pond, and I crack

the window to let it in. You've frozen your calendar in July, but it's October now, the month of moths pinned under glass. July has always been a good month for Santa Corazón. I could go on about July like an echo, the fireorks over the waterfront, the swans in the park, youth nipping at your heels.

Something I do wakes you, and you get up from the couch. You're tense. You've had a bad dream. You tell me it's because of the guilt you feel. I tell you God is a hole in the sky, hungry for hunger itself.

We dance in the kitchen as if it would change anything. In between our sarabande you confess that, while I was gone, you decided you had been unfair, that I wasn't the only one. You thread your hands through my hair and I can't stand how sorry you are. You tell me in a somber voice, a broken voice, that you understand why I left, which makes me wonder what you've been hearing around town.

I know how the rumor mill turns. I know Santa Corazón's fear has morphed into pity for the family we could have been.

But I wonder, does everyone still talk about the devil girl in the baptismal pool? The priest who choked on air reaching in after her?

You've never asked me about it.

I don't blame you.

But I wonder what you would do, if you knew everything.

Here's what you do know. One morning, twelve years ago, a nine-year old girl tried to drown herself in the baptismal pool in the middle of the Sunday mass at the Chapel of the Blessed Heart. The reason didn't matter as much as the spectacle, and the spectacle didn't matter as much as the fact that when the priest fished her out of the holy water, he had a heart attack and died in front of the entire congregation.

Depending on who's talking, the name of the devil who uncrossed my arms from my chest and steered me out of the communion line is different. The lolos and lolas who hogged the front

pews and fanned themselves with their tulays said it was the actual devil, Satan himself, sent by God to humble Santa Corazón. The ates and kuyas, eager to whisper, called it *family history of illness.* And there were some others, my own mother included, who said it was just me.

I don't know the devil's real name. I was the one who named it the Scavenger, for what it reaps, what it does. When I first saw it, it was an infant drowning in the baptismal pool. It floated facedown like a goldfish, blue coloring its collarbones, the crooks in its limbs. I uncrossed my arms from my chest and tugged at Mama's sleeve to ask her if she saw it too, only to receive a *Faline don't talk now* from behind gritted teeth.

At the pulpit I made eye contact with the infant as it twisted its head backwards and gargled, spitting holy water. I realized the word: drowning. That was what happened to my goldfish when it jumped out of its tank, why I had to bury it in dirt. That was what happened to Daddy, when he went past the waterfront, into the bay, and never came back.

Mama couldn't grab me in time. I stumbled out of line and ran towards the baptismal pool, towards this drowning baby surrounded by people who did not help it. I remember the chill of the holy water, that baby's sandpaper skin, as I tried to rescue it, and realized I could not because it was suddenly a thousand pounds, dragging me down.

I thrashed up at the stained glass, at the vaulted ceiling, trying to pry this infant, this demon, from my hands. My lungs ballooned with water. Pain burst my veins like pipes, a burning, who knew water could *burn*? In that] moment I thought: would my mother cover me in dirt? Would I go where Daddy was?

A pair of wrinkly hands tore me from the murky fathoms, and in between the barrels of blood and water I spewed from my mouth I caught the eyes of the priest. He said something before he convulsed, mirroring me, and the drowned infant, turning to sand, falling through my hands, spoke: "We're too late for this one. Watch him."

So I watched.

I'd been waiting on my gift. Everybody in Santa Corazón had one. My mother could float. Sadie across the street could heal her own cuts, and her brother Regan could read your mind on Tuesdays. I desired a gift that would grant me mimicry of God, so here howled punishment, a stray on my doorstep.

What do you do, when fear churns in you, a stomachache? Oh, you live with it, until you come across the only thing that makes you forget. You fall in love with a boy, and when you dare to get too lost in him terror tightens its leash around you.

You turn sixteen and you have a daughter together, and your lover's Midas touch is her only saving grace. Together you name her Miriam. You're seventeen and scared, then eighteen and scared, so on and so forth until you're twenty and scared and your daughter is gone. The presence of her absence, heavy in everything around you, makes you understand your own mother and her leaving, where she went after the water swallowed your father, why she refused to face what swallows you, so you go to her for the first time in years, a ghost in your childhood home, so she can give you money to do what the Caringals do best. You leave a letter for the boy you love, leave the town that made you mad, you leave, leave, leave, until you cannot leave anymore.

After we dance we go for a ride on your motorcycle. Redwoods cartwheel past us in a maudlin frenzy, and I'm drunk on nostalgia. Front gable roofs, arrows pointing towards the heavens. Floodlights, crippling the football pitch of our old school with radiance.

Santa Corazón is so beautiful. It's such a shame it's haunted by brilliance.

I remember the white ceiling of the hospital, pulsing, screaming. I have forgotten the pain of birth, but its intensity is married to the marrow in my bones. The body never forgets. Your hands tense over the handles of the Kawasaki as blacktop tucks its head into its knees and tumbles forward. I used to watch your shoulder

twist, the flex of your deltoid, when you'd wind your slugger back to kiss the ball. I can't see it underneath your jacket, stuck to you like a second body, but I know you're doing it.

I tell you to stop before the waterfront. You help me down, asking—milkweed and lavender? I answer your question with soil-stained knees, and together we pick flowers for our daughter. It doesn't matter that they're wilted, because you're here.

I pull a thread out of my fraying sweater and bind our flowers into a bouquet. On our way to the cemetery, I count ten horses grazing.

When Miriam was born the sky was dark and I thought it was nighttime. But it was only the crows, flocking, watching, outside the hospital window. You held my hand and then our daughter with tenderness that would make any sinner sick. It was enough to make up for where my water broke: at the church reception hall, in the middle of a youth pastor's spiel about how all gifts are given back to God.

It was a cryptic pregnancy. All throughout contractions I counted backwards—around nine months before July was October, and in October I realized I loved you, and you realized you loved me, so we decided to do something about it.

I asked you for a minute alone, just me and Miriam. When I held her I cried. Would she ever know my shadow? Would her father's glory be enough to cover the shame of her mother? She was small and soft, wheedling without words. Light collected on her eyelashes, fluttering like golden feathers. She was the most beautiful thing I ever saw. Apart from you I don't know where she got it from. I had forgotten how to be beautiful, if I even learned at all.

A three-headed crow poked its heads into the window, and I covered Miriam's eyes. The Scavenger watched me with all six of its eyes before it said "She looks like you."

"How dare you come here," I began. And when I thought about how those were the first words my daughter heard out of the mouth of her mother, I sobbed even harder. "How dare—

It cocked one of its heads at me and said it wasn't here for my daughter. At least, not yet. It was here because here was a hospital, a charnel house. As a birthing gift, it gave me a package deal. Seven fish for the man with the hole in his head I shared an elevator with on the way up to the delivery room, and his daughter, too young to be forgetting his name.

I didn't sleep the night we took Miriam home. Cocktails of opioids carved out my veins as I crawled from the bed I shared with you, on my way to deliver twice.

My pad itched, damp with blood and guilt, as I dragged myself to the nearest grocery store. Oh, when you're sick in this town, it comes alive. Neighborhoods marry like intertwined hands here, streets meandering into each other like rivers, like people who aren't looking where they're going. Love or hate Santa Corazón, its anatomy is burned into my head. The cooler I dragged behind me, filled with water, harmonized with the trickling of the neighborhood creek, buried underneath emerald ginkgo. I felt every step I took in my spine, the hard, concrete sidewalk whipping my feet.

At the grocery store I paid ten dollars to the white-faced woman at the seafood counter for seven live tilapia. In the parking lot outside I held each one up to the air, crucified slimy scale and bony fin against the July night, and remembered, remembered, remembered.

When I came home you asked me why I smelled like blood. You left Miriam with your parents and took me back to the hospital, thinking something was wrong. I don't know what it is about you, Theo, how you make me forget, how you reach into my soul with those sturdy hands of yours and strangle my sickness, if only for a moment.

You touched my knee, and I lost it in the car. You slowed down and talked me through it, but I couldn't be talked to, not when I was trying to tell you what I could, and realizing just how much of it couldn't come out right.

What I meant to say: I'm sorry I'm a murderer, I'm sorry I dirtied your future, I'm sorry I keep lying to you, I'm sorry, I'm sorry.

What I said instead: I'm staining everything. I'm staining your passenger seat, staining you, staining our daughter. There is a crack in the center of me I think even you cannot fill, an emptiness wringing my gut like a washcloth over everything I touch. That is how the red spills, how I bleed, and I'm scared I'm going to do it forever.

At the cemetery we hold vigil for Miriam. I used to read her short poems while you brushed her hair, so I read one while you replace the old flowers with the new ones. A touch from you would bring them back to life, but you like rotating them out. It feels like acceptance. I wonder if we will ever substitute "feels like" for "is", if we will cross that threshold between mimicry and embodiment.

Her gravestone is as tall as she was when she first stood upright. You insisted on carving all of it yourself, and managed to get through everything with little issue apart from a dilapidated stiletto southeast of the hyphen between our surnames that's supposed to be a swan boat. She loved those things, though they were hallmarks from the dry years of our own childhoods. In the summer the white hot metal burned my thighs off and left me limping out like an injured fawn. They moved so slow I couldn't even tell I was moving.

You tell me your parents think we should get the swan boat covered up with a nice little heart on account of how morbid it is. I laugh and don't mean it. You give me a look that says *If I weren't so exhausted, I'd be laughing too.*

Then the way you look at me shifts. Oh, I know your certainty. It haunts me. "The baseball team needs a coach," you say. "It's enough money for the bills."

"Just the bills?"

And then, after an even longer pause, you make another confession: your parents' house is now in your name. They've left Santa Corazón, retired their old skin from this old town. You bring up

my writing, you tell me you'll build me a study by the greenhouse. You won't ask me to go to church. You won't ask me to go outside. I can write all day if that's what I want. I don't even have to look at you. I don't even have to show you anything.

I just have to be here.

Away from Santa Corazón, I slit a rabbit's throat for the teacher who told me I should be a writer. His face smiled with wrinkles when he told me I had the pain for it. There are those, he said, who don't know how to chew sugarcane until they turn their teeth black, don't know how to love like you lean into a punch. Those who do, he claimed, should be writers.

I told him I didn't know how to do any of that, and he called me a liar. So I started writing afterwards. Because of him I thought, someday, I would come back to you a poet. I would explain, write everything out for you in words as beautiful as you are.

But I'm standing in front of you now, and I'm not a poet. I'm just a killer, an elegy machine. You don't know who you love, no matter how much I want you to.

"Come home." God, your words shred me. "It doesn't always have to be like this."

"Oh," I whisper, "how do you know that, when it always was?"

We were nineteen, and Miriam was three. One night we went down to the waterfront near all the cranes and the pits in the ground. You ran around touching all the wilted plants, and Miriam followed you, stumbling, laughing. *That one next, Daddy, that one needs it!*

You picked her up, pretending to be a forklift, and she laughed as you held her. This is Santa Corazón, you told her, imitating some wise old sage, this is all ours, and it's going to be all yours.

I let a fencepost receive my weight as I leaned back and watched. Past your dancing shadows, across the bay, where my father went swimming forever, ship breakers anatomized old freighters against a backdrop of windmills. Antennae spiked and received signals, volleys of red, across an invisible net. I wouldn't have ever correct-

ed you, told you you were looking out, that you weren't showing our daughter our city, but everything beyond it.

I'm not a stickler for cold facts—I prefer the romantic, if it kills nobody. But if someone wanted to know Santa Corazón, they would go to the church, and they would sit in the pulpit for a month or maybe two and pay close attention to why the average parishioner says they need God. They would lie face first in the chaparrals and root themself in the pulsing microcosmic heart of a company town-turned-postmodern suburb.

They would visit the emergency room of the hospital later that same night, where you changed back from forklift to father after Miriam collapsed on the way back to our car. They would sit amongst the uncles and aunties whispering in the waiting room, in for too much wine or too much blood, deciding who will know what tomorrow. How short my skirt was. How long your hair was getting. How I tripped over my own shoelaces when I ran in, knocking Tito Jamie's water bottle out of his hands. How a Marlboro Light in your back pocket burnt through your denim and Ate Lisa's good ballet flats got caught in the crossfire.

How our daughter had a year left to live.

There is a word for the afternoon, the drunken stumbling of the morning, pregnant with fatigue. None exists entirely for the after-midnight, which is the opposite, in spirit, of the afternoon. A current thrums in the air, alive with potential.

This next remembering is selfish—if I close my eyes I feel it, the wind in my hair when you drove me around in your dad's Viper. Our lunches on the rooftop. I was young, then, wasn't I? Even when numbness ruled me?

But I open my eyes, and I'm back in reality. The longer I take to give you an answer, make this visit permanent, the more I break your heart. My name's delicate on your tongue, the way it is when you are going to push me off a cliff. "Faline, I'm not going to let you leave again."

I shake my head. "We'll talk about this later."

"Where?" Your voice breaks. I can't look at you when you're like this, when I know we're going to fight, so I just look past you, at the waves of mist curling over an ocean of headstones. "When?"

"Theo—

"Look at me."

"I am—

"Do you think I don't know you're keeping secrets from me?" Oh, *that* makes me look at you. *That* makes me shrink back. "We had a daughter. She's dead. And I'd do anything, I know you would too, to bring her back, but no fucking gift in Santa Corazón, not even God, is going to do that. But you know who's still here? I am. You are. We loved each other, and I still love you, even when you do things like this, but if you won't even let me try to understand—

"It won't matter even if you do." My lips tremble. It's pathetic. "I don't make you happy, and I can't stand it here."

You try to grab my hand. I pull it away. It betrays something, I think—I don't know if it's my reflexes, I don't know if it's all of me. I turn, I try to run, I don't know to where, but you're taller than me, faster. You pull me back, you hold my wrists, and you beg. "You made me happy. You were the only one who couldn't see it, but I think you knew anyway and you still keep trying to leave me, first with the horse—

That's the killing blow, and you know it. You stumble over the word, and for a small eternity neither of us say anything. But you are relentless. I know this. It's why I love you, and it's what's going to kill us both.

"We have to talk about the horse, Faline," you plead.

I touch your face and you crumple into my hand, sobbing. Like that dog in the shed, the first animal I killed for you.

When the Scavenger came for our daughter I lost my mind. But before I tell you about that I want to talk about guilt. Not the sort of guilt you feel when you cheat and steal, but when you dip your toes into the truth.

The day after Miriam's diagnosis I went to Confession for the first time in years. The Chapel of the Blessed Heart brought in a new priest from out of town, and I craved absolution from someone who wouldn't pierce my soul in doing so. Someone who wasn't you, wasn't anybody who knew anything about me.

So, when the priest scratched at his gray stubble, asking me what I'd done, I asked him a question in return: is anger a sin?

No, he told me, but it is symptomatic of a sin, or it leads you to sin. Growing up is growing closer to God, closer to your gift, which is from God.

But what if God gives you a curse and calls it a gift?

I asked him that, and he laughed in my face. Look at Santa Corazón, how beautiful this town is. Who among your blessed people would call their gift a curse?

Then I dipped my toe. I don't like it. It's a heavy gift, a wet shirt. You should know what it's like, Father, to watch something die. A soul leaves a body like a magnet rises. Perhaps the flesh struggles earlier, and death is the moment when it loses. How many times will I witness it? How many bargains will I make?

I left the chapel knowing I hadn't found what I was looking for. The new priest, already blending in on account of now being afraid of me, absolved me of nothing. I wanted him terrified like I was, terrified *with* me. Somebody out there ought to be.

You were, the night the Scavenger came. We were staying at my mother's house. I woke up after having dreamt of nothing, mist in my gut, rising. I dragged myself out of my childhood bed, crumpling the cotton cover sheet. Miriam pawed at the space I left behind, her hand a white spider. A little bubble of drool collected at the edge of her cracked lips, chapped no matter what we did. When I wiped it away I felt her smile against my thumb, a weak quirk upwards, the twitch of a wing.

I left the room. You, with your back to the door, did not stir. We fought earlier about how much time she had. You thought sickness was a visitor, and I knew it was a thief. I'd taken her home against your wishes. You wanted her to fight for what you'd prom

ised, nothing short of the world. You told me I didn't know our daughter because I was born scared to lose her. Didn't I want her to have a childhood like ours, a life like ours? Didn't I want to watch her come home from school, see her face light up in front of her first car, witness her dance in the mirror in a prom dress?

Years spent staring into the maw of endings had me forgetting: I was nineteen, and could not remember. To you, remembering is vivid, relentless. Memory sunk its claws in you, talons poisoned with glory, and refused to let go. I've seen you clutch at the sink and breathe hard, so hard I might lift the film of your eyelids and witness a supercut of your youth.

I didn't remember my youth like that. Ever since my father killed himself, ever since I thought that baby in the baptismal pool would kill me and my mother refused to look at me anymore, I lived my life looking at everyone else. I told you as much, without telling you everything. *You don't know what it's like. You don't know what it's like!*

It stung, how you ended our argument with a question. Like a man revisiting a shrunken pastime. *Were you always this hopeless?*

It will take years, I think, to shake the sound of the Santa Corazón nights from my bones. But when I walked down our street alone that night, searching for nothing, a rare silence haunted me.

I stopped in front of a storm drain at the end of the cul-de-sac. Eyes bulged out from behind the grate, blinking and wailing. The Scavenger oozed out of the grate, shoveled its frogspawn body together, and leered over me. We stood alone, so I asked it, "Have you come for me?"

"I always come for you." It spoke from an orifice, its voice clanging through me as if I lay sandwiched in a Newton's cradle. "But I'm not here for you."

I looked back over my shoulder at your parents' house, where you slept with Miriam. I thought about how she could have turned to you in her sleep, pawing at your chest. How you could have held her then.

My wicked body bolted the door to my mind. Panic did not

hold me so much as resolve. The Scavenger intimated me with the many ways men could die, through accident or vice, fever or virtue. The collateral thrum of a tiny pulse, a neuron firing. The wetness of fur, the spurts of spit. I've cradled arteries the size of fingertips between my own thumbnails, I've burst them like pimples. I've scrubbed my hands raw in the shower hoping to forget the sort of brown red dries. And I've touched you, Theo, with those same hands, the same hands that remember.

In July our daughter was born and in July she would die.

"You're here for Miriam," I said.

"A horse. One more month."

I did not fear what I knew so well, so I told the Scavenger: "Take me instead, and give her everything."

Its stillness rippled through me. The Scavenger had shown me anger, on the rooftop with you, and for a moment I thought it might revisit the feeling. I thought it might boomerang that question, why I think I'm worth my daughter's fist-sized, failing heart. If I had learned nothing since then, nothing since the love, nothing since we made something of that love, nothing at all from the bleeding.

"A horse," the Scavenger repeated, calm as the dead. "One more month."

You didn't wake when I came back. Miriam nestled her head in the crook of your neck, her body shuddering in short intervals. Some of your hair had gotten in your mouth, slipping loose from your bun—growing up you kept it trimmed, out of your face, so you could see everything. I hadn't realized how long it had grown until then.

Maybe it was unfair of me to decide, alone, that you would be fine. But you have to understand that I was taught fairness through bargain, and there would be no bargaining out of you. I brushed your hair to the side and kissed the edge of your mouth. That was the way we did it the first time, when the fireworks on the Fourth turned my head and you barely caught me.

Then I looked at my daughter. Were you right, that I didn't know her? Even when I was there, watching everything?

Miriam opened one eye, a brown pearl, and looked at me. Her yawns sounded broken. *Mama, what's wrong?*

Everything's okay, I told her. You should go back to sleep. *Don't wanna.* Oh, we have to do things we don't want to do sometimes, honey. *Okay. I love you.* I love you too. When I turned away, she asked, *Mama, you see the birds?* Where are the birds, honey? *Everywhere.* Do they scare you? *No*, she decided.

That's good, honey, I said. Don't be scared if you can help it.

I took a knife from the kitchen.

I ripped a piece of paper out from the grocery pad you pin to the fridge, and on it I wrote where you could find me in the morning.

Then I left.

In the cemetery, over our daughter's grave, wind howls. You tell me I wasn't well after Miriam was born. I was afraid, and her sickness made me terrified, so terrified I would do what I did that night, that I would make you scramble out of bed for me, sorry about what you said, only to find me in the hills unconscious, half my body crushed underneath a dead horse. What went through my mind?

"I keep reliving it," you mumble. "How it was like to find you like that. How I couldn't even talk to you about it, because of Miriam, and after she went I couldn't mourn with you, because you were gone, too, even before you left. I know you know how that's like. You've spent your whole life grieving everything, but I've spent my whole life grieving you."

"But I'm alive," I say, helplessly. "Theo, I'm alive."

You shake your head. "Are you?"

I knew where to find the horses, the quietest of all the animals. The hills behind our neighborhood, the hills we watched on that roof when we met. I couldn't see that old vantage point from

where I waded through seas of yellow grass, but I imagined that the heaven I'd never see looked exactly like it. I didn't want to think about you finding me. I didn't want to think about how you would mourn. I didn't want to leave you.

But I always do what I need to do.

A horse trampled through the brush. Lanky, with a fever in its eyes. I counted the rings in its amber irises the way I could a fossilized tree stump, a whorl in a doorframe. It told me it was young, but it also told me it was angry, angry and tired, and because of all that wild it was ready to die with me.

I ran at it without thinking, and it ran at me, and I hopped on its back, its bony, emaciated back and held on like it was a rank bull, but it was not, it was a horse, just a tired horse, and I was just a girl mother, and I loved you and I was doing this for you, so Miriam wouldn't be scared of the birds, so you wouldn't be scared of me, so I wouldn't be scared anymore, and I plunged the knife into the horse's neck and it bucked me off and I flew, my back slamming against spruce, oh, it hurt like birth, the same spruce our porches are built from, the same woods our small town carved itself out of, and I was in the dirt, I was in the dirt where I came from, in the dirt where we return to, and somewhere in Santa Corazón the foxes were screaming.

The Scavenger came to me at the end of everything.

"Me," I insisted, "for her."

Its silence lasted lifetimes, but when it broke: "If I take you, then who would see me?"

I was discharged from the hospital on account of your dishonesty. Just messing around in the hills like we used to when we were kids, you told the doctor. Got the horses all riled up.

You're still kids, you two, my doctor said. Be careful.

I walked out with two broken ribs, a broken arm, and a permanent bruise somewhere I still cannot find. We didn't talk about it. That last month I bought for Miriam, we spent entirely with her.

We never let her witness defeat, never let her lose a game. Your gift was hers, as far as she was concerned—every withering sapling, coward flower, you held her hand out to touch, swearing truth in her revival. And as for me, as for the animals, near and never far, Miriam touched and did not kill.

On her birthday her fever broke. She crawled on my chest, breath hot against the cool breeze of the ceiling fan, and asked *Can we go to the swan boats?*

Sunrise in Santa Corazón is a collage of mood and color. That July it was warmth triumphant, the clicking of small bugs, emerald blades of grass glinting in the eager, firecracker sun. Sweat stained the crooks of our armpits even with the windows down, driveways racing past us, grandmothers with orange Creamsicles, shirtless men washing cars, bathtub Jesuses holding discount Judgment Day. *The birds*, Miriam said throughout the drive, *look at all the birds!*

We paid the man with the hay bale mustache a quarter for a ride, and he threw in a bonus newspaper. You put your jacket under me and Miriam so our thighs wouldn't burn. The lake, still and calm, reflected the watercolor world about a horizontal axis as the engine sputtered, and propelled us forward.

The newspaper told us about a crown fire cartwheeling through the Sierra Nevada, a dog learning how to speak. All uninteresting to her, so I read Miriam something from a neighborhood poet as she put her head on my lap, her legs on yours, and closed her eyes.

I touched Miriam's cheek, felt how the summer underneath her skin wore her out. She was so pale, so thin she was bone. I thought she might rattle like the sputtering motor underneath my feet, so I held her closer. How was it that, in sickness, she looked more like me?

Pollen drifted down from the willows, collecting on her eyelashes, welding them golden, sealing them shut. I skimmed a finger over her lips and they felt just like her skin, like sandpaper, and I realized I had been practicing for this moment, practicing since before.

I brushed her hair to the side, out of her face. I kissed her forehead, I showed her to the sun. She used her entire body for her final breath, rippling through her like the water. Her chest, as big as your hand, stuttered before it fell, and did not rise again.

Then, a murmuration. A swelling.

Miriam's birds erupted from tears in the sky, stuffing bursting out of seams. They swarmed over her and carried her upwards, to that hole in the sky where all is blue.

I won't talk about the aftermath, because you've lived it, and it's happening now. Won't dignify the church with my acknowledgment, the fawning of the masses, how tragic, how young, how innocent. What I want to talk about are the nights I caught you smoking through packs, nights I thought of meeting the Scavenger in your name, bargaining for your own sickness down the line.

Oh, I knew I'd try to give myself again for you, the way I did our daughter. That time, I would make it work. But I also remembered how you looked when I woke up in the hospital, how broken you were, as if you were the one mangled in the wilderness.

I couldn't do that to you again. I couldn't do anything, *anything*, to you again.

At the cemetery, fifteen months after I left, you lean down. You're so close to me I can't tell my skin from yours. "If you tell me right now that you don't love me, that there really is nothing for you here, that leaving really will make you happy, I'll let you go."

I knew it would come to this. I've lied all my life, just as much as I've killed. I open my mouth, I'm ready to tell you what you need to hear. Oh, I'll keep bleeding when I'm gone, but you will be clean. You'll grow up, be more of a man than you already are, and maybe somebody else will...

You touch me.

It's rough, your palm against the back of my hand, callused by work, by holding onto things too tightly. I remember. I remember your hands over mine on the railing of the rooftop, I remember them over mine at the hospital when you told me to breathe,

when I gave birth to our daughter, when you drove me back after I killed those fish, when I sobbed and you soothed me. I remember every night I snuck out to deliver to the Scavenger, how your hands always held the space I left, warming it for my return.

Theo, you're so alive that I'm scared of it. I feel it in everything you do, everything you fight for. It's enough, and I break.

Sobs wrack through me and we fall into each other, not caring that people might hear, not caring that I can't even lie to you if I try, because every word will come out a blubbering mess.

I grieve for everything. How it hits me? Like this, like streetlights before sunrise. They flicker on over Miriam's grave, over oceans of people I've never known yet killed for. It's October, it's the month I realized I loved you, and I still do. I could leave again, back to the beyond, past the freighters and the shipyard, the lazy Morse antennae, pinging a town too big for its body, and I would still love you.

I can lie about the Scavenger, but I can't ever lie about you.

I open my mouth to tell you I'm sorry, but I realize I've probably said those two words to you more than I've ever said I love you, so I tell you that instead, and I let us take each other home.

We save most of our promises for later, except for one of them: that there will be a later. For now, we're in your kitchen, as morning trickles in. I cook you breakfast as you correct your calendar. When that time comes for me to tell you everything I want to be prepared, so after we eat, as you do the dishes, I rip a piece of paper from the grocery pad you keep pinned on the fridge, and I start writing.

Evening raptures the sky. A murmuration pivots over the waterfront in the distance, and a bird scrambles over my foot, stumbling home.

In Santa Corazón the foxes scream like daughters at night.

The Scavenger calls me when somebody is dying.

ZIQING LI

What Comes Up

Must go down
as the zenith
of the human experience
this day
to be is to laugh
until your sides ache
like fingers digging into
your abdomen and tugging,
sinewy bands of muscle
playing you like an instrument;
a group of clowns is a choir
and they pile out of a van
at the end of the day
all honked out
pitchy giggles and snorts
weaning into the
silent solemness
breathing
the nighttime air
doses you with
the pool, they say
everyone's going there
when did they all
the clowns of the choir
and another bus full of people
collectively
pack a swimsuit and
decide

as the saying goes
the highest point reached
by a heavenly body
directly above
laughing
with your stomach clenched
sinking into
a strange feeling
approaching sobriety
you squeeze your round, red nose
squeak squeaking
you don't know what you're doing
eyes glazed over
and remove the foam ball
stifled
awareness of
your breathing
in and out
icy in your lungs
you are one beat too slow
nodding in agreement because
where is there? I am lost
without me
I mean to say
alone, I am not a celestial body
I didn't know to
I didn't
I should be

we
at the pool?

Suddenly aware
I look around and
there is only
me
robotically
I unhinge
my laptop
or my jaw
or my sanity
and pretend there is a
we
where there is only
Henry Clay
1850
a compromise.

My gaze goes
blurry,
soft,
distant,
here
there
lost momentarily.

A shadow
has drifted over to me
curled up in my seat
not knowing how to
fill the loneliness
quite yet,
curved lips
or is it

swimming
(in starlight and cosmic dust)

I am grounded to Earth
pieces of me are still scattered
the sky and I and—
we tend to disagree
fighting over what the blue curtains mean
I'm unhinged I'm unhinging
hunk of space metal
slope of prehistoric bone
temporal wonder temporary stability
proper answer
try to seek ask why
blue
his
curtains are
(an eventual truce)

running away from me
opulent,
intangible,
light-years away,
I call for them like a lost pet
my galaxy thoughts
(I forever await their return)

the sun's
come to visit me
we both belong up there except I
still live after hurtling to ground
it never leaves
but it feels bad for me
pity
a smirk

an arched cupid's bow
hiding malignancy
where are your friends?
places a hand
atop my head and
fingers a stray strand and
don't misunderstand—
I lean into the warmth
and mouth,
where are yours?

My head lifts
groggy still,
half-lidded eyes
struggling
to focus on
a bright screen
white and fuzzy
tinged with the red words:
Assignment Late.
Henry Clay
is upset with me
and angry sleep lines
mark up my face
the edges of a sleeve here
a zipper there
the imprint of
something best
forgotten.

or explicit mocking
benign in its natural warmth
the sun at its highest point
casts the shortest shadow
it is a heavenly object that
spins, the sun doesn't laugh
cruelness is not in its nature
its endless reminder of up above
lips around a sunspot,
(I dream of sunlight on my face)

CELESTE WEBB

Echoes

I've heard about people being driven mad by the silence.
They say, "It's the ticking clock, hearing the AC going
On and on as it rumbles like the fridge downstairs or
Cars driving on the overpass down the street. Sometimes,
You can hear your heart beating, your breath in an empty room,
Just you."

A door slams closed with a soft click.
The fan spins and spins with nothing but the feeling of
Air shifting along the tops of my forearms. People walk around
Like shadows stepping around corners and bleeding and blurring
Into new spaces. Cars ghosting down the street are gleaming
glares Slicing across the ceiling in a knifestroke from corner to
corner.

I remember the way you say my name. How you laugh it into
being With a smile curled around the tip of your tongue. When
it's A whine after I tease you, sweet and tart like wine seeping
between my teeth And trickling down my throat, tickling as it
settles in my stomach. You've Tumbled it across the lunch table
when asking why I have sticks Woven within the strands of my
hair. I've heard it stumble out of your chest After surprising you
with a gift, stunned and sun-warm and smile-bright.

I stare at a clock and imagine it clicking and ticking.
I stare at an AC vent and imagine it humming and grumbling. I
stare at the door and imagine you calling out to me.

I know how the world used to sound.
Its echoes linger on the border between
Madness and Myself.

DAMIEN DIAZ

Angel in the Dark

:

"I'm worried that I don't feel anything, Roger. It's all kind of just... slipping away."

Roger's reflection hung over Séreux's shoulder in the bathroom mirror. "Why does that worry you?" he asked.

"I'm hyper-aware of everything now—of myself, my place in this setting—but it's like my feelings are evaporating into a cloud right in front of me."

"Isn't that supposed to make it all easier?"

"Maybe," Séreux replied. "But it's sad if it really was. Details keep resurfacing, getting enlarged and specific. Mannerisms, obscured faults—it's overwhelming. I feel like I'm set apart from everything, even my own life..." Séreux took a long breath and held it, feeling the heartbeat drop from their chest like it had fallen from vertigo. A long fall until Séreux's lungs clouded the mirror with warm air like the morning dew on grass. "How did I even get here?" Séreux said, recovered.

"I need you here with me," Roger whispered, embracing Séreux from behind.

"But does it have to be here?" Séreux turned to the unoccupied shoulder in the direction of the modest, yet confining apartment. "I want to feel like I belong somewhere, to be so ingrained in my setting that I'm not even aware of any separation. But at this point I don't think that kind of change is possible."

"It can change," Roger said, turning from the mirror view to the enclosing apartment, "because you are my angel in the dark."

Séreux stared at the mirror as both of their reflections became bound to the frame.

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HAIR:	Brown	AFFILIATION: Alastaine Foods
		ADDRESS: 22nd Chapel Dumont
SEX:	Female	
WEIGHT:	71kg	
HEIGHT:	173cm	

Genevieve Bowen
Lead Researcher of synthetic proteins and artificially grown produce at Alastiane Foods. Scheduled to reveal results of Omni-Vita to Alastaine Board of Food and Agriculture in response to South American relief effort. Target to be intercepted posthaste. Data of food product to be retrieved and all copies deleted.

ADDITIONAL NOTES: Access card to front gate has been provided envelope. PIN to encrypted drive is 9782564

[BURN AFTER READING]

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"This is such horse shit—" Jacks stepped out from the opaque walls of the conference room into the disarrayed hallway. Séreux leaned on the adjacent wall downing grocery store coffee by the cupful. "Christ Séreux, you were supposed to be here forty minutes ago." His voice cut through the cacophony of flickering fluorescent bulbs, the discordant haze of chatter between suits and their white-shirted interns, and the clattering of dress shoes and heels on the waxed company-approved dark repeating tile

floor.

"Hmm..." Séreux's weariness put their words out of sync. "I was delayed— security." Sleep had been as rough on Séreux as PowerPoint transitions. "Why's this place so high maintenance today?"

"A shit-smeared rod fell out of somebody's ass and onto my desk. My office. Five minutes." Séreux figured if they'd been caught coming in late again, Jacks might dock them with another reprimand. Hopefully they'd get lucky, and whatever today's up-stir would overlook their need for a better temper foam bedding.

:|

"Jacks, I don't get how this hits us. We're logistics, not R&D."

"Is it surprising that just because a company has a big name, one major mess-up from somebody you've never even met can end it?" Jacks took out the Kahlúa he kept in his desk's top drawer with a 'World's Okayest Boss' mug, slightly chipped from a decade of service. He offered the bottle, but Séreux declined. "What a shit-storm, this," he groaned, pouring, "Pray you never get promoted here, it doesn't even come with a fire extinguisher."

"So then, the execs are saying that some brain-wave strolled into R&D and stole data on some new snackable? How does that even happen?"

"Who knows?" Jacks said, sipping from the mug. His gaze peered over the brim of the mug. "But the upper floors were talking like it was something that could alleviate the crisis in Peru."

"Yea that's bad." Jacks raised his eyebrows in agreement. "I mean from a moral standpoint," Séreux added, "don't you figure it's a little fucked that people out there would only solve a hunger crisis if they could get something from it?"

"I would focus on keeping your own stomach filled with coffee. Company poured so much of their resources into this *good*

idea that there's talk of restructuring."

"Talk?"

"Only if the Internal doesn't find her." Jacks let out a sarcastic "ha-ha," "Can't wait for this to blow over."

"*Her?*"

"A Genevieve Bowen, one of the leads. Internal went over her place, with everything travel-sized dropped off the face of the earth too."

Damn and they're talking about restructuring my department? "So what?" Séreux leaned back in the chair and sighed, staring at the ceiling, "we just wait holding out our hands until they decide to leave us with our severance package?"

"Pretty much."

"Need any help with anything then?"

"I'd like to think our rapport is pretty solid," Jack answered, "that's why I'm giving you the heads up to not step on anyone's toes."

I

"I can't ever stop dwelling on it," Séreux confessed, laying shirtless with Roger on the cheap temper foam, "I mean it's almost childlike how fixated I can get sometimes." Roger turned on his side and placed his hand on Séreux's stomach.

"How long have you been thinking about this?" Roger asked. His fingers danced shadows across Séreux's chest soaked in the ambient neon lighting.

"I don't know... always, at least sometimes. It's something that was always in the back of my mind but I was so afraid to find myself that I settled on what was told to me to be realistic for my life."

"Are you still afraid?"

"I don't think it even matters anymore, or maybe what I fear is that it never did in the first place, and yet it still suffocated me. I mean shit, I took this job for the security, busted my ass for degrees that I deluded myself into believing that they could

bankroll what I actually wanted to do. Yet here I am, disgruntled, unfulfilled, with money I can't spend because the company could go under in 6 months...shit probably next quarter."

"Good."

"Good?" Séreux chorted.

"Remember what you told me when we first met?"

Séreux turned over on top of Roger. His warm hand traveled across Séreuxs cheek. "I think I said a lot of things."

"Life is dull and the hardest thing most people struggle to find the very things that give them goosebumps."

"Oh god, I really said that?"

"Yea, paradoxes aren't not something ordinarily brought up in small talk. I'd figured you were just trying to impress me."

"And it didn't work?" Séreux teased, twirling Roger's blonde curls.

"Not really," Roger smirked. "I thought, *what an odd thing to say*." His nonchalant remarks led Séreux's eyes to the shape of mild regret. "Come on, don't make that face," he added, pulling Séreux back to him. "If anything I thought that you were incredibly raw for telling a total stranger this."

"Most people say I'm just hypersensitive."

"Most people are boring...anyways, I actually think this works out. Since that food pill or whatever it was is on hiatus, you've been home most weekends. Why not write those reflections in, what did you call it, an episodic?"

"An epistolary, but it's mostly going to myself rather than other people."

"Maybe I can hang over your shoulder as you write them." Roger gazed with the softness of his bedroom eyes. He caressed Séreux from neck to collarbone to waist. "Now angel," he whispered, "can you get the lights? I prefer when it's dark." Roger's neon-soaked silhouette seeped into the cheap temperfoam, blending with blankets and pillows, creating a conjoined sensuous flow of arms and legs like extensions of brush strokes.

I

AGE:	63	AFFILIATION: European Food
HAIR:	Blue-grey	Safety Authority
EYES:	Amber	ADDRESS: 141 Mugenstrasse
SEX:	Male	
WEIGHT:	87kg	
HEIGHT:	181cm	

Silomn Nadjevik

EFSA Liaison Officer facilitating ongoing coordination between Alastaine Foods and various European Food ministries operating within Peru. Due to deteriorating health related to lifelong chronic illness, target manages overseas international facilitations remotely from their manor. Biometric face camo along with Housekeeper's imprint data has been provided at pick-up location. Uniform has been provided at secondary pick-up location.

Additional Notes: Target is a known cigar collector and carries a portable oxygen concentrator on his person.

[BURN AFTER READING]

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...Silomn Nadjevik died in a tragic house fire yesterday. Fire investigators determined that the accident was caused by traces of smoking materials found on Silomn's oxygen tank originating in his study. He was 63 years old.
...Silomn's contributions to food security developments across Europe reflects his passion and stands as an example of the fundamen

tal goodness for humanity.

...His wife Narensha broke her silence about his death and opened a heartfelt memorial service, quoting, 'I have lost my world, but the world has lost her heart—' The wall monitor behind Jacks's desk turned to black. "Can't listen to this right now," he groaned, swirling in his chair and setting down the remote.

Séreux's despondent attention rested towards the office ceiling. "That's really the story Internal's going with?"

"Companies tend to get less attention from accidents than actual homicides. And with allthe other shit-smearing around here, a fine that large would knock the A's off Alastaine."

"So do you figure Internal finally has some traction on the people involved with whatever happened with the R&D lead?"

"That seems to be the common denominator of all the water cooler rumors," Jacks said, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Fuck me, there was some faded one last week... some of the middle management started pulling out because they think, and get this, it's just one guy."

"Oh brother," Séreux said, rolling their head. "Well if they think that then maybe this company is burned after all."

"Whoever is involved, Alastaine can't touch Peru until this problem is sorted."

"Add a little corporate espionage to the biggest drivers of world hunger." Séreux mumbled, blowing enough sarcasm toward the ceiling that it entered the ventilation shaft.

"Séreux, this is really happening and I need you to take this seriously."

"I am taking this seriously."Séreux retorted, leaning forward with arms bent over their knees, fragmenting their reflection in the waxed dark repeating tile floor. "Like how asinine is all this? Don't you think it's, at the very least, moronic that we are constantly undermined, that there is nothing that we can do, and that we suffer for it? I mean shit Jacks, it's just hard to swallow that people benefit from us failing to solve a goddamn hunger crisis."

"Be real, Séreux. You think Alastaine wouldn't be involved if it didn't profit from it?"

"Yea well, it doesn't make it any less disheartening," Séreux said, suppressing the urge to walk up and say, *"I can't believe you just said that to me".*

"I agree, that's what I found the most interesting. On both occasions, footage caught a lone figure walking in and out of their residences as though they had open access."

"So even that rumor is true, really?"

"Yea. The nest upstairs keeps buzzing about it. They even had something that disguised their face in both instances."

"Okay, so let's say then that a couple Site Directors are conspiracy theorists. That doesn't make whatever Internal's got pure conjecture. One guy got to both, doesn't mean they're acting alone."

"Couldn't agree more. Why? 'Cause there's talk that info on targets is being leaked from inside, and it makes total sense."

"How can you say any of this is making sense?"

"Unrelated people don't say the same thing for no reason. But think about it—before, have you ever heard the name Genevieve Bowen, seen what she looks like? Or hell, the only reason people like us know the name Silomn Nadjevik is because of the way he died. They weren't another charismatic CEO or a controversial president, or some eccentric engineering genius. Sure, they were in high positions, but they were people just like you or me—people putting in the day-to-day work so that the achievements of those whom they would most likely have never met could take credit. The right people, the important people, remain important to their parasocial masses while the actual work goes unnoticed, but it's important nonetheless."

"What are you getting at?" Séreux looked at him in surprised confusion. This rapid direction of tangents was unlike the unimpressed demeanor that made Jacks somewhat related in the office setting. "You're starting to sound like you see patterns in the air."

Jacks tossed a thin sheaf of paper with Alastaine's '*A*' logo and

Internal Intelligence Report in bold on the front.

"What is this?"

"Important people," Jacks sighed.

Séreux examined the personal details pertaining to the investigation of Genevieve and Silomn—glossing over their routines, education, interests... Although the information itself was unremarkable, the presence of it thickened the ventilated office atmosphere. The fact that he obtained any kind of information from Internal untainted by rumor unsettled Séreux. With Jacks sitting nearby, his glare tightening each time Séréux peered from walls of blackened bars implicating them in corporate politics without choice of refusal. Séreux's skimming was interrupted at the last page, mismatched with color creases from being folded into fours. It was a copy of a handwritten list of names, three columns long, with Genevieve's and Silomn's crossed out, along with a handful of others in no particular order. Jacks's name was somewhere in the middle column, while Séreux's was near the bottom of the third.

"What the hell Jacks... this is... "

"Legit? A threat? Some edgelord misinformist sparking some neurons? Whatever it is, Internal didn't intend to tell me or anyone else on this list, which is why I'm doing it."

"Are you crazy? We have to give this to the police."

"Don't be an idiot Séreux—" Jacks took away the thin stack and dropped it into the top drawer inside his desk — "if Internal found out this got out you'd be put in a white-padded room beneath the building. Besides, I think this was delivered to them like some kind of taunt or something. If it really is just one guy, then it shouldn't be long until they smoke that brain-wave."

"And if they don't?" A few seconds of silence passed, and their smirks turned to chuckles in an off-unison disbelief.

"Regardless," Jacks added, "use some of your vacation days, maybe even some sick days, but don't go out alone. I can only write off expenses for work trips for the names in our department. The rest I'll have to improvise."

"What about you? If there are leaks in the building couldn't you be throwing your name to the top of the priority queue?"

"Give me some credit, this isn't my first briefcase exchange."

Séreux blew air to the ceiling and got up from the chair. "If you say so. Alright, well I should at least try to pretend like I'm getting work done today."

"Hmm." Jacks took out the half-empty bottle of Kahlúa from his desk and, with an empty motion, turned on the wall monitor behind him with the remote pointed over his shoulder. The door in front of Séreux slid open to the office ventilation of coffee and artificial fragrances.

"Look out for yourself, Jacks. You make things less dull around here."

|:::

"I thought it would be enough, but it isn't." Séreux's shirtless reflection floated in the bathroom mirror. A corona of fallen bottles and crumpled papers orbited the temper foam as Roger lay bare, staring up at the ceiling.

"How many are you on tonight? Roger asked, his body motionless in the mirror's background.

"Not enough. It's never enough, even when I'm crossed. The feelings are peaks of a numbness that fades as fast as you've convinced yourself they're here to stay, and inevitably turn to a hope that they last at least for one night."

"Are these the reflections from your epistolary, or are they the ones scattered on the floor?"

"They aren't reflections. Only ignored realizations that not everyone can achieve their dreams. My life is a fractal of a daydream."

"..."

"The job was only one overused, drawn-out cope... I put all of my being, the part that was actually important, in one basket, suppressing the stacking realizations until it caved under the weight, but I couldn't feel it get any lighter."

"..."

"There's not anything I can do. I was born in a time of buzzwords: Efficiency, Unitisation, Packaging, Transportation, Overhead...these systems and processes became my systems and processes, my being transmuted to copy-paste sheets."

"..."

"Working in a tolerable delusion to afford your dreams only for the weekend. What about during? Was it my fault or my settings'? Did I choose this, or did I believe there were no other options for me? I'm not sure if this is the end or just the beginning. Leaving town might seem like a fresh start, but what if it's just another dead end? I miss the days when drowning my sorrows felt liberating. It was this dwelling that made me hold, with such grateful rawness, my fluidity... my memories... all the cleverness... but most importantly, the feeling. Now it's all a numbed breathlessness. How did I even get here..."

"..." Roger rose from the temperfoam, his body drifting towards Séreux. As he came closer his neon-soaked silhouette resurfaced in the reflection, lingering as he hung over Séreux's shoulder. "You are here because I need you."

"And I have to be..." Séreux felt his thought drop, replaced by a compulsory déjà vu.

"Because..." Séreux looked to Roger as though their eyes needed reassurance that they could see. "And I have to be because..."

"Because you are my angel in the dark."

:||

AGE:	51	EYES: Blue
HAIR:	Black	AFFILIATION: Alastaine Foods
		ADDRESS: 19th Jean Gallimard
SEX:	Male	
WEIGHT:	79kg	
HEIGHT:	190cm	

Jackson Erskine
Logistics Site Director at Alastaine Foods. observations indicate that target has gained unauthorized access to Internal Affairs files regarding ongoing investigation of corporate espionage. Target set to Priority One Elimination. Any and all files to be retrieved for further review. S-5 Neurotoxin is located at coordinates provided in envelope sleeve.

Additional Notes: Target is a heavy drinker and keeps a bottle of Kahlúa in the top drawer of his office desk. Exercise caution. Tends to arrive early and stay after hours.

[BURN AFTER READING]

II

Séreux awoke within the white room. After another breakfast of egg whites and rice, Séreux scratched another tally mark into the lining of the white temper foam bedding with the handle of a white plastic spoon.

Another tally mark, another white breakfast, another day spent looking at a white ceiling. Another tally mark, another white night spent on the temper foam, another breakfast without the outside world. Another scratch without an iota of explanation for their monotone confinement.

Séreux passed the time lying on the temper foam, imagining patterns in the white ceiling and then watching them move behind their eyelids. In one of those intervals, as if summoned by their mind, a figure appeared looking down at Séreux.

A figure in a suit, bearing the 'A' badge of Alastaine Internal Affairs and a white featureless mask, spent the next few tally mark scratches accusing Séreux of murdering Genevieve Bowen and Silomn Nadjevik, and on the disappearance of Jackson Erskine and the intelligence report he stole.

II:

"For. The. Last. Fuck-ing. Time—" Séreux yelled, " I did not kill anybody! I don't know about any missing data, I never stole any files, and I don't know where the hell Jacks is!"

"Surveillance shows that you were the only one to enter his office," the masked suit said in indiscernible static. "Again, what were you doing in his office?"

"This is insane!" Séreux clenched fists of frustrative desperation, "I already told you that! Listen, Jacks was the one who found the intel report and the hit list, with my name on it and his by the way, and I went in there when he was passed-out drunk and returned the report anonymously because I didn't want to, A, get killed, and B, get shoved in this white room that I've been stuck in for days now!"

"We know, Séreux." the masked suit said in lower pitch, "we found traces of the S-5 in his coffee mug. You put it in his drink and he was dead not ten minutes later. We know you've been sabotaging Alastaine's involvement in South America."

Séreux's chest collapsed, "Jacks is..."

"Again, I already told you this. I've been telling you this for days now. Stop stalling.

Which company do you work for?"

"I-I dont—"

"How much do they know about our operations?"

"I dont know—"

"Who is your next target!"

"..." Séreux sat in silence, unable to stop the thoughts from dropping from their mind and into the uncanny sensation of déjà vu.

"That's okay..." the masked suit backed away from Séreux and towards a passageway that opened from the solid white wall. "We knew everything to begin with, but I have to admit, you are full of promise. We'll try again tomorrow."

Séreux took a long breath and held it, feeling their body drop

from vertigo and imprint in the temper foam, but there was no apartment and no bathroom mirror. Only the white room.

"I don't know... I don't even know why I'm here," Séreux whispered.

The masked suit stopped at the door, its back turned to Séreux. The featureless white mask began to glitch and shift, and soon, blond curls cascaded from the figure's head, seamlessly transfiguring into Roger's sensuous features. "You are here because you need to be."

"Because you are my angel in the dark."

HALEY SHEA

Silhouette

HALEY SHEA

Droplets

YASMINE V. NAHDI

The Daughters

The family's farm was deep in the countryside, thirty minutes or so away from the nearest town. The land that surrounded it had nothing but emptiness and thorny bushes and gravel, yet anyone passing through would know the family that lived there. In case you were unfamiliar with the area, a sign with the family name written in both Arabic and what was presumed to be a French translation of the letters pointed left, gesturing past the fork in the road.

The family had been there for decades. No one was exactly sure when, but the sign itself was an indication of how the family had predated all others that came to the land as if they had simply materialized along with the weeds and the l ake of salt nearby that would harden every summer. The grandfather and grandmother still tended to the farm despite their old age, assisted by the hands of their grandchildren. They had twenty of them, courtesy of their eight children, and saw almost each and every one of them multiple times a year, with the exception of two. There were two girls they rarely saw, not by choice but of circumstances, yet they were the most cherished of all.

The first girl was the daughter of the third-eldest child. Her father had moved to America in his late twenties for better job prospects, earning enough money to send to his family back home. Years later, he settled down with a woman he met at work, and they had a daughter.

She was raised visiting the countries her parents hailed from every couple of years, and her absence from their lives regarded her as the most treasured niece, the most intriguing cousin, and the most loved grandchild.

The second girl was the daughter of the second-youngest child. Her father lived on the farm his entire life and planned to have his family live there as well. He wed a woman from the city, whose own father had a farm not too far from theirs that they mostly stayed in during summertime. They had a daughter soon after, naming her Nour after the light that gleamed from her bright blue eyes that mirrored her father's and his mother's, something none of the other grandchildren had the pleasure of inheriting. She had spent her toddler years on the farm before her mother took her and left, divorcing her father and moving to the city. That was the last the family had seen of her for years, with her father only visiting her periodically when her uncle from America would come to see her.

***

When she was younger, Nour would ask her mother why her father was never around. She fell prey to the moments she felt his absence the most, like career day at her school in Tunis, when her classmates excitedly brought in their fathers who were firefighters and doctors and government workers, or the annual Eid concert, where parents and pairs of grandparents would sit together, eagerly watching as their children performed songs and dances in celebration. Nour would catch the glances coming her way every career day, swallowing the bile she tasted in her throat at the thought of no one sitting next to her for the event.

She would smile at her mother and jidd's faces in the crowd when she performed, but then her eyes would fall on the families of her friends sprawling through the aisles with relatives, and she would quickly blink tears away.

She would cry herself to sleep most nights every summer when she visited her jidd's house, situated only mere minutes away from the farm that she called home as a toddler. Her tears would seep into her pillow as she gazed out her window in the direction of where she believed the family to be, past the dry branches of the olive trees that seemed to extend for miles, wishing that she could walk or perhaps float over to the farm and see them. Nour didn't know why she was never able to see her other cousins, but she reveled in whispers of them every summer. Her jidd would occasionally mention her eldest male cousin in passing, speaking of his work in the fields, but she could barely put a face to his words. Sometimes, he would speak of seeing one of her aunts in the local market, but she never asked which sister of her father's he saw.

Her memories of her father were murky vignettes in her mind. She remembered he had sad eyes, like hers only in color, yet she could barely recall his face. When she was a child, she felt angry. How could he never visit her? How could he ignore the only child he had? But soon after, her mother had told her that he had married someone else and that they had a baby— a boy. Then the news came that he had another daughter, and then another. She was only seven at the time, then eight, then nine, but she could feel her throat close up. She feared she would never see her father again. He had his own children now.

When Nour was thirteen, her uncle came to visit again, this time bringing her cousin, the American, and a little girl she had recognized from a picture her mother had shown her of some of her younger cousins on her father's side. She had seen pictures of her American cousin that her uncle would send her mother as the years went on as well, and she faintly remembered her when they came to visit five years before. Her American cousin looked incredibly different fromher, with dark hair and angular eyes, yet it was a face she could never forget.

She watched with her aunt and mother as they pulled into the driveway of her grandfather's farm, dust swirling around their rental car as the gravel crunched beneath it. Her uncle stepped out, then her American cousin from the front seat, then the little cousin, recognizing the young girl as the daughter of her father's youngest sister from a picture she had seen on her mother's Facebook. Nour remembered how shy the little girl looked in the picture, slinking in the shadows of the hallway as her little brother posed smiling next to her. Looking at her now, the little girl probably didn't know who Nour was, and she wondered why she had come.

The American cousin came up to Nour and hugged her, kissing her hair. She smelled of expensive perfume and sun, her dark curls whipping in Nour's face. Her dark eyes were lined with kohl, and she had an air of difference to her that Nour could only register as foreign. Her uncle followed, then the little girl. She shyly smiled up at her before wrapping her arms around her waist. The three of them walked into the house, sitting down in the living room and watching as her uncle chatted with her family.

There was a silence among them, but her American cousin would glance at her in between bites, smiling. The little girl stole glances too, but stayed at the corner of the couch.

The adults went outside, her uncle lighting a cigarette on the way out. She glanced down at the tray, counting the dates and biscuits left. There were a couple of date pits lying discarded, and she counted those before angling herself towards her American cousin.

"I like your shoes," she said in English. Her cousin looked up with a start. "Thank you," she answered. Nour savored her accent, her voice echoing in her ears. It was different from what she heard in the movies she watched in her English class, less placeable and more mundane than the glamour of the actors on screen. "I like your earrings," she added.

She wasn't familiar with the word earrings, and her face must have betrayed her since her cousin pointed to dangling flowers that hung at her earlobes. Nour smiled and thanked her.

"What's wrong?" her American cousin asked the little girl in Arabic, nodding at her. The harshness of the vowels came out softly, with a slight accent. It was the kind of speech you learn at school, lacking the jabbing nature of the dialect that a native would have.

"Nothing," she answered, smiling a toothless smile.

"Talk to us, then."

After that, the little girl could barely stop. She talked about school and her favorite dresses, while her American cousin listened with a smile. Nour wasn't sure if she understood or didn't, so she tried her best to translate with the English she knew. The American cousin's enthusiastic nods

nods satisfied her, and she was suddenly grateful that she chose to learn English instead of French at school. She laughed when the little girl told a story of her brother, and Nour vaguely remembered a little boy in a picture her aunt had sent her mother not too long ago.

She couldn't help but wonder why the little girl was there. She enjoyed her presence, yet questioned why she was the only other cousin of hers to visit after so long, and why she was the one sitting next to her and not someone else. Perhaps it was her age that made her the perfect companion to her American cousin— a carefree little girl who couldn't understand why she was a stranger to the rest of their family and didn't seem to care.

A silence fell upon them. Nour could feel the little girl's eyes on her, and she looked at her and smiled. She returned her smile, folding her hands into her lap.

"Who is your father again?" the little girl asked Nour. She was shocked by the question, yet tried not to show it on her face when her American cousin glanced at her.

She said her father's name, her voice coming out more level than she expected. The little girl made an ah sound, nodding her head as if she remembered, but how could she? She couldn't have been older than eight years old, the age Nour herself was when she was told that her father had another child. She doubted that her father ever spoke of her, especially if he had a family of his own. Perhaps her cousin's mother had told her about her in passing, but how could a little mind comprehend the thought of her father having two families? If she counted correctly, thehalf-brother she didn't know would have been close to the little girl's age, and she wondered what their relationship

was like. She wondered if her cousin played dolls and dressed up with her half-sisters, if they were part of the stories that she expected her cousin to cherish in her mind. She wondered if she would ever have a relationship with them, perhaps in the future, when they were old enough to understand that she wasn't their competition but their sister, no matter how much she wished her father was in her life.

Her uncle re-entered the room, smiling at the sight of the three of them. She wondered if he heard bits of their conversation, but the thought quickly left her mind as she listened to the little girl ask him if they would bring her home with them.

"Some other time," her uncle said. The little girl seemed to understand that this wasn't something she could insist upon, nodding her head before folding her hands in her lap. Nour looked at her American cousin, who was pointedly looking down as she got up, careful not to meet her eyes. Nour wondered what she was thinking of. Was it the shame of having a hidden part of the family separate from the rest, yet only mere miles away? Or perhaps it was nothing,and she was reading too deeply into things. After all, her American cousin had nothing to do with the absence of her father.

As Nour watched the two girls walk towards the door, she couldn't help but yearn for them to take her with them. How she would love to step onto the farm of her father's family. She wondered if they had olive trees the way her jidd's land did or thorny plants that surrounded the perimeter of the land with echoes of danger if you crossed its boundaries.

Perhaps she could ask to see pictures of their farm. Maybe then she would be able to catch a glimpse of her other cousins and family members, a hint of a smile from an older cousin or the running blurs of younger cousins or even her half-siblings. Shaking her head, she followed them out the door.

Her uncle waved goodbye before stepping into the car. Her little cousin hugged her before bee-lining for the back seat, leaving just Nour and her American cousin standing outside.

"Bye," she said, stepping towards Nour.

Nour wrapped her arms around her. "Come again," she said.

She felt her cousin nod. Nour wasn't much shorter than her, and her cousin's chin rested almost perfectly within the crook of her neck. She felt her cousin stroke her hair, and she felt at ease at the gesture of tenderness. Nour wasn't familiar with the sensation of having siblings, and she knew her cousin didn't either, but she thought that if sisterhood could be reduced to a gesture, it would be this. A gentleness between two outsiders, arm's length away from home.

She let go, and her cousin smiled before opening the car door. Nour waved as she watched them back out of their driveway, dust swirling around them once again until the tire tracks in the ground were the only thing Nour could see.

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A week later, Nour's uncle and Tamara visited again, this time asking her if she would like to come along with them

for the day. They were headed to Hammamet, a city named after the Roman baths that adorned the city in antiquity and now known as a tourist attraction, with jasmine vendors up and down its streets and horse-drawn carriages circling plazas. Nour happily accepted their invitation, and Tamara smiled at her, squeezing her hand before getting into the car.

It was a two-hour trip to the city. Nour watched as the city line came into view, registering the familiar vendors on the street and the sandwich shops on every corner. Nour loved visiting the countryside in the summer, but the city is where she truly felt at home, and Hammamet was no different from Tunis. She looked over to Tamara, who was also gazing out the window with the sun reflecting off of her sunglasses and her hair whipping in the wind. Nour thought about what she might have been thinking about, if this place was also familiar to her in some way or another. She wondered if Tamara could smell fresh bread when she walked down the streets of her home, somewhere in California or New York, in a big city that she couldn't remember the name of.

They arrived at the coastline in the early afternoon, the sun beating down on their faces. Nour followed Tamara and her uncle out of the car, looking towards the sprawling stone steps that led to the famous Sidi Bouhdid Cafe, a beachside tourist trap that overlooked the ocean atop the city's ancient infrastructure. As they walked up, Tamara handed Nour a woven fan with a pink flower embroidered within its fronds, motioning to shield her face from the sun. She thanked her quietly, lifting the fan up in the same way that Tamara did.

The cafe was nearly barren when they walked in, and they sat down at a table that overlooked the south side of the beach. Nour breathed in the salty scent of the ocean air, looking towards the coastline. She was never much of a beach person herself, but she enjoyed the atmosphere and watching people enjoy what it had to offer. She watched as families splashed around in the ocean, nearby children taking turns diving off of the nearby rock mounds and their mothers relaxing in the sunshine.

A waiter came by their table with menus, and Nour watched Tamara and her uncle grab two before she hesitantly put her hand out. She fidgeted as she read through the menu, her eyes skimming the prices of the lackluster food. It was almost devoid of any traditional meals she was accustomed to, and she flipped through the menu in awe. Could tourist areas like these truly not offer any authentic cuisine? The thought was unimaginable to her, but she had never traveled farther than Sfax which was only three hours away from her home in Tunis, so she decided that perhaps tourist destinations weren't about food, but experience. Her eyes settled on a chocolate crepe that wasn't too expensive as the waiter returned.

"I like crepes," Tamara said to her in Arabic.

"I have never tried it," she replied in English.

"I don't know how to say it in Arabic," Tamara said before finishing off in English, "but they're thin and sweet, from France."

Nour nodded, though not sure what to expect. She wondered if it would resemble the pastries she would sometimes see online, with powdered sugar and flaky crusts.

The waiter arriving with their food interrupted Nour's thoughts, and she watched as two plates of sandwiches and one with her crepe positioned next to a cup of fruit were set on the table. What met her gaze was a thinly wrapped dough-like pastry, and she lifted her fork, struggling to cut a piece off before Tamara graciously handed her a knife, showing her how to cut it properly. She cut off a piece and then bit into it, feeling the chocolate gush out and onto her tongue before quickly cutting another piece and ravishing each bite.

The three of them ate their meals in silence, only looking up to exchange what seemed like obligatory smiles and gaze at the beach. With his cigarette pack and a lighter in his hand, her uncle stood up from the table once he finished his food, leaving the two girls for a moment.

"Do you come to Hammamet a lot?" Tamara asked Nour once she had finished her meal.

They seemed to switch from English to Arabic without knowing, mostly speaking in the languages that weren't their native tongue.

"No, not really." Nour thought back to the last time she came with her mother. She couldn't have been older than seven, and she vaguely remembered buying a garland of jasmine flowers that her mother placed on her head.

Tamara nodded. "I like Hammamet," she said. "But I like Tunis more." Nour smiled at that. She was always partial to her home city, but she couldn't help but cherish her cousin's appreciation for it. Nour was about to respond, but the sound of a family sitting down at the table next to them distracted her. They were a family of three,

with a little girl no more than four years old climbing onto a chair, and she watched as she excitedly grabbed at a menu that was too big for her little hands.

"Where is Amina?" Nour asked, suddenly remembering the little cousin who visited with them last.

"She's home," Tamara said. "Playing, probably."

"She's sweet," Nour replied.

Tamara smiled. "Most of the time, unless she's hungry." Nour laughed as her uncle came back into the cafe. At the sight of them talking, he smiled, letting Nour finish laughing before asking them if they were ready to leave. The cafe was not too far from the old medina, and they walked through a cobblestone alleyway into a little souk, a sunlit street full of shop vendors selling colorful garments and souvenir trinkets for tourists. Tamara quickly hurried into the nearest vendor stall, parsing through keychains of little camels and miniature flags. Nour watched as she picked out two, then three, then six, before handing them to the vendor and retrieving three crisp bills from her purse. As she followed Tamara into the next few shops, she wondered who she would give the souvenirs to, if it were her family or friends back home. Tamara seemed to want everything that had the tiniest piece of home, picking out little stuffed camels with Tunisia embroidered on their multicolored bodies and getting names engraved on bracelets by a jeweler with a cart full of silver, her father handing over the necessary amount of money each time.

They wound up at the end of the souk close to an hour later, and by then the sun had begun to set. Nour trailed Tamara and her uncle back to the car, fanning herself while watching Tamara rearrange the overfilled bags she held in

her hands. She set them in the trunk of the car before turning to Nour.

"You can sit in the front," Tamara said in Arabic, closing the trunk.

Nour looked over at her uncle, who was getting into the car. "Are you sure?"

Tamara nodded. "I want to nap, anyways."

She said the last part in English, to which Nour frowned in confusion. She couldn't understand the word nap, and Tamara must have sensed it, saying the word for sleep in Arabic to clarify before climbing into the backseat. Nour entered the passenger side, stealing a quick glance at Tamara in the mirror, watching as she closed her eyes.

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Nour must have fallen asleep sometime after, opening her eyes to see the familiar dirt roads that led into the countryside. The streets were barren, and the darkened night sky twinkled with stars.

"Good morning," her uncle greeted her.

"Good morning," she replied, smiling a little.

Tamara stirred in the back seat, and Nour watched as she sat up. They approached the fork in the road, turning right as a truck with bright headlights came from the opposite way.

"That's your father's truck," her uncle said quietly as the truck came into view, beaten down and far from the white color it once was. Her uncle slowed down the car as he beeped, and Nour shrunk in her seat. Tamara looked out the window, watching as her father's truck stopped next to them. He opened the door and emerged while her uncle

did the same, and she could barely make out his towering figure from where she was seated.

"Come here, Nour. Don't be shy," her uncle said.

Nour got out and walked around the car, facing her father. He looked so much like her, more than she ever remembered, beyond just his eyes and hair color. She could see their similarities in the way his eyes crinkled as he smiled, in their similar set mouths, in their stature. She couldn't remember the last time she saw him, perhaps three or four years ago, but she knew that if she saw him anywhere, in the street or at the market, she would recognize him no matter how much time had passed. Nour hesitantly stepped forward, and her father hugged her.

"How are you, Nour?" he asked her.

"I'm good," she heard herself say. She knew it was polite to ask him the same, but she couldn't bring herself to say anything more.

"Did you get anything from the souk today?" he asked.

Nour shook her head.

"Here," he said, fishing into his pocket. He pulled out five creased bills and handed them to her.

"No, *Baba*, it's okay. I don't need money." Her voice faltered at saying the word baba, which felt too personal and too intimate to call the man who was her father yet never acted like one to her.

Nour heard the sound of the car window descending and looked to see Tamara poking her head out. Even in the night, she could see that her brows were indignantly furrowed, and Nour looked back at her father, who had just noticed Tamara. He smiled at her, but Tamara's face remained unchanged.

"That's all you're giving to your daughter?" Tamara asked Nour's father, nodding at the crumpled bills in Nour's hand. Nour expected her to have a jesting smile playing on her lips, but Tamara's face was hard and her voice was blunt and level, every syllable of her usually soft Arabic coming out as hard as if it was her native tongue.

"Tamara," Nour's uncle said as a warning, but Tamara didn't break her gaze.

"What?" she asked, this time in English. She asked her father something else, but Nour's limited comprehension only caught the word "nothing."

"Don't," Nour understood her uncle tell Tamara. Tamara looked at him, then at Nour's father, and turned away leaving the window open.

Nour looked away from the car and back at her father, his head avoiding her eye and turning towards the ground. She thanked her father again, giving him an awkward hug before going back into the car. She looked at the back of Tamara's head, seeing the reflection of her placid face in the window.

Nour didn't know what to think. She admired Tamara's bravery, once again feeling a sense of sisterhood only an older female relative could offer, but she also felt unsettled by her outspokenness. She couldn't think of a single person she knew, both her own age or older, that would ever speak to a family member in that way, much less an older male relative. Perhaps it was her American ways that emboldened her to do such a thing. Nour could see the American quality in her uncle too, in his softer demeanor that made him seem like he never thought to raise his voice at his child no matter what, a smile that seemed permanently

etched on his face, and atthe way silently drove the rest of the way home. Tamara was lucky, Nour thought, to have a father like him.

Besides, what more could Nour's father give her? An apology for abandoning her as a child? That seemed too big of a deal to admit in the middle of a dusty road with her cousin and uncle as witnesses. She looked down at the money he had given her. It was enough to buy new clothes for herself when she went back to the city for school, but deep down she knew she wouldn't spend it. For now, she thought, this is enough. The sight of him and something to remember him by.

They pulled into the familiar driveway of her jidd's house not long after, where her mother was waiting for her at the door. She must have seen their car lights, and for a second Nour wondered if she had seen her with her father, but realized they were probably too far away to see properly. Nour, her uncle, and Tamara exited the car, and Nour watched as her cousin and uncle greeted her mother, exchanging pleasantries and talking briefly about their day. She noticed how neither of them mentioned seeing her father, and Nour debated telling her mother about seeing him once she had the chance. Putting the money in her pocket, she decided against it, selfishly wanting to keep the memory to herself.

Tamara walked away from the adults and towards Nour, and she stepped forward to hug her. Nour's initial intimidation quickly melted into gratefulness, and she couldn't help but feel happy that someone felt similarly to her, thought that the whole ordeal was strange and unfair to Nour, and was willing to stand up for Nour when her own

timidness would not let her. This is what family feels like, she decided, as she hugged her cousin.

"Visit me again, please," Nour said in English.

She felt Tamara nod before pulling away. "I will."

As she began to walk away, Nour called out to her. "With Amina. Or someone else, whoever. Anyone."

Tamara met her eyes and nodded in understanding. Nour and her mother watched as her uncle and Tamara got into their car, waving as the engine roared to life and they began to drive away. When she could no longer see them, she followed her mother into the house, with the image of her father lingering in her mind and the weight of his crumpled bills in her pocket.

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NATHANIEL EDU

Self-Intimacy

It's natural,
every once in a while, to be glowing
over the checkerboarded floor of a dark-room,
your light source is a mirror: dreaming;
you really have no right.

it is dusting over with smoke.

It's perfectly common to fall over backward
for just longer than you expect,
arms flailing. head-rush. your own weakness.

you are to be shown how little control there is.

It's embarrassing,
but it's natural:

We Al l Wat ch P i l es of S an d
D is sol vi ng in to
N o t h i n g n e s s.

NATHANIEL EDU

Women are Grasshoppers

They sit inside the blue-summer pavement
where the sky has melted
to hide them.

They kiss the dry grass and sing,
under the wind, so that nobody
hears them.

Stars fall for them nightly
and they lie still,
even though they have wings.

until at the last second,
they leap, admiring
the explosions.

and some have called them
Angels.

To see one is good luck
and to hold one
is a miracle.

Friendship Song

Put me together
like a puzzle piece
or the snapping dry bark
of an old pine tree.

With firm rivers friendly
at the core of my being,
I can always come apart
and you can have me made again.

Just the way you want me, know
I'll always be your friend.
Just the way you want me, know
I'll always be your friend.

TA'HLIA DAVIS

Flashes of Periphery

September 2023

The Sun refused to hide behind slumberous storm clouds the day her grandfather died. Refused to cloak itself so that the heavens might weep. Couldn't bear to curl up and take a leisurely nap, enjoy a day off, and be content to play a supporting role as the rain takes center stage. No, instead it marched through the sky, bearing down brutally, and biting the back of her neck. Her grandma had said it was, "Lighting his way home, washing them clean of sad thoughts, and bringing about the celebration of his long life," but the girl thought differently. The Sun was there to chastise her, to censure her grief, to goad her darkened inner monologue into something less barren. It was attempting to fill the void she'd welcomed in, the moment she had received the phone call.

She had been lingering near the house phone, toying between preparing for the day ahead and eagerly awaiting a tired voice. Choosing her outfit purposefully, comfortable sweatpants, a tight, bright white tank top to match her new bright white shoes. She stood in the bathroom mirror and tried on a golden dragon necklace, but couldn't stand the way it hung from her neck. It wasn't the tickling sensation that annoyed her, but the minute and possibly imaginary weight and dragging of the gold chain, the texture of the metal against her skin. The necklace was complementary to the tarnished gold hoop earrings she wanted to wear, but she couldn't mix metals. Not when she had a long journey with her mother ahead. The last thing she wanted to hear for days on end was her mother's nagging about her cloth-

ing choices. It's bad enough her hair wasn't exactly perfect, the messy parts on her sectioned scalp, a testament to the rush she had been in to finish the style hours before.

Outfit complete, purse packed, and a handful of bacon hastily crammed into her mouth the moment her grandma turned the corner and left the kitchen, the girl proceeded to relax and wait. Checking the clock on the wooden entertainment center, listening to its hands click and clock and click, turning her phone over and over again, oscillating between pressing the phone's home button and smashing the phone's power button with unnecessary aggression. Every minute that elapsed between 8 and 9 only served to increase her anxiety. She paced between the couch and the window of the front door, keeping in time with the ticking of the clock. Her thoughts were fuzzy and blurred, apprehension coated mental images of her upcoming class schedule, excitement sparked from short imaginings of her new job, dread dripped out of weeks, months, years old memories of the road trip ahead, sliding through arguments about cheating partners, leaking amongst snippets of various homophobic slurs and targeted insults, hanging precariously from puffs of smoke tinged tobacco red, marijuana green, cotton-candy pink, dragging along drifts of drink, of Grey Goose and Hennesy, gas station fruit punch, bottles of barely chilled beer. But it didn't matter because the road trip would end in a homecoming. The chance to be around her chosen family again. Another year away to pursue her degree. She just had to survive this trip.

Her frenzied calm was disturbed when the long hand of the clock ticked into its 9th position. When her grandmother's house phone chimed and chirped, when the wind blew through the living room, rustling the dangling leaves of potted plants and crinkling plastic-covered furniture, when she removed the phone from the receiver and wrapped the coiled cord daintily around her finger, pressing the phone to her ear, a "Hello?" cut short as the screaming began.

At first, it was an angry whipping sound, shrill and sharp,

cutting through the pleasant atmosphere of that early morning. She tried to talk to the voice, make sense of its mumbled mantra through the screeching, but could only pick up a few words, repeated over and over again.

"She left me, she left me, she leffftttt me, she left me, she left me, she leffftttt me, she's gone, she's gone, oh my god..."

Was that Aaliyah? The girl checked the caller ID, where her mom's number flashed across the tiny screen. *So why did Aaliyah have her mom's phone?*

"Who left you? Who's gone? Mom? Did Mom leave you? What happened? Please, please stop yelling, I can't understand what you're saying."

The screaming continued for several minutes. The murmuring words stammered when the voice had to draw breath.

The girl was exasperated. Of course, she'd have to deal with family drama on her big day. She could only imagine what her mom and sister had been arguing about that morning. She tried to calm her sister down again, begging and pleading with her to cease the screaming. A headache had begun to sprout from the base of her neck and crept around to her frontal lobe.

"Please, Aaliyah. Please stop yelling. I can't hear you. Tell me what happened. You know Mama said you can't come with us this time. Please just chill out."

Unable to bear the sound of breaking glass, the painful, pitiful screeching of a young girl scorned, the girl had started to hand the phone to her grandma. Who had appeared after the phone had started ringing and was trying to figure out what was going on. As the tip of the phone left the girl's ear, the voice whispered, crackling along the sentence, "This isn't Aaliyah. It's me."

Her mom's voice.

"What's wrong Mom? What happened? Are you okay? Who left you?" The questions jumped ship, hastily exited her mouth in quick succession, concurrent with the flow of her thoughts. She briefly puzzled out every possible reason for her mother's state. Lingered on a few situations that might have occurred with

her boyfriend, the kids, maybe her job. So she was unprepared for the answer, the clarity, the brief moment when sound stood still and rays of sunshine lit up her crumpled face.

"He left me. Grandpa. My dad. He's gone, Imani. He left me."

September 2011

"Christian, I shouldn't have to call you to tell you to check on your own daughter!"

"I didn't make Imani by myself Christian, you did this too. And if you're not going to be here to help raise her, the least you could do is call every once in a while. Even that other no-good-ass baby daddy I got sees his children sometimes."

"She's a growing girl Christian! A whole-ass child! And not the only mouth I have to feed and clothe and send to school every day. I can only do so much with the little bit of child support you send every couple months."

"Okay, man. I'm fucking tired of that excuse Christian! You haven't been active duty in ages. See… You know what? I know what this is. You've done got down there and found you a wife. That's alright. I'm not mad, that ain't none of my business. What is my business though is you remembering you have a fucking daughter! I don't give a fuck what you and your bitch got going on down there Christian. I truly don't. But what you're not going to do is ignore your firstborn child."

Imani stood on short, shaky legs, shaded in darkness at the entrance to the kitchen. The archway was partially cluttered, a medium-sized fish tank sat on a tall black metal stand. The two turtles inside swam around quietly, the filter humming, the tiny turtle eggs drifting along the bottom of the tank. Earlier that day the turtles had to be separated. The girl turtle and the boy turtle had been fighting, the boy turtle was trying to eat the eggs. At least that's how her mom had explained it. While they didn't need more turtles, it was terrible to see the fighting, the splashing and tearing at each other, to listen to the scrape of tiny claws

against hard shells. The snapping sounds as water collided with the filter, the walls, the floor. Imani had mopped the mess up, it had taken way too long. Her younger siblings stood nearby but were completely unhelpful. Aaliyah trying to play in the puddles, Darius rooting for the boy turtle despite not knowing who was who.

Her mom had sent her away, tasking Imani with putting her siblings to bed. She had helped them up the stairs and watched as they changed into their bedclothes, before reading them each a story. Aaliyah had requested, *Frog and Toad are Friends*. Darius had entered his "boy phase" and wanted to reread the graded reader about Lebron James and the Miami Heat. Having successfully put her siblings to bed, Imani went to find her mom. It was getting late and she had to go back to her grandma's house. She knew her grandma would be waiting for her, standing at the front door, peering through the darkness, muttering to her plants about Imani's lateness, how Jasmine "shouldn't have that baby walking around this late at night."

The door to the primary bedroom was ajar, but the room itself was empty. The upstairs bathroom also open and empty. Journeying downstairs, Imani found the lights in the living room off, the playroom was closed down for the night too. So she ventured further into the house, turning the corner out of the living room and into the main hallway.

That's where Imani found the only light. The kitchen was bright that night, cabinets clattering, fluorescents flaring, and her mother's voice shouting into her BlackBerry. Imani had been privy to these conversations before, always hidden in a corner, peeking around a wall, lingering in a hallway. She had never confronted her mother about the man on the other end of the cellphone, had done her best to not think of him at all, but kids at school had questions. Her own siblings had questions. So many voices mingled together to create a chorus of shame. At least that's how the books she'd read had described it. That burning feeling when you don't have an answer, the tingling at the tops

of your ears, the scratch at the back of your throat. Unsure as to why you can't answer a simple question.

"Where's your dad?"

July 2003

Early one morning, William started his day. Just as he had every other. Making his bed, drinking his Folgers, going out to feed and water Princess, the golden labrador retriever his niece had named, before attending to his breakfast. Eggs, sausage, a bowl of grits, too much salt, but just enough flavor. The day ahead promised plenty of Sun, so he drank a glass of ice-cold water. Black folks hadn't yet caught on to the necessity of sunscreen, so he ventured out without it. Leaving the cosmetics on his late wife's side of the dresser untouched.

His garage held everything but a car. Entering the garage from the house, taking the exit opposite the basement door, he found himself standing on cold cement. Long wire stands, unstable, but chained together with twist ties surrounded him. A maze of his own creation. His niece's toys scattered about, glints of pink amongst the dark metals, and paints, ladders, Folders' cans full of nails and bolts, wooden planks, and old newspapers. Dog food and packets of seeds partially ravaged by rats, evidence of their brief stays in his humble home evident in the empty mouse traps and untouched sticky paper. But that wasn't his concern today. Today he needed to do some weeding, to pick the fruits and vegetables to present at the next farmers market, to provide his sister with fresh produce for the next barbeque. In the corner to the left of the garage door, lay a small collection of gardening tools. On his way across the room to his tools, he pulls the bright red string hanging from the ceiling. His steps on the concrete are muffled under the creaking of the garage door. Hefting the hoe and shovel over one shoulder, pulling along the garden hose and watering can with the opposite hand, William left the garage.

They found him 6 hours later.

The Sun had gotten to him. Turned his skin bright red, his tongue navy blue. He had fainted. No one knew how long he had fainted for, just that he had never woken up again. The ambulance arrived without the lights and sirens. There was no need to stare at lines on beeping machines, no need to rush onto the highway and into the emergency room. There was no need to tell his young niece after her long day at school.

But she was observant. Imani didn't know much, but she knew how to read lips. She knew how to sound out letters, fold them into words adults flung over her head, knew how to construct her own comprehension, illuminating situations children should not be privy to. Most days this skill got her in trouble. On the day her uncle died, Imani found herself in trouble again. But this was different.

When she entered her grandmother's home after school that day, the curtains were drawn tight. Her grandmother sat crying over a drooping plant in a dark green plastic pot. The plant had taken root in her grandmother's indoor garden long before Imani was born. It sat next to her grandfather's plant. The two of them bordering the old box TV, seated in the best light, the light now smothered by the deep purple drapes. Imani hated helping her grandmother repot the plants, didn't like the way the dirt clung to her nails, the heft of the leftover water in the tray. She understood nothing of plants, just that green meant healthy and yellow meant sick. Just that her grandmother had been plucking yellow leaves from her uncle's plant that week.

That afternoon, the dirty water tray was lingering nearby, dry and cracked. The Folgers coffee container turned watering can also sat empty, but within arms reach. Her grandmother bowed over, fingers grasping soil and plastic rim. The dark green pot. The pot that usually sat next to the TV, on the right. Her uncle's plant.

Her grandmother always assigned houseplants to her close friends and family. When the plant starts to droop, when the dirt is too dry, when the Sun and plant food aren't enough,

when transplanting the poor soul to a new pot isn't enough, her grandmother makes a phone call to the plant's namesake. She's never been off about a feeling. But this time, the change was too sudden. By the time her grandmother had thought to call her brother, by the time William's home phone rang on and on without answer. By the time her grandmother had roused from her plastic-covered recliner, shuffled off her houseshoes, and donned proper outdoor attire, it was too late. The neighbors had already called the ambulance.

So when Imani arrived home that day, something inside her didn't feel quite right. She asked her grandmother if she could call her Uncle William. Her grandmother ignored her. The drying roots of the plant soaked with her tears. Her mom entered the living room behind her, closing the front door. Her mom and grandma locked eyes, shook their heads, and mouthed a word she recognized and one she didn't.

"H-E-A-T-S-T-R-O-K-E."

"A d-a-m-n shame."

"I don't know what I'm going to do without my brother, Jasmine. He's all I had left. My last sibling."

"You have us Mama. You have us."

Heat. *S-T-R-O-K-E*. Heat means hot. But Imani couldn't understand what stroke meant. So she asked.

"Granny, what's a stroke? What happened to Uncle William?"

The first thing you learn in a Black household is to stay out of grown folks' business. And death, death was the epitome of grown folks' business. Her grandparents and their cousins and brothers and friends spent many a morning at funerals, peddling obituaries like trading cards. When Thursday night's news becomes a Tuesday morning funeral.

"Did you hear about Naomi's girl? Poor baby done passed away. And so young too. May she rest in peace. Ain't in no pain no more up there with the Lord. She has gone on home."

So when Imani's grandmother responded, "He has passed on girl. Your Uncle William has gone on home today," she knew

what it meant, and wished she hadn't learned to read lips. Imani went and found a quiet place to sit down. To watch her mom and grandma whisper to each other, to wish her grandfather was there to keep her company, to imagine her uncle going home.

Imani spent the days between Thursday night and Tuesday morning in tears. Sobbing as only a small child can. Day and night. So much so that her mom and grandparents began to worry about her. They didn't know where the child had learned to understand grief so thoroughly. On Sunday morning, before setting out to Sunday School, Imani requested an audience with Princess. If she had to go without seeing her uncle, she must at least see her other best friend. So after church, her mom took her to her uncle's house and let her venture into the backyard.

As she rounded the corner of the house, Princess raced out of her doghouse and to the gate of the fence. Imani sat down on the grass in her Sunday best, knowing she'd receive a lecture about the decision to do so later, but she didn't care. She held on to her friend's fur through the diamonds of the fence, pressing her face into the wire, crying.

The outfit she had worn on Sunday had to be dry cleaned. Imani didn't understand what this meant either, just that the clothes had gone away all Monday morning and came back light pink and covered in a plastic bag. On Tuesday, her mom and grandma left Imani to dress herself. They had final arrangements to make at the church and with the funeral home, or so Imani had overheard. Her grandfather was in charge of making sure she made it to the church in time for the service.

As she walked down the aisle, holding her grandfather's hand and dressed in her pretty pink dress, Imani tried to hide her cries. Her tiny hiccups echoing in the solemn space. She was handed off to an auntie when she made it to the front pew.

"Auntie Gladys. I want to see. Lift me up, please."

"Nah, baby. You don't need to see that. It's okay. He's just resting."

"No Gladys. Let her see him. She has a right to. He was her

person."

Her grandfather always made sure she got what she needed. So her aunt lifted her. Hands grasping the small child through her poofy dress. Pushing through the small procession of people walking past William's casket. Imani, upon seeing her uncle, reaches out to him. Raises both arms, stretching out of her aunt's grasp. Gladys takes the hint and lowers the small child onto the man's body. Imani lays her head on William's chest, pressing her ear to his heart, straining to hear it beat.

Silence.

She tries again. She presses real close, but still nothing. So she does what she's seen people do on TV. She crawls up his body a bit, tiny bright white boots knocking against the velvet interior of the casket, unaware that she's being watched. All she sees is her uncle. Her best friend. Too still and quiet. She presses her ear to his lips. They're cold and hard and dry. She presses harder, hoping she might catch a wisp of breath, a hint of an exhale.

Silence.

She breaks. The wailing she had stifled upon entering the church bursts out of her. She cannot contain herself. She soaks his shirt with her tears. Trying in vain to water him back to life. Whispering the prayers she learned only a few days ago, just in case he hadn't had time to say them for himself.

"Now he lays himself down to sleep. He prays the Lord, his soul to keep. If he should die, before he wakes. He prays the Lord, his soul to take."

Over and over again. She oscillates between sobbing and whispering. Praying and mourning. Too young to understand the show she is putting on for the funeralgoers, but just young enough not to care. Eventually, she begins to tire. Can only shed a few tears at a time. Has successfully monopolized the last few moments her uncle's body will ever be exposed to light. Her grandmother comes over and untangles her tiny fists, forcing them to release his shirt. Collects the tiny shoes she's lost in the shallow depths of the casket. And arranges her granddaughter's

tired body in one arm, shoes in the opposite hand. Places her in Gladys' lap.

"That's right. Go to sleep, baby. You'll see him again one day. I promise."

September 2023

Imani had dreamt about that moment for years. How she had laid on her uncle's body, wishing him awake. Sometimes she'd wake up in her college dorm room, face saturated with tears, body bent into a child's pose as if trying to rearrange itself the way it had that day. The pain was unbearable, that loss. Being too young to understand adult promises, coming home from school for weeks after the funeral expecting to see her uncle.

Sometimes she'd make her grandfather drive her to Uncle William's house. He'd let her into the garage. She'd walk around the shelves of wire and twist-ties, picking up his tools and placing them back down. Disturbing the growing fields of dust. She'd stand in the front garden where they found his body. Imagine his tongue becoming a packet of Skittles, a chameleon in the afternoon Sun.

Princess had been adopted a week after the funeral, and it only saddened Imani to peek around the corner of the house and peer into the empty doghouse, so she only minded the front yard. In 2011, she adopted a pet guinea pig. Her mom felt it was time for a new animal, for an increase in household responsibilities. One day after Imani had cleaned the cage, laid fresh carrots in a plastic dish, filled the water bottle, and exited the house, she met her mom at the car. Hopped in and commented on the weather. The heat rolled in waves, the Sun's embrace washing over them. Her mom had reminded her of the cool house they had awaiting them upon their return, finished packing Aaliyah and Darius into the car, and set off on their weekly grocery trip.

When the family arrived home, the guinea pig was frozen solid. Dead and sad looking at the bottom of his cage. He hadn't

even tried to hide under anything, just curled up on his side. Imani's mom and grandmother got into an argument that day.

"Jasmine, you bet not make that baby pick up that animal. You're going to scar that child. I didn't raise you like that."

"Mama, it's her animal. She shoulda known better than to leave a warm-blooded animal in the air like that."

"It's not right Jasmine. Don't treat that girl like that."

"She'll be alright."

And she was. Imani had harvested a shoebox from her mom's closet, a plastic bag from their shopping trip, and all of her courage. She stuck her hand into the cage and extracted the tiny creature, placing him into the box. She scavenged her grandma's junk drawer for scissors and tape, stumbled upon a faux flower and an old obituary. Cut "In Loving Memory" off the pamphlet and taped it to the box, added the flower in with her poor pet. Asked her grandfather to drive her to her uncle's house. Then asked him to dig her a hole, deep enough for a shoebox, right there in the front yard.

Imani prayed over her dead pet, just as she had prayed over her uncle. Her grandfather waited in the car to give her some privacy. But this prayer was all apologies, a scattering of "I'm sorry" and tears. Her grandfather had to collect her from her spot next to the mound of dirt. Pulled her up and out of the Sun.

Now Imani found herself walking into it. Out to the rental car with her suitcases. The Sun beaming brightly, her mom's face darkened like those nights in her dorm room. Imani tried to think her way through every movement. Reminded herself over and over to carry the weight, to not bend to the pressure. One step at a time, one piece of luggage at a time. Whispering to herself, over and over again,

"You'll see him again one day."

"He's gone home."

"He's not in pain anymore."

"Uncle William will take care of him."

But the mantras did not stop the flashes, the bits of memory

and imagination.

The time her grandfather had walked her down the aisle. Holding her hand as she tiptoed in her bright white shoes and pink dress. Closer and closer to her uncle's body. How her grandfather would never get that chance again. Will never walk her down an aisle and hand her over to the man at the altar.

The way her grandmother sat shaking over her uncle's plant. Having to read lips to understand her grandmother's devastation. The air that had billowed through the living room earlier. Rustling the plants. Imani had paid no attention to the color of their leaves, the state of their pots, had forgotten which plant belonged to which family member or friend. Now her eyes flickered to her grandmother's prone body leaning over her grandfather's plant, her will breaking a bit more each time she had to collect another suitcase.

She excuses herself. Tells her mom and grandma that she needs to check the bathroom one last time. Just to make sure she hasn't left anything behind. She locks the bathroom door behind her. Slides to the floor, both hands find their way over her mouth. And she sobs quietly. Mouthing the words her mother had yelled with abandon.

"He left me. My grandfather is gone."

CONTRIBUTORS

ADORA CHEN is a third-year Business Administration student here at UCI. Art has always been a big passion for her, inspiring her to incorporate her illustration and design skills into a future career in marketing. While a business student, she enjoys contributing to the arts community at UCI through her work as the treasurer for the Art History Undergraduate Association, where she helps plan annual art exhibitions. One can view more of her work on Instagram (@svelte.art) or on her website (adorachen.com).

CELESTE WEBB is a third year Mathematics and English major who has no idea how they got here or even where "here" is, and yet here we are anyways. They're still wandering, and that's a good place to start.

CLARI/MARS GAO (they) is a writer and artist dedicated to the global struggle against imperialism and the collective making of history. they love poetry and art of all forms. and cats :3

DAMIEN DIAZ is a fourth-year undergraduate student majoring in English at the University of California, Irvine. His work has been published in various college print and online publications, including UCI's Echolalia Undergraduate Journal, the University of the Incarnate Word's Quirk, and San Bernardino Valley College's Phineas Magazine. A passionate enthusiast of the cyberpunk genre, Damien aims to infuse a contemporary flavor into its current resurgence while also celebrating the diverse nuances of language and its creative aesthetics.

DJOLIN SUTJIAWAN is a New York-based writer with roots in Singapore interested in writing as an act of connection.

ELAINE VINH is an aspiring author and poet from Orange County, California. She is pursuing her bachelor's degree in English with a specialization in Education and minor in Creative Writing. She enjoys writing fantasy and romance, usually giving up on the latter, and needs to have bubble tea next to her while writing.

HALEY SHEA is a fourth-year art major with an emphasis in photography and a minor in digital arts. Intrigued by the sculptural qualities of the body, she explores the interplay of fragmentation, surrealism, and abstraction in her artistic practice.

JADEN CHUNG is a second-year English major. In his poetry, Jaden is interested in exploring the complex tensions of the human psyche, and their often paradoxical coalitions with one another.

LOAN TRAN is a 3rd year English major with a minor in Medical Humanities. She is fascinated by the humanities intersections that can be found within the medical realm: the composition of medical terms, medical anthropological approaches that forge connections between one's health and their culture, and many other humanities connections in medicine. She writes poems as a means of finding solace–in contemptuous or confusing feelings. In the near future, she would like to obtain a masters in Psychology to become a therapist to help others process and organize their feelings. Lastly, she would like to commemorate this poem to her son (her dog), Yogi, mom, sister, and brother.

NATHANIEL EDU is an individual who believes that everyone should make art because the creation of art allows one to liberate themselves from suffering and see themselves as beautiful, if only for a moment. Even if one's art is 'bad' in whatever sense that that word means to them, he believes that it can only be developed into something good through faith in the artistic process and dedication to the art form. I.E. making art even if it's bad. Finally, he believes that the most important art transcends or at the very least disregards the glass boundaries of 'good and bad,' and we connect to it for reasons that are entirely unrelated to said concepts. Though our reasons for connecting may be inexplicable, the appreciation of such works leads us to deep truths about ourselves and the worlds we inhabit. It is Nathaniel's goal to figure out what it means to make and engage with art in this way and he is grateful to share his attempts, though he is sure that his perspectives and sensibilities have changed a lot since writing these poems.

PATRICIA LOUISE RACELIS is a fourth year double majoring in Drama and Asian American Studies, with a minor in Creative Writing. She has a sweet tooth, which makes up for the things she loves writing about.

RYAN TRANG is currently a third year English major suffering with his Informatics minor. If not stressing over his minor, he's probably playing video games or trying not to burn down the kitchen with his cooking. This poem marks his first public piece of poetry, so (and we're going to change the perspective here) thank you, genuinely, for reading. I really appreciate it!

SAMMY ISMET MERABET is a fourth year at UCI studying English and Biology with a minor in Creative Writing. They enjoy writing short stories and poetry about identity, queerness, and class. Their primary goal is to break into animation scriptwriting. Their secondary goal is to create an em-dash based society—in which all punctuation marks and alphanumeric characters are replaced with the humble em-dash. Their tertiary goal: — — — — — — — — — — —.

SARA TIERSMA is a 3rd year Literary Journalism major and Sociology minor from the Central Valley. Though she loves her nonfiction major, as an avid reader of all genres of books, she also loves the power and freedom of fiction!

SHENHAN QIU (ENGLISH NAME CECILIA) is an artist who continually explores themes of fantasy and imagination, using bright, vivid colors in her paintings. Her goal is for her audience to feel a sense of relaxation when viewing her work. She hopes you enjoy her pieces.

TA'HLIA DAVIS is a senior at UC Irvine, graduating with a B.A. in International Studies, a B.A. in East Asian Cultures, and a minor in Creative Writing. Humanitarian issues and comparative international governance are her areas of academic interest. Creatively, Ta'hlia enjoys experimenting with poetry and afrofuturism. This was her first attempt at a short story and she is just grateful that it's legible.

YASMINE V. NAHDI is a fourth-year English major with a specialization in future teaching and a minor in creative writing. She was born and raised in Los Angeles, California. She is the co-editor-in-chief of Her Campus at UCI and a marketing coordinator for the UCI Anthology Yearbook. Her research interests include bildungsroman novels written by female authors ranging from the 19th to the 21st centuries. In the fall, she will pursue a master's degree in English literature at Loyola Marymount University. When Yasmine is not writing, you can find her reading, at a coffee shop, or playing video games.

ZIQING LI is a 4th-year Psychological Science major whose love for creating works of writing knows no bounds. She is currently leading a team within UCI's Video Game Development Club to create a Visual Novel. More often than not, you can find her awake at degenerate hours reading fiction, playing video games, or chatting with friends.