

# new forum

A surrealist painting of a woman's face. The face is rendered in warm, golden-yellow and orange tones with visible brushstrokes. A large, dark beetle with green and black markings is perched on the bridge of her nose. Her eyes are large and expressive, with one eye showing a blue iris. Her lips are painted in shades of red and orange. To the left of the face, there is a dark, abstract shape resembling a flower or a shadow. The background is a mix of light and dark colors, with a dark blue or black area at the bottom right.

Spring 2025

# new forum

UNDERGRADUATE JOURNAL OF THE ARTS

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Spring 2025

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FACULTY ADVISOR ..... REBECCA SCHULTZ

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## FOREWORD

Artists are solitary beings. Whether we are burning the midnight oil, sketching in our notebooks, fleshing out a character arc, or poring over line breaks, our creative endeavors can often feel isolating. But bringing a journal like New Forum into existence is anything but solitary. It is a collective process that negotiates individual visions, putting them in conversation and allowing each piece to resonate within a greater collective.

This issue of New Forum was created with the health of our planet—an even greater collective beyond any arts journal—in mind, and, because of this, we chose California Green Press (CGP) to print our pages. CGP uses 100% post-consumer waste recycled papers and soy/vegetable-based inks with low volatile organic compounds output.

We intend to minimize our carbon footprint and ensure the materials we produce are as sustainable as possible. It is our hope that publishing undergraduate creative work can coincide with continued, sustainable practices.

New Forum wishes to thank The Green Initiative Fund for their generous contribution. The editors also wish to thank Rebecca Schultz for her continued guidance and belief in this publication. Above all, we would like to thank our contributors, whose work appears in these pages. Without them, none of this would be possible.



## Vestiges

There are a few occupations that come to mind most frequently when I consider a job. Whale therapist is the most important one, I think, in conjunction with whale historian (cultural, not political).

The eye of a whale should be way up on the list of evocative organs, right next to the human heart. It is immense and ancient and much more limitless than space or the void. Something about being in the fathoms of the ocean must have made it so that Jonah found in it a thing that made God fathomable. The whale is born a witness. It is carved into being on the fifth day, before all of humanity, and has that great bottomless eye to show for it. It doesn't speak. It is. I vastly prefer biology to physics, and I think that is the proof. The whale is something as convincing as it is wordless. In bodies upon bodies, there are silent colonies of millions, growing still, and within them a horde of quiet genetic transformations that create more change than an exploding star. The star, luminous and aflame, will soon be a fading star, then a dribbling one, then a moot point. The whale, however, is infinite as carcass, an ecosystem of itself. It's much in the same way that inheritance is, in the same way I have my father's eyes and his forefathers'. There are more recombinations of genes in people than there are atoms in the universe. Or otherwise, we contain multitudes.

The truth is, Jonah only started believing in God because he was on the verge of death. This isn't an unfair or uncommon practice, even if it is an assumption. No one laughs at God in the hospital, and certainly not in the casket. He didn't look into that fathomless whale's eye, blue and glossy and vastly intelligent, and believe that it was the product of a greater being. He probably appreciated it for what it was, which was a watery death, and proceeded to pray because he saw that which was around him for what it was: fear and lucid awareness before the end.

His actions taken wholly from the present were mistaken as hindsight, and that is how the repentant Jonah came to be.

But I'm hired to analyze whales, not people. That's probably the best part. I would get my board certification and open an underwater office. It would be near the surface of the water with natural ambient lighting, and I would have a running theme for the interior decor. Nothing too traditionally naval of course—best to avoid any sailor motifs. I would soothe past the crimes of Ahab and the stomach bug of Jonah, and I would trace that ancient lineage back to the whale's first memories, of being a blubbery splotch in the watery womb of the world. I would say, "I wish you could see yourself in my eyes."

I can imagine it now. The water would drape us in doctor-patient anonymity, and I could almost calcify there in bas-relief from the salt-water-flavored joy it brought me to picture this life of mine.

Now usually at this point in my day fantasy, I am jolted awake by something real: my sister tugging on my sleeve, a honk from the car behind me, or the missing drum beat from a song that has ended some time ago. But today, or at least for now, I am lucky and in the presence of silence's good company.

It's easier these days to have some time of my own without interruption. The house is empty, my sister Iris' room long cleaned out since her engagement the summer after she finished high school and my parents' rooms just as they were, collecting dust from the last time they occupied it only a few months before my turn to graduate. Some days I wished the few years between Iris and I were none at all, and that I was in her shoes, checking off all my major life events before they weren't around to see them anymore. Sometimes it wasn't enough just to learn how to swim with my dad on cool summer nights when the wind hung just low enough to brush the tops of our heads over the water, or to roast fish outside in the backyard with my mom and the same crooning songs on the radio.

Pia was my sister's most recent milestone. My parents saw her through prom night, graduation, engagement photos, baby showers, and baby Pia's birthday. Pia was their favorite milestone too - their first grandchild, and the only one that would share some overlap in the dates on their gravesites some day.

I was meeting Pia for the first time since she'd started up at the local

elementary school, and I knew she'd grown quite a bit from whatever grainy photos I had caught wind of in between the slew of pre-typed cards and bills I received in the mail. In all honesty, I was a lot more excited every time my sister sent me a package for a few dinners than whatever it was she had to send me about Pia, but that wasn't for lack of love.

It was September then. The sweet tea of summer had been drunk, but the last few dregs of it still circled in the long warm nights and the overripe honeydew on the kitchen counter. My sister's garden buzzed and burbled, and her crooked house sat atop it like a ship ran aground on an island of vines and rambling shrubs. We were under the white trellises out back, she and her husband readying dinner inside and me and Pia situated at a patio table with a tray of tea cups and plates between us. Among the cups were piles of cookies dusted in sugar, arrays of tea cakes, and petits fours in brown, green, pink, and cherry red.

At that time, Pia was in an odd phase where she had somewhere found a fascination with Persian tea, which is apparently something that kids do if not already preoccupied with pirates or the Russian royal family or automobiles. I thought this was weird, because I thought my sister was weird and figured any attempts to raise a child would follow in stride, but I thought tea parties were normal and cardamom black tea with a stick of cinnamon was better than normal. Plus, I was fairly sure Pia's main concern was the part where she got to suck on sugar cubes as part of the drinking tradition.

I was pouring, and she wasn't drinking.

"You're doing it wrong."

Pia stared at me. I stared harder.

"Why don't you show me how to do it like you did earlier?"

"It's hot."

"Well just air it for me."

"I'm not five."

I looked blankly at her yellow and pink ensemble. It was accented with fruit. "Not far from it."

This earned me a condescending glance, which I hadn't presumed to be possible in kids of that age. I wasn't so versed in child rearing, and I had no recollection of a brown bear that rolled its eyes or a golden lion that pouted in any of her storybooks. But after that I thought about my

sister, and the way her coffee eyes settled on me, and that cold glance was less foreign and more something in the family business.

I looked at Pia again, actually looked, without seeking something from her or a way to catch her attention. We didn't bear much of a resemblance, but the way she slumped over the table with a black spill of hair over skin tinted russet by a long day outside reminded me of the way her mother and I grew up. Iris had more friends to meet and play with outside, but I spent most of my time on the water with our parents and the sailboat and the glare reflecting off the surf - this evened us out to about the same look. *We're clay baked in the same oven*, we would say, when asked if we were twins.

"Is something wrong?"

Pia didn't say anything, head down and seemingly absorbed in the green lattices in the garden table. This wouldn't last long. Even from the way she had to fully face away just to ignore me, I saw her toe visibly tapping and knew her silent treatment would eventually give way to one burning brown eye peeking out at me from between the sheets of black hair. "You can take your time but I'll finish the rest of this all by myself."

I dragged out the last phrase slow, slow as honey.

"But that's too many sweets before dinner."

"Well everyone else is inside, so I have no one to help me."

She was mumbling, head still down but lolling in my direction.

"There's just so much left over, I don't know what to do with it!"

A few excessively loud slurps and my task was done with the following words: "I'll take some."

She conceded to continuing the tea party she had started, and as the teas and treats disappeared one after another, her curtness was replaced with her characteristic babbling. "—and I'm getting bored of it. I've already done volleyball for two weeks, which is a really really long time, and I finished my drawing yesterday. I read all my books again. There's nothing to do!"

"I'm sure there's something. Aren't you going to the beach on Saturday?" Pia brightened.

"Yes! You should come, you haven't gone with us at all lately, and you're supposed to teach me all that stuff Grandma and Grandpa did and I really want to go on a big boat like theirs. Mom even said I can

use Grandpa's sailing watch and his hat, the one in all of his pictures, and you have extra life vests right because that would be really bad if we didn't—" "What did you say?"

"I said you should—"

"No, what did your mom say?"

"She said I can take some of Grandpa's old stuff because it's good to—"

I felt sick just listening to her. The sugar turned in my stomach.

"No, Pia, you can't use or take any of his 'stuff,' what do you even think you're talking about? That's not yours, and it's not your mom's, and you can't have any of it because that's insane."

My voice had been getting louder at that point, but I didn't care.

"You're seriously so entitled if you think you have anything to do with my parents, who you've never even met, and even if you did meet them, I'm sure that he, that John wouldn't want anything to do with you at all—"

Iris threw open the screen door. Pia was crying. I wanted to do the same.

I was ready to defend myself, or run, or cause enough damage to make my getaway while they picked up the pieces. I found myself standing.

The crunch of the door flung open was plastic on wood, sudden, just enough to mask the sound of a brazen mistake for a moment longer.

"What's all the noise out here girls? Let's settle down and start getting ready for dinner," Iris called out.

She was up to her eyes in plates and tableware, stumbling down the path towards us with her long skirt skimming the tops of the overgrown grass. Her eyes swam in the turquoise waves of the cup, distorting them from cat-like to doe-like with every mad tilt of the stack of plates and bowls below it.

"Tea party's over, chop chop. What did I say about cleaning up *before* I'm done cooking? Get over here and— oh, what's wrong sweetie?"

Iris was quick. One fell swoop and all the tableware and utensils were cast aside, exchanged in an instant for an armful of Pia and her big tears.

"I'm sorry Iris, I wasn't trying to."

My voice came out thin and unconvincing. The conviction I had

felt, to talk back to her, to stand up for what remained of my parents and myself, was ebbing by the second. It wasn't much use. They were a world away from me, bodies turned towards each other, yet the sting of Iris' neglect of me felt pointed.

"Shhh, there, what did she say to you? Don't cry, it's okay."

It was impossible to discern what Pia said in response, the sound garbled by her tiny huffs and snuffles. The murmurs from Iris and the whimpers from Pia became grating, amplified through the scope of my dread wondering when they would turn their attention to me. "Thanks for all your help," Iris said finally. "No, keep standing there."

I stepped forward, then back.

"I should go."

"That'd be easy for you, right?"

My face was growing hot, the warmth rising to the surface like something dead in the water. I forgot she did this. Maybe in recent years having to reign in Pia's moods, she had developed a more commanding presence, but this was the Iris I knew: quietly relentless, dismissive in her sharp and pretty way. She didn't even have to look at me. "It's not," I said.

"And that's not what you're supposed to say, is it?"

I felt thirteen again, in my matching pajama set and walking into the living room at Iris' birthday sleepover with all her older friends. They giggled after I'd asked them to quiet down, eyeing me draped over the couch in their ditsy flower pants and tastefully mismatched plain tops.

The next time they came over, I hid in my room and brushed my hair, put on Iris' shirt and black pants, idling in anticipation in case they saw me. It didn't matter. They ended up leaving to go out that night, because already there were better things to do.

"I invite you over because you're my sister, not because I don't have anything better to do," Iris said. "Could you at least try for me? What did you even say to her? God, it's like you don't understand a thing that comes out of my mouth."

I didn't say anything. I usually didn't, and then there was her husband coming out of the house, and Pia's stomach grumbling, and by and by all the responsibilities she had and all the ones I didn't. There were things to attend to.

We set the table. We said grace. We had dinner. They were mother,

father, and child, and I was there to see it.

I don't daydream of my future family. My sister doesn't inspire me in that way. I think about yelling at Iris, but I bet I think of yelling at her husband more. I dream of work that I can throw myself in, drown myself in, and go home to bed without a further thought.

When it comes to jobs, my next favorite profession is private paranormal investigator. I'm out on the hunt for residuals of dead exes and following the red thread of their most frequent haunts and blackest lies. My favorite operations are the most personal ones, like when my client puts me in charge of the estate sale for the white mansion on the hill overlooking the sea. I note the woman with sunglasses and a mink scarf lingering in the hall and the way she looks at the smiling family portrait. A cold miasma lurks just behind.

That's the least interesting part though. I'm the first person on the scene after the deceased is announced, likely because my client doesn't want too much "fuss or hullabaloo," as she might say in her lilting accent. It feels authentic that way: personhood, interrupted.

I'm there to change out the rumpled sheets from his last hour. I close the cabinet door left ajar, give her the yellow sticky note on the counter with the scrawled signature. I put away the pastel paints they bought for the nursery, and I lay out dozens of lemon themed kitchenware with price tags, evidence of the deceased's unnamed, unsettled everyday passions. I show the best parts of the collection to the maid's daughter, who wears yellow and white striped socks, and I let her pocket them without a word. When she pulls up spare change, it'll be there: lemon salt and pepper shakers and citrus porcelain butter dishes stained from the patina of pennies. All those dead things are breakers: foam on the water and reborn.

Still, all these ideas are imagined. This is the version of me that can see those dead things time and time again, and find in them holy relics with a message to be gleaned. The real person that I am, who is not a cetacean psychiatrist or a semi-fraud private eye, could barely see those dead things once. I didn't keep around any of those things from John and Mary, not in plain sight, but I couldn't possibly give them away either.

There it was again, those words. John and Mary. The incident with Pia was the first time I called my dad John aloud. The word slid out as



naturally and cleanly as a bar of soap. Saying Mary followed in stride. I didn't stumble over any warmly familiar accents; I didn't hear him or her in the way I shaped my vowels or see with my mouth the state of their lips, poised to speak in comparison to my cautious tongue. I strayed from the path of those hateful alveolar consonants, and I avoided the perilous pitfalls of their soft palate pitches crooning out the same syllables as my childhood lullabies. In that moment it was the only way I could talk about John without saying something worse, something that would make Pia cry enough to flood that shipwreck house back into a golden era of seafaring. Then it stuck.

I became a child anonymous, cleared of roots or moorings. What was John's spot on the porch outside to me? What was the fragrant kiss of Mary's shampoo and conditioner to me? They were specimens in a cabinet, and all I needed to do was close the door.

If I were Jonah, I would take the scar on my knee from falling off a tree and make it into the scar of a whale's tooth, mind the fact he could only have survived in a mouth full of baleen. I would charge people to see it and admire it, the shape of it, the white and bumpy surface weathered by the surf and sand. I would give the scar a placard and carry it around like a business card, crisp and etched with my name and the date the vicious attack occurred. Or better, the date I emerged triumphant from the belly of the beast. My history of grievance was a stretch of sand without footsteps and in its place was glory and change. It didn't matter that I was the one who changed it so, that I had laid in place the sketches of the prophecy to be foretold. I chose my own fate.

It became easier from then on. The locations I had frequented with John and Mary when I was young became BC ruins, ones where I decided to pass on the wired headphones explaining where the roofs once were and what artist had done the previous paint job. I meandered over the rocks and rubble, thinking that the white columns had always been colorless and the greatest hall had always been open to the dimly lit sky.

With the extra time I had in my first years of college, absent of household chores and family obligation, I trekked the coastal trails teeming with canoe plants and creeping morning glories regularly. This helped clear my mind of a past now deemed fiction. I kept steady on a diet of drinking in the early morning mist and feeding off the shot of adrenaline I earned from stumbling on the edge of the cliffside path. Rocks

would hurtle into the water from the cracks I'd made in the trail, and I would stumble all the way back home watching the churning waves relish the last of the bone fragments. During the whale migration season, among those waves are the round crescents of many backs moving through the water.

I had more birthdays, and I drank on New Years. I painted my nails by myself. I talked to Casey towards the end of my second year, although I had met him before that. He worked at the market by my house. He was my least favorite person to see there. If I knew he was bagging orders, I'd scurry off to the farthest lane, even if it meant getting checked out by the old man that mixed up the fresh produce codes or the new hire that did the same. If I saw him restocking shelves, I went to another aisle and stared at coffee tins (Arabica, Robusta, Java, Kona) until I heard his footsteps thump away. I could recognize him by the back of his navy blue shirt instantly, or even less than that: the way his pants were cuffed at the bottom or the three shoes he rotated between. I knew him in the way a rabbit knows to glance at unseen things out of the corner of its eye, piecing fragments together from flashes in its peripherals and a quick glance behind.

This wasn't through any fault of his own. I just didn't like the way he would know when I changed my hair, which made me keep it routinely tied back, and I didn't like when that just made him compliment the new shade I used in my makeup. I kept away from accessories he would notice, and I erred on the side of blandness by armoring myself in a palette of neutrals in inoffensive fabrics. Even then, he always knew just the right thing to ask me or start a conversation around. Sometimes I was convinced there was someone standing behind me with cue cards, and that that was also the real reason he looked in my direction - to look at something closely apart from myself.

"Those are my favorites too," he said after my third week of honey roasted cashews. "How'd you do on that test you mentioned?" he asked, and it had only been my first semester in college.

I wasn't sure if I didn't like having the conversation or the abruptness with which it ended. I always felt like I had something more to say after the fact, an excuse to make for why I was the way I was or a more full explanation to clear up any misunderstandings. I didn't know why I cared about his opinion. I didn't think it was weird that I was so ner-

vous to look straight at him.

Naturally, it came to the point where I had to ask him to continue our talks, because it really did bother me and I couldn't stop thinking about it. I'll always remember the look on his face when I actually asked. Eventually, I had realized my avoidance of him could be chalked up mainly to embarrassment and early infatuation. Our conversations started to look different, even if it had taken a long time to get there.

"I got your favorites, and a few new things I thought you'd like," he said as he opened the door to my room.

"Let's go out to celebrate after you're done with your tests," he said, and he already had his keys in hand.

So the night before, when Casey asked me to go to this lookout point, I didn't think anything of it. He didn't like that I hiked by myself so early in the morning, so he would always conjure up somewhere new for us to go together as incentive for me to not go alone. We start up the trail, and I think little of the summit and my surroundings and more the feeling of his warmth beside mine. I watch the sight of him puffing hot air in the mist.

We pass through quickly, which requires some hopping over muddy patches and fallen logs. It takes a near fall for me to look at my surroundings more—which, even then I mostly notice by watching his arm shoot out to hold me back from stumbling over another rock.

The trail seems old. The dirt is packed hard by previous hikers and the trees have an old-growth look, apparent from the sprawling mosses and the dead and dying debris in the undergrowth. It has that feeling that makes you think you've been there before, if not now but in some distant past.

We reach the top. It's a small clearing at first glance. The old trees closest to the trailhead dominate the scene there, but they thin out and shorten until the shrubs that follow lead the eye to a raw cliffside dropping into the ocean and opening out into an enormous sky. The path to the top has driven out some of the chill, and I breathe the sharply cold air with relief.

Then I notice the benches around the clearing.

They are wooden benches, not quite cobbled together but warped from the hilltop mist and the passage of time. Moreover, they are familiar. I didn't just *think* I had been here before. I *had* been here before,

years ago.

I had run my fingers across the brassy plaques on those benches, just the same as Casey was doing now. He reads it aloud.

"May and Ko-uh?"

I almost laugh right at him.

"Mai," I say, the syllable tumbling out like a sigh of relief. "Khoa," I continue, and the sound is like a flower unfurling.

He smiles.

"My parents have something like that," I found myself saying. "It's not a bench, it's just a placard on the end of the pier near my house, where the light is. It's where they would walk after we got dinner at the beach after a day of sailing. I didn't know why people put memorial plaques out there. The air is wet and things rot so fast. I guess they wanted to think of it as a good memory, but knowing their names are there kept me from coming back."

"You've never told me anything like that."

"Have I not?"

"No."

"Can we sit here?"

We do.

The bench creaked under our weight, and the bench weighed on my mind even as the air was light and crisp, and the sky and the sea ran freely in lightening shades of purple and blue. "I've been here before. I remembered because of the benches, but now that I look around, it's like I can't stop remembering. The dead tree over there, the tall one to the right? My dad told me they're called snags, but I thought that was mean. It's not like there's something wrong with it, it's just there. Still. And there used to be wildflowers here. My mom told me not to pick them so they could grow but we took the leaves off of the ground and made wreaths and threaded the stems through the holes kind of like this."

I feel like I can't speak from the thickness in my throat. I make the motion of pulling the stem through the hole. As much as I want to look out onto that boundless sky and breathe, I feel the wood of the bench, and the warmth of human touch, and I am faced with something undeniable and solid that leaves me without any more words to say.

No matter how ancient the whale, it is not the first. There are the

towering cliffs, the primordial trees, the endless waves that churn under the dawning light that is spilling over now. There are the animals that came before the whale, and the things before that. When the whale becomes a whale and is left with the remains of hind limbs that once walked, does it feel a phantom pain there? Or is it too ancient to remember?

No matter how ancient the whale, it is not the first. I am made up of those vestigial parts from John and Mary, from mother and father, the parts which I cannot leave behind. I used to think, how many generations will it take for it to be realized that these parts are no longer of use, that their presence doesn't hurt like a phantom but something alive? It begged the question, how many becomings and deaths will I have to endure until it is wrenched from my DNA? Until it doesn't dictate the way I think and breathe and the underpinnings of every bit of life in me? This whole time, I was hoping Darwin would grab me by the throat and shake the sorrow out of me. "Are your hands cold?"

He interrupts my thoughts again. Still, I let him. When I look at my hands, they are raw, and red, like something skinned. Part of it is from the cold and part of it is from digging my nails into my palms, hard. I look at the long fingers, and on them, the hard white calluses from pulling the ropes on that little family boat of ours. The proof of us has always been there, not just in benches.

Casey closes his hands over mine, but even before they fully eclipse mine and hide my fingers from sight, I realize I feel no ache in recognizing myself. The air is crisp, and cold, and light.

KATY NGUYEN

## Cry As You Might

They say that a crocodile's tears could never mean anything. If they did, then they were insincere, hypocritical, or both. There is no reason for a crocodile to cry when they are aggressive, callous, and hideous. How ironic for one to shed a tear when they easily feast on the meat of their freshly mauled prey. With slit-shaped pupils in their eyes, narrowed by the harsh glare of the sun, no trace of remorse can be found within their gaze. The crocodile has been this way and will remain this way.

With a resting face so unfazed, these reptiles go about their lives however they please. Nothing can get to them. Nobody will ever see through them. This animal will continue to be aggressive and callous and hideous. Sure, many creatures will turn the other cheek out of disgust and fear. No matter, the crocodile will carry on. Who needs on-lookers when you could swallow them whole? Why should you spare someone who already thinks so little and too much of you? As you take another bite, another stab at someone's flesh, maybe a bitter tear wells up at the corner of your eye. Does anybody see? Does anybody care?

—

So you tried too hard on the field trip. Followed too closely only to stay behind. Cracked a joke that went over their heads or because you're just not funny. Went to the restroom in a group and nobody waited for you. You thought nothing of it, assumed they were probably just outside, when you noticed them walking on without you. Even so, you ignored the hurt in your thirteen-year old heart as you let out a small laugh and called out, "Wait!"

On the bus ride home, you told yourself everything that happened was okay because this was as good as it gets in the seventh grade. You don't get to ask for more. What else is there? The bumpy road, muggy heat that no open window can get rid of, and heads lolled back against

the peeling leather seats.

Some stranger of a classmate sat next to you and shrugged, “I didn’t like any of the art. I just wanted to be out of school.”

You replied, “Like I care about some artist named Parmigiano.”

“Isn’t that a cheese? Oh, you meant Parmigianino.”

“I still don’t care.” Two beats.

“No need to say it like that.”

Neither of you ever looked at each other. One staring out the window and the other at the shape of someone else’s head. Flushed by the heat and singed by embarrassment, something rises in your chest. You force it down and blink it away. So childish, so caught up in your head. You don’t even know him. Don’t make it any more awkward and weird for the both of you. Yet the boy snorted and broke into easy laughter.

*Okay. Laugh. Laugh at me, you thought. Laugh at my clumsiness, my mistake. Laugh at how I care too much so I can learn to care less.* This will never mean anything and neither of you will see each other again. Tomorrow will come and you’ll still be as foolish as ever.

—

Once, there was a crocodile named Sweetheart. He was notorious for attacking fishing boats and its motors. While an incredible menace, Sweetheart never attacked people. He watched them from afar with their peculiar appearances, standing upright and speaking a nasal-y gibberish. They always threw their bodies back out of some genuine emotion unknown to him. Reached out their hands to touch the other. How they understood that there was no malice or aggression in each other’s touch. No need to be on the offense or defense or any other fense. How every gleeful expression there was came so easy to them.

What Sweetheart did know was the anxiety in their eyes as he waded nearby. The terror in their voices as he thrashed against them, as he put an end to the ruckus and the noise. Why he attacked them, people never knew. Never stopped them from coming back. Doesn’t matter that the people disturbed the peace of the swamp or how they flung their fishing rods and hooks that poked and grazed against the pads of Sweetheart’s feet or the rough scales of his body. They’d say, “It’s just a little tickle.” Nevertheless, he swam at them. Sweetheart was a cold-blooded creature that attacked at his own convenience. A mean old thing who’ll eventually grow weary of his ways.

Then it was decided that Sweetheart was unsafe for the public. So a team from the Territory Parks and Wildlife Commission caught him. They surrounded him on all sides. Snarls filled the air as he fought for his peace, but it was futile. After tranquilizing him, the team wanted to transport him to a sanctuary. Maybe it was better this way. Knowing that feelings are out there and he won’t have to see them again. It was more than he could handle and the anesthesia was coming on strong. Maybe it was better this way. Scared, numb, and tired. What was the point of him attacking and fighting and trying? After all, everybody else carried on.

At some point, his body got caught in a sunken log. The trip was cut short because he drowned. Sweetheart was gone and the people remained the same. It was better this way.

—

Physical therapy as usual. The session will be over at 5pm and your husband will come get you then. It’s getting old. Loretta’s been with you for five months and there’s still a discomfort in your chest, legs, and your hands. Parkison’s is a hell that never leaves. Been there, done that. It’s time to move on. Still, here you are. You give the physical therapist a tight-lipped smile and get back to balancing. One leg up as though you’re a flamingo. Your left hand quickly reaches for the metal chair to keep you steady. Fifteen seconds, pushing for thirty.

Your core trembles at twenty and you have no time to brace for the fall. Loretta rushes over to catch you in time. “Let’s take a break,” she says, “You’ve been at this for a while.” She sits you down on the chair and you sharply exhale. She smiles gently, but it’s kind and pitiful all at once. “What’s on your mind?”

You grouch, “I’d rather have carpal tunnel than this.”

She laughs freely. You hold yourself back until a smile twitches at your lips. A small laugh slips through until it erupts into a howling laughter. The both of you throw your heads back and, for once, you’re you again. You’re normal and fun and nothing ever happened. But a joke like that shouldn’t even be funny because it’s sad. It’s pathetic. You come down from your laughter with a sigh and admit, “Nothing is easy anymore. I hate it.”

You look at your hands resting on your knees. “I’m never getting better.”



Loretta looks over at you and you look back. She is the kindest twenty-four year old you've ever met and you can't show her any grace. Loretta shifts herself to face you and leans over. "Maybe there's no getting better. But there is feeling better."

"No!" you shout, "I can't pick up anything for longer than ten seconds. I can't hold my stance for twenty. I can't drive my car. I can't pick up my kids. I can't laugh without getting upset right after. I can't cry without feeling guilty. I can't do anything! And don't say that it's okay that I can't because it's not. It'll never be okay. It'll never be okay and I'm wasting my time being like this over something I can and can't control."

Hot tears sit at the edge of your eyes as you breathe furiously. Loretta never looks away. She blinks away her tears and places her hands on yours, which have been shaking the entire time. With your ragged breath and her sorrowful smile, the world thaws for a moment and you let yourself admit defeat.

—

Meanwhile, the only animal that could beat a crocodile in a fight is the hippopotamus. It is a territorial animal that fights to the death if they have to for a place they claim was already theirs. There is nothing like watching a pack of these ferocious, unrelenting beasts topple a lone crocodile. It is terrifying because they don't hold back. In a body of water, they throw themselves over the crocodile, hoping to get it under. They beat its body with the round of their snouts. Left and right, it never stops. It is hard to find the crocodile itself amidst the violence. The water is restless as it splashes and sloshes through their bodies. The rough grunts and snorts of the hippopotamuses fill the air. When does the thrashing and crashing end?

The only way to escape is to dive down, to wrestle oneself under the feet of the herd and swim away. When safe, the crocodile is able to come up and breathe for air. Aching and bruising all over, the reptile swims to find land and hide. It struggles to catch its breath after its mouth has been stomped on. It struggles to find air. There is a stutter to its movement; it limps and limps, hoping to be out of anybody's view. Its blood works ten times faster to heal its internal wounds. And yet, lost scutes never come back. The crocodile can recover, it will live on, but to try and exist in a space where one is deeply unwanted... hard to

say what the reptile must do about that.

—

You're the last to head out of the room, cleaning up after yourself. The professor hurries to a research lab. The rest of the students walk on, laugh on. You grit your teeth. *Stop.* You look at the PowerPoint you made on synthetic drugs. It was perfect and your professor loved it. It was interesting, you're interesting, and they made their cruel jokes anyway. Your eyes burn. *Stop.* They don't know anything about you. Whatever they say doesn't have to mean anything. You powered through with a smile on your face and answered all questions with pleasure. A guy smirked, "What happens when you take too much molly?"

"You die." Laughter echoed in the room and you should be laughing with them. They don't know anything about you.

No, but they really don't. They don't know a single thing about you. Try as you may to express your disliking, your discomfort. *Take a joke, why don't you. Take it easy. Chill, even.* You should be able to do these things. You should be able to let go. You cannot scream or unearth anything inside of you because no one will hear. There's a tightness in your chest and no one sees. They say there is nothing as cruel and grueling as your twenties and they are right.

So when you find yourself at the zoo, you sit in front of the crocodile exhibit. Nobody is around and the heat of the bench makes you uncomfortable. You stay, though. The sun beats down on you to let you know it's 4pm. You stare at the lone crocodile eating its meal, that tightness still in your chest. Every day you try and no good comes out of it. You make simple remarks and all you get is polite laughter. Conversations lose their momentum when you join. Nobody adds on to what you contribute in a discussion or two. Out of nowhere, the reptile shifts itself and faces you. Tears well up in your eyes, your fists on your knees. It's like there's something wrong with you. Off about you. It's genetic and inherent and you can't do anything about it. You stare at the crocodile and it stares back. When it opens its mouth, that's when you let go.

A cry fills the air and it's yours. *People will look.* Let them. Your cries turn into sobs. You wipe away the tears and they keep on coming. How are you older and still a kid? *Like I care about some artist named Parmigianino. No need to say it like that.* It's middle school all over again. At some point, you even wail. *Stop.* But you can't. It hurts all over, it re-

ally does. Through your blurred vision, you notice the crocodile never broke its gaze, only closed its mouth. *Stop*. Shame crawls up on you as you sniffle yourself into a calm. Your eyes grow weary from the crying and the wiping. *Stop*. You weakly get up and take the long walk back home. Tomorrow has come and you've been foolish all this time.

—

At night, when the sun melts away and the moon rises into existence, when every other creature feels the weight of their eyelids, the crocodile lies awake. The night is theirs. There, in the darkness, the crocodile's pupils widen and widen. Its vision is sharper and its mind bigger. The zoo is empty of people, the neighboring animals are tending to themselves, and much is on the crocodile's mind. The crocodile pays attention to its surroundings. It hears the crickets. It smells the crisp air. It watches the moon above. The crocodile thinks about tomorrow and recalls what happened today.

A woman came by and sat directly in front of you. The two of you were separated by the bricks, metal, and glass but none of that stopped her from staring at you. You minded your business and ate what the zookeepers threw in for you. Nobody else stuck around too long. You weren't doing anything nor were you in season. What was she doing here? Still, she went on with her staring. Unbothered by the screaming kids with their parents chasing after them. The sun hitting the back of her neck. You couldn't take it anymore, the fish didn't taste the same. You shifted your body and stared back at her. Even the godawful sun started hitting your mouth. You had to do that thing you do when you don't want to overheat. Your mouth opens, big and wide; a buzzing fly flits all around it.

*Leave me alone woman, get out of my face.* If you stared long enough, maybe she'd leave. But she didn't. Instead, she let out an unspeakable sound. A sound you'd never heard before. You watched her whole body shake as she made this sound. It was crying. You've never heard or seen an adult do that before. It was unsettling. But you can't find it in yourself to look away. Did she want someone to see her? Acknowledge her? You do. Maybe all humans needed this as well. Though, this woman did not stop. The crying only got louder and louder. It even sounded

did not stop. The crying only got louder and louder. It even sounded hysterical. Your mouth closed and you sat still. You never looked away. Then, the two of you made eye contact again. She stopped herself and sat still, shuddering and sniffing. You felt something inside of you, in the pit of your stomach. When she got up and left, you could have moved on. But for the rest of the day, for the rest of the zoo hours, you never stopped thinking about her.

Even now, in the dead of the night, you can still hear her cry. It's a sound you don't really forget. For once, awake as you were, your legs went slack. Your heart pounds a little harder. You breathe a little harsher. Something was in your eye. Your night vision clouded. The world around you blurred. A tear fell and it left a tiny ripple just around the edge of your snout.

KIERA LLOYD



*Do You See Me?*

## What you can't see from the center

It was Vonnegut who said we were all bugs in amber,  
the 'amber' being the moment, and oh how I would love  
for that to be true — not true in a figurative sense, because  
it is, we are all fossilized and so unaware of it —

I mean, I would like to look at the world  
and see stillness in tangerine, a match frozen alight.

What a break that would be  
from the constant, arduous  
thing that is taking air through your parted lips  
and rolling it over your hard palate  
the way you would suck on a cough drop  
and spit it out.

What a break, from the weights tied to your eyelids  
and the shadows they cast underneath.

Couldn't you imagine? Hold onto that thought  
even if it's like grabbing a comet's tail.

Even if it's like washing sand-filled shoes in the ocean.

Don't tell anybody I told you this,  
but I think that's all there is to it.

## To You, Myself, A Self I Never Had

Cellophane wrap the memories  
A sense of self to share  
The saran unravels itself in pools and pools  
Cementing a flimsy and hollow window to the floor  
Seek platitudes from fast fashion pop songs  
Finding a self to share  
A quote, a qualm, a litany for the sake of definition  
What microcosms compose a song of such multitudes  
A husk, distant  
Not quite distinct from this or that  
A reed in a sea of heads and bodies  
Striving to drink the liquid courage to blend in and stick out  
Discontent with equilibrium  
Confined by a room with an unlocked door  
Confide in a half-broken belief that this is a life  
This is how to define a self  
The nonexistent key sits in the cusp of this hand  
Chuck it to the floor

## The Gaze

Your best friend Michael calls me around noon on a Sunday, telling me to pick you up at the airport. You've just flown back from Scotland for a semester of research, and you hadn't found anyone to drive you back: not with your usual jet lag and hangover from business-class champagne.

When I first see your lanky, pale figure walking up to me, your suitcase dragging with one bumpy wheel behind you, I first notice the reflective black Ray-Bans, your favorite pair that makes you look like an asshole. Next, I notice your newly hollowed-in cheeks, the wrinkles around your mouth that resemble my own. You've returned to grad school for a PhD, and you are 44 years old. You are the adopted brother of my mother. At this point, I haven't seen you for five years. I am 24 years old.

You acknowledge me with a little wave and a very slight turn of the mouth before hobbling over to the trunk and slamming your suitcase in. Then, you open the passenger seat door and sleep facing away from me for the ride back home.

\*

Per the agreement that we discussed when I pulled into the driveway, I'm living with you while I take a gap year from college. My parents are busy with their divorce. You and your wife divorced three years ago. You used to cook every day but now eat little crumbs and takeout food. Your daughter goes to Catholic school and refuses to live with you. That is all you will remind me of before melding into the long chair on our front lawn: bare sunscreen-less legs angled against the sun, palm concealing scrunched-together eyes, the Ray-Bans in your other hand. I watch you from the kitchen window, washing the dishes from lunch and tracing the flowers on a plate with puffed-up latex fingers.



As I look around the glass cabinets for an extra sponge brush, I notice your eyes plastered onto the wood backing. I turn around. You're still sitting outside. As I take the brush out from the corner, another silky outline of those eyes floats above its bristles.

\*

You and Michael have been friends since high school. He's three inches shorter than you and has a J.D. Although he is presently in the midst of a divorce, unlike you, he doesn't have kids. But an octopus at the aquarium is very fond of him.

Michael calls me on a Saturday, just as I peel myself out of bed, to say that you two have gone hiking. I hadn't realized because your wallet is still here. But as Michael drones on about what you're planning to do, I retreat into my bedroom and press my face deep into my pillow, sucking in the remnants of detergent, skin flakes, and the perfume I wore last night. I'm hungover from the party we unexpectedly threw when a few family members dropped by. You'd gesticulated your arms wildly in the doorway as uncles and cousins held still around you, drops of champagne splattering on your shirt.

\*

You were 26 at the time, and I was 7. At the party celebrating getting your master's degree, you'd drunkenly brought me aside and asked me which (married) woman would be a better lay: one with a smooth back in a blue dress, or one in an orange dress with a complicated hair pleat. I'd said that you couldn't be sure the orange one didn't have a bad back since her dress went up to her neck. You didn't let me finish my thought as you laughed out loud, said that I had a point, and then sauntered off with your fifth glass of champagne before falling into a table of petit-fours.

Four years later, you came to my parents' new house with your wife and newborn daughter, Ray-Bans hanging off your collar and wearing new brown dress shoes. You'd only given us an hour's warning about showing up, despite not speaking to us at all in the last year.

For seven or eight hours, we ate and talked as the dead persimmon tree in my parents' backyard flopped and broke wide against the wind. Your wife looked at everyone, eyes lined in gray and maroon, unblinking. Your wrinkles had deepened, your cheeks had loosened, but you still had eyebrows: you reminded me of Pope Francis as a bouncer. I'd

sat across from you, you gave a little wave and a tight-lipped smile from the side, and continued discussing your PhD with my mother. I chewed the meat and peas on my plate, and as you smiled at my mom's joke, my dad had taken a picture of you, the picture still on your LinkedIn.

You then asked me how school was going. Instead of responding, I'd stood up, walked over to your new baby, and peered into her eyes and her fat segmented limbs gangling back and forth against the wind. Your voice trailed behind me that you wanted to stay the night.

\*

Still Saturday, I have a dream about you while napping on the couch.

We're standing in line in the airport, but instead of a baggage check-in all of us passengers are walking into a black hole. You and I wear black trench coats and all-black underneath, which is what I would wear any day and what you would wear only if you had to. We don't know what's inside the hole or where we would be once we walk in, but I'm not too scared. If everyone is going in together, it can't be too bad. When I turn to look at you to confirm that, you return my gaze with a strangely unbalanced face: your eyes telling me that you're scared. Leaning in towards me, you peer straight into my eyes, tell me that you're sorry, in a soft voice that only I can hear before running off from the line and leaving the airport altogether: your long, thin frame sticking out like a needle through the heads of everybody else.

\*

I get a call from my therapist. She wants to know why I haven't been attending sessions recently.

"Have you thought about going back to school?"

"Yeah."

"Because you're still living with your uncle, if I'm correct?"

"Yeah. We're still living together."

"When you go back to school, you'll have to move out. Is it because you're scared of moving back?"

"No." Shit, I forgot to file for financial aid.

"What's the matter?"

"My financial aid. I forgot to file it for this year. I guess...I can just refile next year. It's not a problem. Since I'm not attending school yet."

"Sure."

\*

Your arms are angled against the books piled on the floor. Silver-rimmed reading glasses are in between your fingers, rubbing into red eyes. The wrinkles on your forehead line up with the painted sea waves hung up on our dining room wall. I ask you who made them, and you take a long time to sarcastically reply, “Michael.”

You’ve studied nonstop since you got back from the airport, and save for the party a week ago which you told me this morning was a mistake and a formality, you’ve cut down on your drinking.

Before going to bed tonight, you leave the bathroom door slightly ajar, and I glimpse your still heavily-wrinkled face in the mirror swooshing your toothbrush back and forth in your mouth. With the spit fishing of the toothpaste into the sink, your lips crudely splashing the grime and white liquid soaping into the basin, the mirror flatlines that you haven’t shaved in a few days. The knobs and veins in your wrists bulge through. Your legs are bone-thin. You let yourself not stand straight. The curve of your shoulders weakly imitates shoulder pads in the mirror, the dying light slicing away half your forehead.

Your eyes meet me again in the mirror.

You crudely ask, “What, are you my wife now?”

My beige panties are covered in blood the next morning. I’d lost track of the end of July.

\*

I wake up at 3 a.m, and the tears sliding down my face are thin and sweat-like. The last man I loved was my English professor. I’d just started college, I’d meant to go to his office for 15 minutes, I exited in an hour and 30. He’d pushed me to attend another of his classes the following semester, even though I’d already chosen to take film. I haven’t been able to take a film class since. The first day of college: three years ago.

The things I loved about him: the breadth of his arm; the smell of his clothed chest that resembled a rose with black pepper sprinkled over it; the neck that had a mole on the back and a thick vein on the side that bulged whenever he raised his voice; the wrinkles around his sharp left incisor that stuck out even amongst his unaligned teeth; the way he smiled and how the crow’s feet around his eyes layered over each other almost canceling each other out; the forearms lightly brushed with thin-hairs nearly indistinguishable from his skin like mine; his

hands that were three times the size of mine and which could easily hold my breast in one palm with room for more; the way his eyes could get round and shiny when I made jokes about feminism and politicians and lawyers and the size of his books as they fell off the bookshelf. The way no eyes appeared behind his black Ray-Bans, when we first met and finally the last time he spoke to me before getting married and leaving the university.

\*

Still in bed, I pull up the Zoom meeting with my therapist.

“How have you been doing this week?”

“One of my uncle’s friends came last night, and they kept me up too late.” Michael had brought champagne, and they laughed until midnight. We’ve been living together now for two months.

“Oh, that’s not good.” My therapist laughs.

“Yeah. It’s not.”

“Besides that, what else has been on your mind?”

“I had a weird dream last night.”

“I would think you would want to talk about your professor.”

“I know.”

\*

On a break from studying, you’re smoking in your favorite place again, the smoke clouding your white T-shirt with the ripped-up graphic. Arms long, bending and struggling to fit into the kitchen doorway.

When I was a child, you’d take me hand-in-hand, and we’d pick oranges and lemons from the trees in Michael’s backyard. From the leaves, the green veins extending under your arms, the light plaid shorts hovering over your legs, still and straight as your fingers twisted the fruit from the tallest branch.

Now, I’m rummaging through the back of the fridge and find an orange ice pop. It’s so hot that I’ve rolled up my shorts the highest they could go. Mosquitoes and bees are zig-zagging around the kitchen; but other than that it’s quiet, so quiet that I can hear the strip of paper taped above the window flap up against the wind.

A strong wind bursts through the doorway. You get startled, look behind you, and see me leaning against the fridge and sucking my ice pop. A thin, warm, tight-lipped smile stretches across your face, your eyes shining in the hot sunlight as if tears are building up.

\*

We go to the groceries a few hours later than usual.

On the way back home, there's a car accident up ahead. Through your Ray-Bans, I can't read your expression, but your mouth is pursed so tight the wrinkles on your cheeks are layering on top of each other. A neighborhood kid's been run over by a dump truck. The next day, the local newspaper publishes a photo of his pink brain matter being scrubbed off the concrete.

By the time the accident clears, we're home by 10 p.m. As we eat dinner, I'm thinking about how hot it is, how sticky the shorts against my skin are, and how glad I'll be when summer is over.

You turn to me from your food and mention, "Once while driving home from work, I saw a kid just like that get run over."

Your eyes, angled slightly above mine, glaze over towards the ceiling.

"I'm driving ahead of a dump truck parked at the gas station. I see this kid hanging out near the back wheel. I don't think he knows the driver is already in there. In the rearview mirror, the truck suddenly backs up...doesn't even give a warning.

"That kid just slides under, so fast."

\*

My therapist tells me to reconsider canceling her, but I tell her that I need to figure my life out before I commit to talking to people about my problems. She reminds me that I'd tried to jump off a building after my last "relationship." She reminds me that I'd then started drinking, and that relapses are common in mental health crises. I tell her that this is not a mental health crisis.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. I'm positive." I smile.

"Well, since we're no longer meeting, what are you planning to do in the time that you have now?"

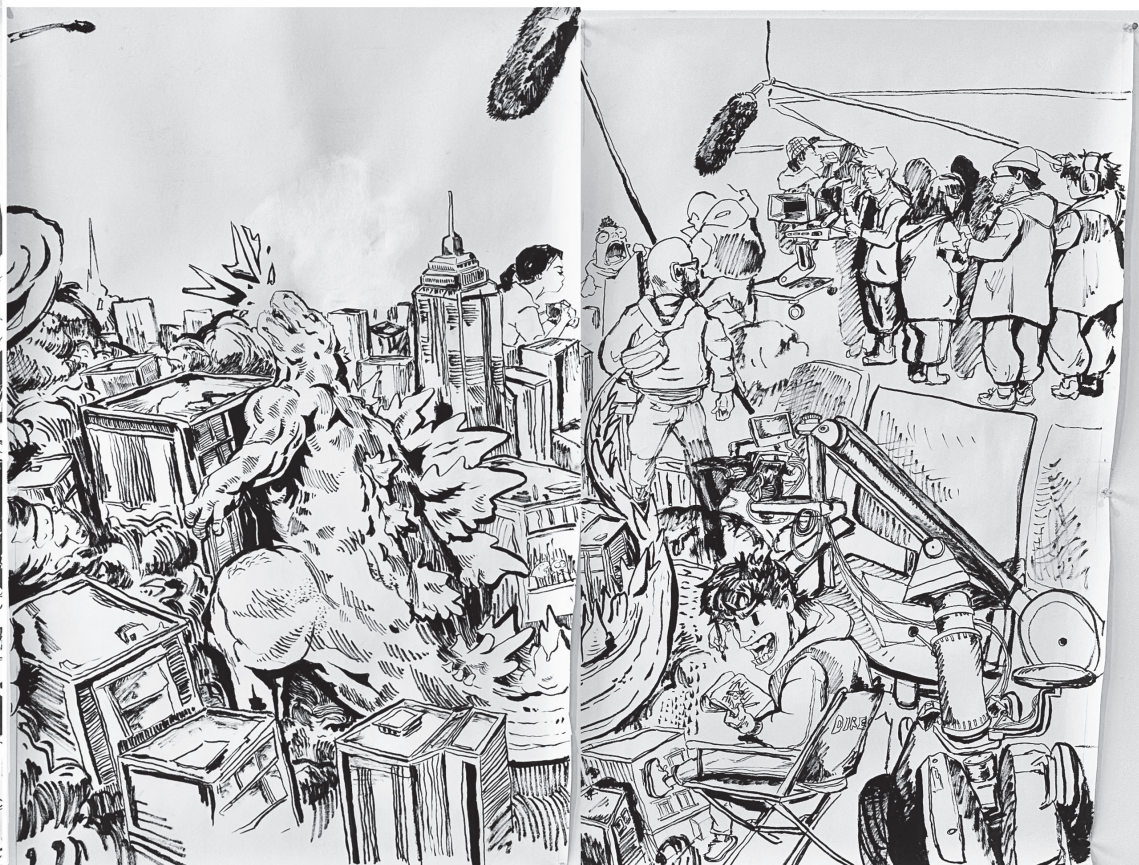
"I'm going to rest. Spend some time with my uncle." She smiles.

"That's nice."





Art 4





BRIANNA SMITH

## Carmen

Carmine red Carmine jewel Carmine bled on the bed  
the sheets snicker whirlpool wrap around her wrists old school Car  
men  
stretches a shriek thunderclap Mom scutters in

*—We're getting the witches ASAP  
Carmine  
Carmen  
my jewel, those old bitches  
they'll know what to do  
Climb in the casket we'll go away and I'll ask it  
of them get you two home safe gem—*

She windshield wipes the phlegm filming Carmine's face but  
Carmine's windpipes evict air  
violently evict the humors: phlegm then bile yellow black and blood  
ruby rosebud Caramel and candy apple

Extinguished in the casket Carmen:  
stomach swelling with resentment cuz her huntsman  
is the new moon absent

They reach the witches who soak her  
in sugar grapple and grapple her into the pressure cauldron cooker  
bleach her blood with vinegar while in the corner Mom  
cedes her signature looks up and a witch interrupts—

*—We take trash or card: tarot preferably, or a thank  
you, bicycle, or birthday if that's all you got currently no we don't  
take credit forget it just sweep them home and Gran*

*when this is over hold her the midwives will warn her but  
let me soothsay anyway: the next babe born of your daughter  
won't bleed red slaughter  
cut her, watch: out  
will seep sugar water*

Don't presume to call it the full moon  
Listen to Carmen croon to her daughter—  
*honeyhoneyhoneyhoneyhoney*

The key of it was in the navel anyways

BRIANNA SMITH

## Falling down the stairs

oh  
 ohhh *shit*  
 KRRBASHH  
 please hold for one  
 WHUMP sec i'm you  
 see i'm CLUNKK on this  
 kinda ride and if i WHUMPH  
 remain on this BANG call i'll surely  
 SHHBANG CRACKK CRASH TRK  
 get motion sick and presently could i ask may  
 CRUNCH i request some SHKK leave? oh whew  
 as i was WHACK i was saying its essential that i navigate  
 my CRRKK way to the hospital but the pocked ceiling makes  
 me unfocus GASH your eyes and now wait for it now it's WOOSH

BRIANNA SMITH

## Mouthful of Mist

Whisper sister, remember when the red running river  
 puffed vapor through glazed teeth, wavered, under  
 that dome of bleached pearl? Those chimneys that reached  
 armful coils of smoke, sulfuric and heavy  
 lidden, where a foot in the wrong place and hidden  
 steam cracked the wake up breath? Scalded we sear now  
 over the silvering blonde wood crust  
 slithering rubber over splinters where the water  
 in my breath seeks brethren in the fumes so  
 carry me oh vapor waif my whisper sister drown me  
 in steam so my lungs sink but my scalp drifts sprouting hair of smoke  
 up there, up where my shoes slip off my feet, let me hide and curl  
 into the sweet lavender whirl of a ceramic mug  
 sloshing with my mothers black tea burbling  
 that pokey old corners hold more steam with a tamer,  
 less volatile, heat

## Double Helix

*“Double Helix: a pair of parallel helices intertwined about a common axis.”*

*- Miriam Webster English definition of the word.*

Heat clings to the air in South Central Los Angeles this March. A concrete jungle of high rises, arts districts, and storefronts, it is like the siphoned electricity of its stoplights, buzzing with unrest. The crosswalks never blink for long enough, never allowing anyone to breathe. Like in all parts of the highway city, the drivers are impatient. The left turns are always “yield on green.”

Sensing its turmoil, the suburbs of LA county watch contemptful from the box seats. Street cops have largely given up on pretending not to be the bullies they always were. The papers say that crime has gone down everywhere except for Los Angeles, a claim some might view as debatable.

Regardless, at this moment, a murder has recently taken place in William Mead Public Housing; at least, that’s what investigators think it is. There’s no real definitive answer yet as to whether it’s a murder or overdose.

Currently, two people are at the scene examining the body. The first, Monroe, is a private detective so entrenched in the inner city that they do not know anything else. Born on Figueroa St. their sense of humor is considered crass and tasteless to the other person, Julian. He’s the lead coroner at the South Central Los Angeles crime lab. Born and raised in the posh, manicured, Greenwich, Connecticut, he’s since grown used to this city’s vulgarity. He is not yet used to the P.I., whose dark laughter makes him jumpy and nervous.

“Good to be home,” Monroe smiles with a cruel and insulting delight. It’s a crooked grin, teeth desperate for a way to escape each other

in a tiny mouth with thin lips. A roman nose sits on a pale face with brown eyes. Scars and track marks are visible on Monroe’s arms, down to the cutoff point of their gloves. Dyed red choppy hair glows in the sunlight shining through the window like a warning sign.

“I didn’t take you for the nostalgic type,” Julian fires back. He is a five foot six waif of a man, his skin tinted with the warm tan shade of sprawling generations of farm workers in the Cagayan province of the Philippines, his father being one of them. Though he has many traits of his father, his pretty face with its round thin rimmed glasses, his contempt for people who talk, and his small spindly fingers are that of his Korean mother.

He doesn’t often show up directly to crime scenes. Preferring the quiet, clinical stillness of his coroner’s office, he is like the denizens of the LA suburbs, watching from the box seats.

Ever since Monroe entered his orbit several months ago, that habit changed. What existed between them should have only been professional. Monroe is as spiky and raw as the city they had been raised in, but something fascinated Julian about it.

The first time Monroe walked into Julian’s office to watch him perform an autopsy, they purred, “That’s hot~!” at the sound of him crunching ribs with pliers to get to the organs. Julian still remembers that splitting grin on Monroe’s face at the sight of his withering expression. It bordered on something between sadism and a sickening need to not be ignored. What was even more troubling about it, is that Julian was working on the autopsy of a drowning victim at the time, a truly horrible case, and there Monroe stood, acting like a kid on Christmas Day. Despite his better judgement, Julian had to admit the banter took the edge off the procedure a little. That was how his interest formed.

Ever since then, Julian had been bristling, losing precious hours of sleep over a living firecracker.

Monroe had gotten their job through a combination of sheer luck, talent, and the guiding hand of their eccentric boss. From the day they first walked in asking for trouble, Monroe had been better than Julian at almost everything, key word being almost. All of it bothered him to some degree, but what particularly annoyed Julian is how Monroe could guess an open-ended cause of death before he could. Emasculation and veneration encompassed Julian’s state of mind. Monroe is foul

mouthed and disrespectful, rife with philosophical commentary and a blatant disrespect for authority. Julian can't get enough. Having spent his life straddling the tightrope of respectability, the ease with which Monroe lends himself to unfiltered language is foreign to him.

"Aw, me? Nah. I can't miss what I'm still seein' every day. Just wanted to beat you to the joke."

Julian bristled, he hated that Monroe already knew he would make such a joke. It was a long winded consistent bit between them for Julian to make sarcastic comments at Monroe's expense. The jabs centered primarily around Monroe's life growing up as a dirt poor kid in South Central. They welcomed it of course. Unapologetic about the fact that they never so much as earned a high school diploma, they glimmered with pride about having completed an adult education program and several required forensics classes on their 'boss's dime'. For Julian however, it was only a half joke. Such served as his silent rebellion, his way to cope with being consistently shown up by Monroe. They had a mind that wouldn't quit, a memory that recalled every detail, and an uncanny knack for guess work.

Monroe touches the victim's livor mortis covered face with a gloved hand, fingers soft. Julian knows they are trying to be tender, but the point is moot.

The victim is a woman in her early twenties, very likely a prostitute. There's meth sores on her skin. The body is mostly fresh. "Main police station thinks they have a guy in mind already..." Monroe briskly laughs. "He's gonna deny it, but if his semen's found in any of the recently trashed condoms, he's fucked."

Julian shudders, not for the talk itself but for the double entendre. He tries to shift his gaze but the scenery does not aid his attempts to make it seem natural. The housing unit the two are in is toaster sized, furniture is trapped in close quarters. There is nothing to observe.

"Hey Jules," Monroe croons. "I'll bet you fifty she was asphyxiated."

A grim paleness passes over Julian's face. "By what means?"

"Ligature."

Julian looks at Monroe sideways. "This can't be the hill you're willing to die on. There's not even signs of edema." The lack of swelling all but rules out ligature. Julian knows this, assuming Monroe is taking on the role of dissenter due to his silence.

"But you agree it's asphyxiation."

Julian flares slightly. "What are you-!" He cuts himself off. "Of course I agree! But I'll have to wager against you on this one. I believe the asphyxiation is chemical."

Monroe smiles again. Julian knows well enough that they love a challenge. The two of them could argue over cases all day if they had nothing better to do. Monroe always knows which buttons to push to make a simple debate turn into a shouting argument. It's a thrilling sort of fun akin only to a jolt of electrical stimulation. The only downside for Julian is that in these moments, he finds himself easily flushed and uncharacteristic in his defensiveness.

"Looks like we've got ourselves a wager then!" Monroe holds out their hand to Julian.

"Don't touch me with those fingers," Julian grimaces.

"Not like yours are any cleaner." Monroe rolls their eyes, "Oh boys!" They play up the drama of their voice while calling out to the mortuary transporters, "Would someone get me a goddamn stretcher?"

\*

Julian and Monroe's debate this morning is to be settled the way they often are, through a third party intermediary. Today, this intermediary is head toxicologist of the crime lab and mutual friend Lily Fitzgerald, a young woman with blueish green eyes, a heart shaped face and sense of style fifty years out of date.

Decked out in a dark purple turtleneck and a thick colorful headband, she sports long blonde hair with blunt bangs. From her head down to her feet, she is the model of what traditionalists expect an American girl to look like. Body type perfectly bordering the line between the hourglass and beanpole figure, she carries herself like a librarian. However, it's when she opens her mouth that she gives it away. She's an eccentric. If you got her three shots into a night of drinking, she could write you an entire thesis about the killings of Dr. Swango and the psychological profile of serial poisoners. It is because of this that she rarely ever gets a second date with most men in L.A.

Having grown up in Sherwood, Oregon, she is a child of the state's laissez faire attitude; don't take our fireworks, don't take our pot, don't take our shrooms. Having managed a brief stint after college with the Portland police department as their 'pet chemist' in her words, she left



to follow her then boyfriend down to LA for his job. When they broke up, she remained stuck in the city while doing her best to stay positive.

Julian still recalls when it happened, thinking to himself that she was far too nice about getting kicked out with the rent freshly paid... too nice, or perhaps too meek to put in a scathing word. She is full of more scathing words now than she was then, but when the threshold is, by Julian's standards, criminally low, that's not saying much. Even still, she has become honest enough to serve as the judge of this bet.

On one wall of her office is a poster of a seventies style cartoon dog drinking coffee with the text "everything is figure-outable." A plaque on her desk reads, "Paris green is my favorite color" a reference to the arsenic based pigment. Agatha Christie books are stacked on another part of the desk.

"You'll be waiting for about two months before I get the confirmation," Lily says.

Julian can tell she's faking demurity. It's one of the only tendencies of hers he disliked.

Having known her for years, he watched Lily climb her way to the top with a vested interest. Personable and easygoing, almost everyone at the crime lab loves her for better or worse. This annoyed Julian at times. Even outside of work, her good looks and inability to say no in a direct way often got her in trouble. Julian could no longer count the number of times she had called him, drunk and crying on the outskirts of West Hollywood when a guy left her stranded on a casual date after she politely let him down. He would be there for her of course, but it frustrated him all the same. At this moment however, he is focused on a different frustration with her, her easy and relaxed rapport with Monroe. She is beautiful, charming, and known to have the ability to wrap people around her finger if she wanted. Witnessing the two of them talk makes something awful twist in Julian, though he can't explain it. Feeling voyeuristic, he shifts his gaze.

"What exactly would you consider a realistic timeline for the results?" Julian asks.

"About eight to twelve weeks! Till then you two might just have to well...find something else to do." Her laugh is soft.

"We'll wait, hon." Monroe shrugs, "Don't rush it. I'll be sitting real pretty after I kick his ass!"

An acidity builds in Julian's throat at the mention of the pet name. While Monroe refers to most women as 'hon', it comes across different when they call Lily that, more personal. With this, Julian's spark of rebellion is renewed.

\*

The first month predictably yields nothing. It's like torture as both of them work on separate cases. All the while, Julian is still thinking about the wager. There's a certain frustration that has historically bubbled in him from their bets. Though it is a fun intellectual exercise, Julian can't help the stinging humiliation that comes from the fact that Monroe usually wins. A decade in medical school spent studying the human form to obtain his doctorate in forensic pathology and here Julian is, getting regularly outwitted by a street punk who can practically identify a cause of death from a glance.

"Don't get fucking tight about it." He remembers Monroe's solemn tone telling him, "Only reason I know all that is 'cause I've seen it enough times." It's true, of course. Death has followed Monroe across the span of their years like a salivating black dog with its teeth sharp and begging. However, this doesn't do anything to assuage Julian's insecurities about himself.

The first three days of the fifth week are sluggish and boring before Lily calls both of them into her office again.

Julian is bracing himself to have his predictions dashed against the rocks, but then Lily explains, "So I found drugs in the system! That means it's gonna take another four to eight weeks to get the toxicology report back. Hopefully you guys haven't gotten bored yet." She smiles.

Julian glances over at Monroe and experiences a sense of recognition in their eyes. They're just as excited about this as he is. He's dizzy basking in their almost predatory gaze.

"Take all the time you need," Julian says. "We wouldn't be in this field if we weren't patient people." But it's a lie, of course, he's not patient, far from it. The irritation burns inside his throat like acid as he steels himself to wait a little longer.

\*

The next two weeks are spent in a state of feverish delirium. Julian finds his sheets covered in sweat most mornings. His dreams are wild

and phantasmagorical. He wakes up naked and ruined, covering up the remnants with a brisk shower, a white collared shirt, dress pants, and dress shoes. He can't look at Monroe, not because he's been beat but because he knows he might win. If the two of them so much as lock eyes, Julian worries he might falter under the thinly veiled arrogance that's been growing in him. He often wonders if Monroe feels the same way.

Julian doesn't bother adjusting his hair in the mirror this time before he heads out the door. He has more important things to think about.

\*

Returning to his senses from the haze of overwork on Sunday afternoon of the sixth week, Julian receives a call from his father. He remembers that both Monroe and Lily once asked about his relationship with his parents during a night of drinking together. His answer was that it's transactional. Lily stood perplexed at the sentiment, but Monroe, uncharacteristically pensive, seemed to understand immediately. Julian loves his father in the way only an ornery and distant child can. There is respect and understanding, veneration and bitterness, a deep seeded embarrassing desire to please colors every interaction. Julian knows his father cares for him. All the same, he will never write down Phil Mendoza's name as an emergency contact if something goes wrong. He knows better.

The conversation consists of pointless talk on life, Greenwich, and taking time off to come home, drifting leisurely along this safe path until Julian's older brother Jamie comes up. Then, he freezes.

It is one of his many secrets that Julian wasn't the first of his siblings to get his doctorate. Too powerful a testament to the ugly scab covering an old wound of validation seeking, it reminds him that someone else is always better. Someone else will always win first.

Julian thinks about his bet with Monroe to drown out this sensation long after the conversation is over. Pouring himself a glass of his favorite cognac for the eight time this weekend, he sits and imagines the official cause of death turning out in his favor.

—

The two weeks after that moment blend together. Julian is working on two other cases of people who were murdered. One of them, he can tell, has been shot with a hollow point bullet, distinct by the way the exit point mushrooms out instead of making a clean escape.

While the dead body itself does not affect him, he notices a sense of creeping dread while clocking out. When Lily asks if he's okay, he goes to respond only to find that he doesn't have it in him. Instead, he says nothing, and walks out.

That night, Monroe is in his dreams again. Standing over one of the dead bodies of the day, he senses Monroe looming over him, hands intrusive and unable to keep to themselves, eyes staring. Soft fingers run over Julian's skin as Monroe asks him to explain the difference in bullets. In real life, they already know this, but Julian explains in the dream anyways.

"A regular bullet has a more defined exit whereas a hollow bullet tends to make a mess. It's more lethal in comparison to its counterpart."

Monroe smiles, "If you were a killer, which would you choose, Jules?"

The color drains from Julian. "Hollow point. It gets the job done quicker and leaves less chances for survival."

Monroe's laugh echoes as they reach for their jacket pocket. Pressing a gun right up to Julian's heart, they whisper "Bang...!" The trigger is pulled and Julian falls backwards. The exit wound that blooms from his upper back is a mushroom cloud.

\*

When the toxicology report for the woman in public housing comes back a week later, Julian is practically euphoric. His face creeps into a poorly hidden cheshire grin at the results. Cause of death is officially labeled as "Asphyxiation by chemicals," due to the cyanide in the victim's system. Ligation is off the table.

"Well played, Jules!" Monroe laughs in good nature and hands him his fifty dollars. Julian is dazed. Barely even acknowledging the money, he is fixated on the brief touch of Monroe's fingers with those painted black nails.

"Sorry for making you wait so long," Lily's voice is sympathetic.

"Don't worry about it hon, it's our fault for roping you into this." Monroe is even keel.

There it is again...hon... Julian wishes he knew why it bothers him, but like most things in his life, the answer doesn't come easy. A shameful thought passes through his mind, *'Why can't I be the one receiving such affections?'* Searching for a quick way out, he settles on the cynical,

“Pleasure doing business with you both. I should be getting back to other cases.” He barely even believes himself in saying that, but it will have to do. He can’t stay here any longer.

\*

Julian spends the rest of the day on autopilot. Expertly skilled at compartmentalizing, he does not unravel until he gets back home to his apartment. Years of this line of work and the educational background necessary to pursue it have made him an expert at stuffing down his emotions. But even before then, he knew as the middle child of the family, that if he could slip away unnoticed, he could break down without humiliating himself.

When he finally unlocks the door to his apartment, he cracks. It is only then that it all comes rushing back. Sticky heat blooms inside him. It is nerves and jealousy and awe all at once that makes him shiver. Setting his stuff down, he clasps his hands in a shaky, prayer-like motion before he walks over to the pantry. He pours himself a cognac and tries not to chip the glass on the rim. That glass was a gift after all, an ancient joke from a family member who considered him too respectable and uptight to even consider drinking. What an idiot.

Julian’s nerves do not calm, he’s too wound up for that. The missing piece of fulfillment he hasn’t had in the monotonous years before this fits right into the slot in his head. It’s a clicking sensation, a form of post apocalyptic rapture.

Though he wonders how long he’ll be riding the high of winning, Julian knows one thing for sure. He needs more. More of this, more of Monroe, more of the sensation of their twisted psychosexual games. In a shameful way that both disgusts and intrigues him, he needs it like he needs to breathe. He also knows intimately that this is one of his secrets. There’s a filing cabinet in his head where he has to stick this with a label that says ‘do not open,’ He knows he will open it anyways. But Julian grew up Catholic, and to grow up religious means that the plausible deniability of accidental sins are, in his mind, better than a behavior like this being on full display. He downs the rest of his cognac and then pours a little more before he’s up to the arduous task of pulling himself together.

It takes the hand of a very long cold shower for him to return to

normal. Julian does not sleep well that night, and for once, he doesn’t care. When he wakes up the next morning, it’s as if the hollow bullet from his dreams has pierced him all over again.

## the entertainer

White ivories  
cry under  
my fingertips.  
God perches  
on my  
shoulder  
and laughs.  
My spine is  
breaking,  
hunched over  
beauty,  
I squint at  
the dots  
and the lines  
on paper,  
they spell  
out what I am  
reading.

but

My fingers  
are short  
and betray  
me when  
chords shrink  
and shrivel  
and rests  
never end.  
Black keys sit

cool and cruel,  
waiting.  
I'd whisper  
to him,  
to stretch me  
out more.  
I was not built  
to play  
for you.



WILLIAM AUGUSTUS MILLER



*The Supplication*

JEREMY GUADALUPE

## Saint Vanta, Dearly Departures, and Partying Like There's No Tomorrow

Funeral parties, historically, have always been extraordinarily lovely; those short evenings would always be filled with drinking from bottles saved over decades, car raffles, drinking games, music, performances, traditions— and just an unreal amount of fun. I usually loved to come because the guests of honor tended toward dumping all their savings into the festivities. But that night— ah, I wished with all my heart that it wasn't happening. I was at my grandparents' funeral party. Between the confetti and streamers, I couldn't keep my thoughts away from the fact that my grandparents would soon be slain at the hands of Saint Vanta. Only then, did I hate Saint Vanta so profusely that the very idea of him made my ears warm up.

That evening, every single guest, young and old, was carrying a flower of some sort. That included myself. It's our tradition to pin a flower to the clothes of the Dearly Departing. Saint Vanta was inspired from watching people throw flowers into an open grave at a classic funeral, he had said it was a horrid shame that the deceased wouldn't have a chance to appreciate the flowers that the mourners had brought. I was clutching a sunflower that I had cut from my grandma's garden just that morning. I wondered if by coming here with my flower that I had given the illusion that I was supportive of their Dearly Departure, but I couldn't have been more against it. There was so much more we should be able to do. I remember having the silly thought that if I could keep my sunflower away from them that they could stay with us forever. As if I could postpone death with a game of hide and seek.

When I made it to the Saint Vanta's Hall, I found it hard to not be genuinely impressed with the spectacle of it all. I mean, to begin, the

hall was almost more like a cathedral, a yawningly high ceiling, stone walls, stained-glass windows, and an array of statues representing Saint Vanta holding lamps alight with gentle flames traced the outside of the hall. On the inside, once you step through the doors, you would be surprised to see an entire forest contained within its walls. Instead of carpet or white marble or whatever, that floor was just soil and grass. Trees grew all around the Hall and they were decorated in the warm-white string lights I had picked out for that evening. I'd have said they looked orange if the box didn't specifically say "warm-white". Above, in-between, and below the trees there were lights and balloons ribboning the venue. You could smell burning coal and hickory coming from the barbecue, sweet bursts came from the guests who'd walk by.

On all the tables, there were abandoned plates with bones scraped clean, balled up napkins, candelabras, and ice buckets. The beers were on tops and capri-suns sat at the bottoms. Saint Vanta's waitstaff swayed and smiled through the crowds, offering cocktails, stealing trash, and carrying boxes of tissues to those in need. Alcohol was never out of reach and I found a great need to make use of that fact.

Despite all the lights, it was dim inside, and the way that Saint Vanta's Hall flickered in the glow of flames felt really intimate despite the overwhelming number of people on the guestlist. The DJ was playing music specially curated by my grandparents. Suffice it to say, that I was doomed to listen to a playlist that ping-ponged between Journey songs and Mexican banda. Maybe I'd have forgiven the DJ if he didn't repeat the same songs, but I couldn't muster the compassion I needed to do that. The warm-white glow of string lights and flames floated on the partygoers' daring and dapper outfits while I vibrated alongside the bass. I picked an obscured table in the corner and spent my time lamenting the flowers that would disappear one by one. By the time I cracked my first beer, I think about eighty-five percent of the funeral flowers were still out and about.

I have nothing against loud music, but in the Hall it was exceptionally loud. During the planning, Saint Vanta mentioned to us that a funeral party's music must be loud so no one can hear the screaming or the fighting. At the time, I thought it was a stupid rule, but it made more sense to me as my cousins began to scream at me for avoiding Abuelo and Abuelita. They mentioned that Abuelita had been asking

about me all night to go see them on the mainstage, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. The flowers continued to disappear from the guests, and each flower's disappearance was paired with ruined makeup, staggered breaths, clenched hands, or a quick trip outside.

When the amount of flowers had dwindled down to just a handful of guests, the atmosphere had changed. The dancing became forced, empty bottles and cups began to clutter the tables, and the guests had begun to glom onto each other like raindrops on a windshield. Before I knew it, I was the only one still holding a flower. I knew that it was only a matter of time before they came to hunt me down, and to wrap up the party. I wondered what I was going to say and whether or not I should be honest about my sorrows. I figured that I would walk around and ask people for advice, but fear of losing my non-existent script overcame my typical desire to be social— and that's when they finally appeared. Despite everything, I'm glad that I got to see them that night.

"Ah, mi Eduardo! Mijo, you made it! I am so glad to see you come," said Abuelita.

Her voice was hoarse, but even that gritty tone couldn't hide the elation in the way she spoke. Abuelita reached up toward my head, pulled me in close, and then gave me three kisses on the forehead. While keeping her hands on my shoulders, she pulled away and gave a big smile. If she had any teeth left, it'd have been a smile worthy of a dentistry commercial. Her lips sank in over her gums and trembled slightly. Her hair was tied back into a bun so that you could see her face much more than usual, so it was easy to see her poor, red eyes.

"I was so scared. I thought that you decided not to come. But— but I am so glad that you are here, mijo," Abuelita said, shaking me ever so weakly. My grip on the sunflower tightened.

Abuelita was wearing a big poofy white dress; it was speckled top to bottom in flowers of every color, but mostly yellow ones. Even in the dim hall, she looked radiant, and, much to my dismay, she looked the happiest I had seen her look in the last decade. I was almost at a loss for words. Atop her head was a crown of sunflowers and a sash of the same kind crossed her heart. Over the course of the evening, her friends, brothers, sisters, cousins, children, grandchildren, and even great grandchildren would say their last words to her and then pin their flowers to it. By the time she had reached me, she out-flowered any



wedding bouquet or parade float I had ever seen. She looked so alive.

"You look beautiful... I'm so sorry, Abuelita. I wouldn't have missed this for the world. I should've gone to you sooner. I want to be here with you and Abuelo until it's time," I said.

She comforted me, smiled, and rubbed my shoulders while Abuelo scraped toward us, his arms outstretched. He squeezed us together, and I hugged them both back. At that moment, I had believed that someone would have to pry me away from them.

Abuelo was wearing the traditional traje de charro from his mariachi ensemble. Everyone loved that outfit of his; it was offensively ostentatious. The chaquetilla was entirely covered in black sequins and it was embroidered with a gleaming (practically neon) silver cord that depicted the shapes of cows, cigarettes, skulls, and coyotes on the sleeves. Despite the years and years of consistent use for work, he managed to keep it in an immaculate condition. The outfit was complete with the typical wide-brimmed hat you would expect.

However, that hat was special; from whatever angle you viewed it from, the triangular pattern along the brim made it look like the hat was smiling at you. He'd use it like a puppet sometimes, making the hat talk to his kids and grandkids, saying some admittedly problematic stuff. A lot of us wanted to keep the hat, but it was probably best that he kept it during the ceremony. For now, it hung on his back by the cord around his neck. He needed the space for all that hugging he was doing, and it's likely that the hat would've been in the way.

"Mijo, we were looking for you everywhere. Did you get any of my ribs? I know they're your favorite! It's the last chance you'll get!" Abuelo said with a satisfied chuckle.

At that moment, Abuelo's smile was big, but I felt it falter just barely when he realized what he had said. We knew it was best for the both of us if we didn't press the issue.

"Are you kidding? I had to fight off Tio Charlie. I'm going back for seconds if he hasn't eaten 'em all," I said through withheld tears.

"That's my boy!" Abuelo said, clapping me on the shoulder.

I felt really guilty about lying. The truth is: I didn't have much of an appetite, I was liable to puke any minute actually. I still regret not having any ribs that night. No one's been able to make ribs like Abuelo ever since. Then Abuelo and Abuelita broke away from my embrace.

"Eduardo, mijo, I love you so much. It is truly hard to say goodbye, but we must. Thank you for taking so good care of us. It's finally time," said Abuelo.

Abuelita reached for the sunflower, and I drew it away from her. All of the onlookers shot daggers at me that could've peeled dirt off a road.

"Not yet, please. I'm not ready. Don't go, I beg you. Even if it's another month— a day, please," I said.

"Mijo—" said Abuelo.

"We'd stay here forever if we can. But life must end, mijo. I'm so glad I get to say goodbye to you for one last time. Te quiero mucho, mucho, muuuucho. I love you so much, Eduardo", said Abuelita.

"We are so, so proud of the man you become. You are strong. You are smart. And you are so kind—", said Abuelo.

Abuelita started crying again, "Mijo. You must take care of yourself and the niños. Be brave, mi precioso. My little cactus. We need you to be stronger than you've ever been tonight. Please, mijo. I have cried enough tonight."

With those words, I felt my soul rip itself from my heart as I looked upon my grandmother's face. She kept smiling even though her eyes were desperately sad. I couldn't bear to make this any harder for them than it already was. I had to smile and mean it. I thought of Abuelita's disease. I thought of all the time she spent alone in the hospital, how much it hurt her to breathe, how much she had to think about her own death. With or without this stupid party, it was time for her to move along. If I had any reason to smile, it was because she would be crossing that threshold with her best friend in the world, my grandpa. Her pain and loneliness would go away.

"Abuelita, Abuelo. I will be strong. Stronger today, and stronger still every day without you. I love you", I said.

The tears could no longer keep themselves at bay and began to run over my smile as I pinned my sunflower to her dress. The funerary flower arrangement was complete. I told them I loved them until the words didn't sound like words anymore. They sobbed into me for what had felt like only an instant, but my

spit-tear-and-snot-saturated shirt indicated to me that we had been holding each other for a generous amount of time.

*Bong.*

*Bong.*

*Bong.*

The steeple's bell practically slaughtered the remaining joviality within Saint Vanta's Hall; each strike of the clapper shook our bones. The bell signaled midnight and the entrance of the executioner. As the sound of the bell subsided, the music, the gossip, the wailing, and the raucous statics of the party smoldered into a sacred silence. The smiles went away and they were replaced with solemn or sorrowful expressions. Everyone stood at attention, even the children. We all turned toward the mainstage where Saint Vanta was now standing.

Saint Vanta is a giant who was maybe eleven to twelve feet tall. He wore a mask that resembled the skull of a deer, antlers and all. He wore a long black cloak with an intricate floral pattern sewn into it with red thread. The cloak looked almost as impressive as Abuelo's chaquetilla to be honest. Beneath the cloak was a formal ensemble, a white button-up, suspenders, a vest, a noticeably thick belt, and a black ribbon where a tie would have been. The wing-tips he wore were red on the bottom, and aside from his monstrous size and deer mask, he looked no different from anyone else in the room. His head swiveled around taking stock of the room, and he waved to a few of the partygoers in attendance.

"Good evening everyone. I would like to thank everyone here on behalf of the guests of honor, Oscar and Librada Ontiveros. For being here. For coming to close the book. To laugh with them. To cry with them. To end feuds. To confess. And to show your love for them. It is not an easy thing to be here for. But, I am glad to see their bravery rewarded with yours in turn. It is time for their final performance. Oscar and Librada, please come forward. Guests! It is your time to do your part! Let Oscar and Librada feel your presence, let them hear you! Shake the earth for them!" said Saint Vanta.

The giant reached his hand out in their direction, and, like a conductor, his rising hand restored the symphony of the masses. A new collective resolve reared itself, the partygoer's grave faces broke into determined smiles and enthusiastic smirks. Saint Vanta stood ready and fixed in place amidst the noise. My grandparents released their hold of me and Abuelita wiped my cheeks with a tissue she had been carrying. They told me goodbye again, kissed my cheek, and walked toward the slender giant arm-in-arm.

The crowd of partygoers parted to give them a clear path to the stage, and I followed them behind as the crowd zippered together behind the three of us. I found myself escorting them like a sort of pallbearer. As Abuelita and Abuelo walked forth toward the unknown, they passed through the glob of family that outlined their path. Enormous smiles and wet cheeks seen in passing. Everyone offered final embraces, farewells, and kisses; each one was returned. A flurry of outstretched hands were gently clasped in my grandparents' as they walked through them. Some threw flower petals, but all applauded. Abuelita and Abuelo were quite the celebrities it seemed. Upon reaching the stage, I stayed behind and watched them waddle toward the towering figure. The giant took a knee before them.

"Take my hand if you are ready for your Dearly Departure," Saint Vanta said. They both nodded and took a hold of his great hand.

"Very well, and so, it shall begin."

A soft glow began from Saint Vanta's hand that was transferred onto my grandparents. The light inched all over their bodies and their shadows evaporated from below them. Abuelita flashed a smile like when Abuelo would throw a blanket fresh from the dryer on her during cold evenings. Abuelo turned to face Abuelita, taking her hands into his.

"Librada, mi corazon. Today, you and I take our final bows. We're going to stun all them. From the day we met, I knew that you would be my forever, and I am so happy to know how right I was", said Abuelo.

"Oscar, mi corazon. You give me so much, and even more still. You're a stupid, stupid man, but all of me has only ever been yours. Life was too short, but it was full of love and of happiness. Thank you for loving me, Oscar. Te quiero", said Abuelita.

Saint Vanta stood and stepped back so he could offer them the floor.

"This is a final farewell. This is a celebration of life and of its conclusion. Please enjoy yourselves," said Saint Vanta, "Strike up the band!"

At his signal, swelling violins, blaring trumpets, and chaotic strums of plastic-stringed guitars tore through the noise. The congregation roared out in response. A battle of volume between the musicians and partygoers had begun. Abuelita and Abuelo appeared to glow brighter by the second. He smiled, took her by the waist, and he spun her about like a carnival ride. They bobbed, bounced, and weaved with a perfect knowledge of the music that was playing. I could see Abuelita's



fingers curl in tandem with the guitar and her steps matched the bass so perfectly that I'd have believed that the music was coming from her. I thanked all the powers that be that the DJ had been relieved of duty for the rest of the evening.

With the dancefloor all to themselves, it was their last chance to show off. With every kick and flourish, they would grow brighter and brighter, though never too bright to look at, like a fireworks show or a beach bonfire. To everyone it looked as if Abuelo had reentered his prime and could finally meet Abuelita's pace again. She twirled and stepped, losing a few flowers with every movement. Abuelo was really sweating, but I was elated to see him giving it all he had.

Abuelo's band insisted they would play tonight despite his objections, he would have preferred to have them as guests, but they felt like performing was the best way to show their gratitude to him. He would be the first of all of them to leave, and it would be their first time performing without him as the opening singer. One of the trumpet players broke down in tears at one point and couldn't play his instrument, but he still held it to his lips as the song went on.

The crowd was electrified, explosive even. The oxygen in the room was entirely replaced with a wave of mournful wails and cheers directed at my grandparents. It was our job to be loud and, boy, did we deliver.

Then, and this part was really crazy, Abuelo lifted Abuelita over his head and the whole room gasped. I could see how much they enjoyed everyone's reaction; they were laughing mid-rotation. No one expected Abuelo to pull out such a feat of strength, but maybe we shouldn't have been surprised. After all, it's not like they were going to be sore tomorrow. He lowered her down and they posed. Their dance was complete; you could see their shoulders lifting and lowering rapidly. Abuelo seemed to be favoring his left side as he took shallow breaths and Abuelita put her hands on her knees. Despite the obvious pangs of a life lived long, Abuelo and Abuelita were nothing but smiles as they continued to glow brighter and brighter.

The violins began their final crescendo and the brass and strings stepped up to match. The crowd called out to them; a cascade of grateful exclamations, final tidings, and platitudes crashed upon them. They restored themselves just enough and waved to everyone, to the crowd, to the band, to Saint Vanta, and lastly, to me. Abuelo turned to Abuel-

ita, one last time. He looked lovingly into her eyes, and took her hands in his again. One last time, he kissed her.

Abuelita reached behind him and placed his hat back on his head and as she leaned into him. They shut their eyes together as their light engulfed them entirely. In an excruciating instant, Saint Vanta nodded his head and my grandparents transmuted into soft motes of light. The hat, flowers, and all were gone. Those motes of light floated up toward the ceiling and dissipated shortly after. As the music concluded, so, too, did Oscar and Librada Flores. Their book was shut for good.

The cheering did not stop for a while. Abuelita and Abuelo had passed on right before my eyes. Although I was miserable, there was something comforting about everything that I saw that night. Abuelo picked the date himself; he didn't want their funeral party to land on anyone's birthday or anniversary. He was over seventy-five, so he's been qualified for a funeral party for quite a while now. I might've had them both for much longer, but Abuelita's diagnosis made her count as a special case. She qualified even though she's only seventy-two. They just figured dying the same day would be perfect. Neither one has to grieve the other or spoil the date for anyone else.

Once the impending doom had been settled, I looked around at the celebration with a new clarity. The others around me were showing me what my grandparents meant to them. They weren't faking their tears. Even Saint Vanta, in all of his stoic grace, hung his deer head sorrowfully. I had heard that he and my grandparents were actually great friends, he was even one of the groomsmen at their wedding long before I was born.

Anything and everything I wanted to say in protest almost felt performative at that point. At the time, I thought that Saint Vanta made a decent point. If I knew I was going to die, I would rather go out with a big bash just like this. I barbecue, I want a (better) DJ playing my songs, I want a chance to say goodbye to see the people I love, and I want to be able to recognize them before my mind goes and stuff. I can get my affairs in order. I can commit to the things that I never want to have to do. I don't want to wait for my body to fail me or to be claimed by disease. I don't want the family to rack up bills while they wait for me to die either. I can't say that I would choose a Dearly Departure for myself, but I understand. I really do.

## cottage

I  
tell my girl  
friends dump your  
awful boyfriends and let's run  
away together and live in a cottage in  
a forest where no one can find us and I know  
that might sound creepy, but I swear to you, unlike him,  
I will only raise my hand to caress your silk hair with slender fingers  
and, unlike him, I will not pull on your luscious locks as if you are my puppet  
I swear to pop your pimples, which erupt a week  
before your period and, unlike him, I can say the  
word PERIOD without my face becoming a furnace  
but                *I love him* you tell                me  
but                *I love you* I tell you                and  
you                shake your head                and  
reply by telling me it's not the same BUT I LOVE  
YOU I reply with a puffed chest as you attempt  
to explain how my love for you is different than  
yours for him *do you want to hug me?* if you want  
me to. *do you want to kiss me WITH TONGUE?*  
if I have to. *do you want to take me under the sheets*  
*with our hot bodies pressed against each other like we're*  
*holding on for dear life?* I look at her playful brown  
eyes and plump pink lips as she is holding in a laugh,  
thinking all of this is a joke. is my love a joke to you?  
we move onto the next topic but I'm still thinking  
about that cottage in the forest and how  
I want to keep you in there forever.

KIERA LLOYD



*Letting Go*

*Letting Go*

Clay has many similarities with the sensitivity and strength of the human body and the Earth. I used materials for their unique natural occurring processes. Ash causes glazes to be runny, so the blue is lively and dynamic in areas where it's thicker because it pools and flows through the contours during the firing, much like the unpredictability of a volcanic eruption or mudslide. Clay slip made with calcined kaolin cracks once it's applied and pulls apart when fired like the separation of tectonic plates on the earth's surface or the desiccation of desert mud cracks. This reminder of how little control we have over our powerful planet is humbling. However, we can work with creation rather than against it to relieve conflict, not only on a global level but also an interpersonal level with those we are closest to, whom we share our earthly home with.

## En Gritós y Peleas

Doesn't matter if it's day or night, in the living room or the kitchen, even in the car when we go to the store. The yelling sounds like drums beating, echoing in my head, making it hard to think about anything else. Mom rants that Dad's a "*flojo*," a "*huevo*," that he doesn't do anything right, and Dad just laughs, and continues about his day.

I can hear them from anywhere in the house. Sometimes I try covering my ears, squeezing them tight until everything sounds like it's underwater, but it doesn't really help. They get so loud it feels like the walls are going to crack. The sense of fear travels up my throat, making me want to throw up. When they argue, I want to disappear, to shrink down and slip into a crack where I won't have to hear any of it. I wish that I could be flying somewhere far away from here.

I can see them from in between the pillars of the stairs, my eyes feel cloudy with tears and my stomach twisted into knots. The lights cast shadows on my face like piano tiles. I want to scream, but I have no breath.

"Why can't you just understand?" Mom yells.

"And why can't you stop bothering me? Always on my ass, *siempre chingando*," Dad snaps back. His voice is explosive; it sounds even angrier than hers.

"*Todo el tiempo me chingo para ustedes. Y esto es lo que pasa?*" he exclaims.

"You don't get it huh? Your fucking son needs you. I need you. But look at you, being a drunk thinking it'll help you." She backfires. Her voice quaking beneath her tears.

"We are in a shithole! I am stressed! *No entiendes bruta!*" He argues.

"I have been in this shithole since the beginning with you. When we didn't have enough money for a fucking gallon of milk. What makes

you think I'm not stressed?" she screams. "You think those guys you hang out with till midnight are going to help you?"

"*Y sí! La neta*, I would rather be out there without a worry. Without responsibility."

"*Largaté cabrón. Te crés muy jovencito.*"

"*O sí! O sí!*" he screams.

I can hear her. She screams, calling me to help.

My body feels tight, like if I move, I might break something. I might break.

If I get involved, what can I do?

What would I be able to do?

I am so scared, but I cannot do anything.

I feel so stupid.

I can't help her.

*Amá, perdóname.*

—

I don't remember when I fell asleep, but I woke up to the sound of dishes clinking and the smell of coffee. I roll over, my face sticking to the pillow as I wipe the crust from my eyes. It's still damp. The sun's sneaking through the blinds, casting stripes across my room, and for a second, I just stare at them, trying to ignore how heavy my eyes feel. I don't want to get up, but if I stay here, maybe I won't have to face them. Doesn't seem like a bad idea.

Staring up at the ceiling I trace invisible lines between the tiny cracks in the paint. My chest feels heavy, like someone's sitting on it. Every breath feels a little too loud in the silence. I sit up slowly, rubbing my eyes, and glance at the wall across from me. My posters, bright and colorful, fill up the space with something that feels bigger than me, bigger than this room. There's the mighty T-Rex, its jaws wide open, sharp teeth shining, standing mighty and all. Next to it is the Triceratops, its massive frill and three horns making it look so durable, like nothing could touch it. To be a Triceratops. I wonder what it would've been like to live with them, to walk through jungles with the Brachiosaurus towering above me or to run beside a pack of Velociraptors, their claws digging into the earth as they darted through the trees.

At last, I push myself up, feeling like my legs could give way under me if I allowed them to. I jolt a little more when my feet strike the floor



and the cold rushes up. I remain there for a while, holding myself tightly to prevent my mind from slipping away. I enter the hallway, and it's eerily quiet, the sort of silence that seems too quiet; the home seems to be acting like it's playing along with them.

Can our home feel?

How long can it last without crumbling?

As I enter the kitchen, I see them seated at the table, each engrossed in their own world and clinging to their coffee cups as though they were priceless. They're not even exchanging glances. Dad looks somewhere past the window then with his eyes vacant, goes back to look at the screen of his phone, deep in his own thoughts. Mom looks into her cup and twists the handle with her fingers, and looks at me. She too has been crying.

I inhale deeply and settle in, attempting to act as though nothing is wrong. I try not to shake my hands as I concentrate on them clasped together in my lap. Every movement weighs in on me, making my stomach wrestle with itself. I make myself sit motionless and keep my face expressionless, as though I didn't hear anything the night before and didn't sit there with my heart racing, wondering what would happen next. They don't speak. Like two strangers sitting at the same table, they continue to sip their coffee in silence, and I wonder if they feel as distant from one another as I do.

"*Mijo*, are you going to eat?" Mom asked.

"Ehh, I'm not too hungry, Mom. I might just drink some milk." I replied.

"Maybe you shouldn't. Your shirt looks a little tight on you," Dad tells me, looking over his phone.

Mom just glances at him. This is the first time she looks at him this entire time. She then turns to me and then eyes on the plate with a pink *concha* and the cup of milk she pours for me. Mom smiles at me, reassuring me to eat my fill.

Although I smile at her, how do I reply to him? Simple answer.

I don't.

—

At school, I feel strange around my friends. They talk about their parents like it's no big deal. Things like, "My mom makes the best pancakes" or, "My dad's taking me to the soccer game this weekend." Some

even say, "My parents took me to Legoland." I nod along, but I never say anything. I remember getting a free ticket to Legoland for "Most Books READ" last school year. Going into middle school next year and I still have not gone. I don't want the other kids to look at me differently, like I'm broken or something. Was I normal? I see other kids with their parents at school events, laughing and hugging, and I wonder if I'm missing something or if they're just pretending too. Maybe everyone's family is like this when no one else is around. But then, why don't they look as sad as I feel?

After school, while sitting on the soccer field's edge, waiting for the buses to arrive, my friend Noah sits beside me. With his knees pulled up and his chin resting on them as I pick at the grass, ripping small bits off and throwing them into the breeze. He is wasting time by using a stick to draw designs in the ground, creating shapes and squiggles that have no real meaning.

All day, the question has been digging into my chest, and it's becoming too much of a problem to ignore. I keep looking at Noah while he scratches the soil, wondering if he will find me strange, laugh, or not understand at all. But I can't get rid of it as it seems to be all I can think about.

I say, "Hey, Noah," in a cracked, hushed voice, worrying someone else might hear. He grunts a little and makes one more swirling motion with his stick in the earth without looking up.

"Yeah?"

As I inhale I ask, "Do your parents ever fight, you know?" Feels like I forgot how to breathe.

I want to shrink into the ground as the words linger between us. At last after a few seconds of my question floating in the air, Noah turns to face me. His hand stops moving and his stick lingers above the ground. His expression is empty, and for a moment, I feel like I made a mistake. Perhaps I shouldn't have asked. He shrugs, and his eyes take on a detached expression as if he's considering it. "Sometimes, I guess. They fight over little things. Like cash or, I don't know, my dad forgetting things. It doesn't last long, you know. It kind of fizzles out."

I nod. My parents are different. Their yelling fills the entire home, and they like a storm that becomes louder and larger. At times, it seems as though the walls are barely able to contain it.

“Why? Do yours?” He asks, glancing over his shoulder at me. His voice has a gentleness to it that I’m not used to.

I swallow, finding it difficult to speak, “Yeah, actually. A lot.” I attempt to sound normal, but my voice cracks a little, and I clear my throat once again. “It’s... different. They never stop. It’s like... I’m not sure. It just keeps going.”

Noah remains silent for a moment but I begin to feel bad about speaking. I gaze down, my fingers sinking into the grass to keep my hands from shaking. However, he moves in closer and gives me a gentle elbow push.

His voice is low, as if he’s trying to keep it between us, and he murmurs, “That stinks, man. I had no idea.”

“It’s ok dude,” I reply, gazing at my small mound of ripped grass. “It can be scary at times.”

Without saying anything at first, he simply bends down and grabs a handful of grass, tearing at it just as I do. “You’re free to hang out at my apartment if it helps. My momma makes sandwiches that are way too big. To make room for the cookies she always bakes, we could probably split one.”

I look at him in astonishment, and he smiles at me with a slight, lopsided smile. His eyes have no sympathy; instead, they have a calm, effortless gaze that lightens my chest slightly, as if I’m no longer bearing this burden alone.

“Thanks, that would be so cool” I say, gazing down once more, but this time I’m also grinning a little. As if it were nothing out of the ordinary, Noah simply shrugs and throws the ripped grass into the wind. Together, we sit and tear up the grass, and our conversation ceases. However, this type of quiet is different, a safe quiet, as if I don’t need to conceal anything, at least not from him.

—

Two days later, after convincing Mom, I’m standing in front of Noah’s door. He lives in the same apartment complex as me, just a couple of buildings down. His place is bigger, with a little patio out front where his mom keeps potted plants; bright red and yellow flowers that look like they belong in a picture book. My heart is beating fast as I knock. Stepping into someone else’s home feels... strange, like I’m going into a world I don’t really belong in.

Noah opens the door, his usual lopsided grin on his face. “Hey, dude. Come in.”

The inside of his apartment is warm and has a cinnamon smell that hugs me when I walk in. I hear a soft humming from the kitchen and the clatter of dishes. It’s his mom, singing quietly to herself. *Vicente Fernandez*. “Of course,” I think to myself while I giggle.

She pokes her head out when she hears me and smiles wide, wiping her hands on her apron. “Hi mijo! You must be Noah’s friend,” she says, her voice cheerful, lovely. “Welcome! ¿Tienes hambre? I just made sandwiches.”

I nod, looking down at my feet. Noah waves me over to the dinner table, where plates are placed at every chair. Walking towards the table, I see a plate with my name on it.

“That’s a first,” I say.

“What was that?” Noah asks.

“Oh, nothing nothing,” I wave my hands to distract him from teary eyes.

“Alright, well sit here you like dude. My dad will be coming later. He’s at work,” Noah says, stretching his hand out to the table.

The place feels cozy, like the kind of home you see on TV. There’s a family photo on the wall; Noah as a baby, his mom holding him, his dad with an arm around her shoulders. Everyone is either smiling or hugging each other.

Different.

His mom comes over after a bit, carrying a tray with two sandwiches and a plate of cookies.

“You guys enjoy. Let me know *si quieren algo más*,” she says, smiling at both of us. She kisses Noah on the top of his head and then walks to sit on the couch.

The sandwiches are massive, just like Noah said. I take a bite. This sandwich is so good! The soft bread, turkey, cheese, and some kind of sauce I have never had makes me want to have four more.

“This is amazing,” I mumble with my mouth full. Noah grins, taking an enormous bite of his own sandwich. His mom laughs from the couch.

“You’ll have to come over more often,” she calls out. “We’ve always got plenty of food!”

For the first time in a long time, I feel light. Like I'm not carrying that weight in my chest. "So," Noah says after we are done eating, "you're gonna come back, right? My mom will probably bake a whole bunch of cookies tomorrow."

I nod, smiling. "Yeah, I think I will."

---

That same night, I buried my face in a book I had been reading while sitting at the table. Tracing each word with my finger to keep myself from looking up and from listening to what's going on in the kitchen. My mom's voice breaks through, sharp and quick, slicing through the words in front of me. I press my fingers harder into the page, squinting, like maybe if I focus enough, the words will pull me in, and I'll be somewhere else.

"I can't focus," I say to myself. I stand up and walk quickly to my room down the hall. I kick everything that's on the floor and lay on the carpet facing away from the door.

I'm on a page about the T-Rex. Did you know that their arms were so small they probably didn't do much with them? It's funny to think about this giant, terrifying creature with puny little arms that couldn't reach anything. The thought makes me smile, just a little. But then, through the wall, I hear Dad's voice rumble, low but scary. Mom's words tumble over his, both of them rising higher and louder. I try to read out loud, like I'm telling myself a story to my plushies that are scattered across the room.

"The Tyrannosaurus Rex could grow up to forty feet long," I scream while raising a hand, "and its teeth were up to twelve inches, as big as bananas."

I imagine the T-Rex's massive teeth and feel my own teeth clench together, like maybe if I press them hard enough, the noise from the kitchen will just disappear. But it doesn't. It's like thunder crashing over me, filling up the room no matter how small I make myself. I turn the page, trying to go somewhere else, anywhere else. I landed on a picture of a Triceratops, with its big bony frill and horns. The book says that Triceratops used those horns to fight off predators and to protect themselves. I wish I had something like that. Some shield I could hide behind.

The words on the page start to blur, and I can feel my hands shaking.

I turn to see their shadows on the walls. I go back to the book, reading the words over and over, "The Triceratops had three horns." I think about how strong it must have been to face something as big as a T-Rex, to stand its ground with only those three horns to keep it safe. My voice is barely a whisper now, but it's something. A little thread tying me to this page, to this world of dinosaurs that don't feel anything.

Turning on my back, I close my eyes and try to imagine being in a place where nothing could hurt me, where I could be a Triceratops with armor all around me, horns sharp enough to keep everything bad out. I lay like that, quiet, holding the book close, letting the sounds of the kitchen fade into something far away, like they belong to someone else's life.

When it's finally quiet for once, I lie in bed and gaze at the posters on my wall. I see a distant life in which the only sound I have to hear is my own breathing. I imagine myself in a place of dinosaurs, where I am free and wild, surrounded by enormous ferns, and the only sounds are the gentle rustles of the leaves. The heads of long-necked Brachiosauruses can be seen rising over the trees in an expansive area with tall, waving grass. On top of its neck is Noah, standing there with a sandwich as big as his head made of rocks. Reminds me of that really old show of the cavemen family. Or would it be "cavefamily?" Anyway, I turn to the sun and feel the rumble of the ground beneath their heavy feet, and the endless sky; there is no shouting or rage.

Somewhere much more tranquil, where perhaps I could follow, I imagine a T-Rex in the distance, its massive, powerful legs taking it far and far away. I picture myself sheltering next to a Triceratops, shielded from loud noises and frightening monsters by its hard skin and horns. The dinosaurs in this world are peaceful, their steady breathing filling the air, and I am safe as I watch them wander through the thick grass and graze as if nothing in the world could ever disturb them.

However, the silence is short-lived. The muffled but shattering voices begin to reappear as they bleed through the walls and into my room. Bleeding through every hole, outlet, and crevice. I squeeze my eyes shut, clinging to the vision of the dinosaurs, the gentle sound of their scales on leaves, and the sense of being in a far away, safe place. Noah seems to be reaching out his hand to pull me out of this hand. I try the best I can to reach him until I have to jump to cling to that peaceful

space. His face gradually disappears and is replaced by the yelling, the tension in the air, and the heavy weight on my chest. I am dragged back to reality, to the chaos and the walls that are unable to contain it. I lie there, cold in the void where I cannot escape.

IAN ERICKSON

## **Meadow // Human Relief**

–

Flagrant flapping wings – Umbrella.  
Purple dance purple rain purple sway –  
Hands that pray, not pried, but  
Sliced – open sesame.

–

It breaths and talks to green Friends –  
Slithers and stripes, staining jeans at  
Every opportunity –  
Nature intends to leave its mark.

–

The center is extracted.  
A set of fluttering colors – a buzzard –  
A community whittled to Individual – a buzzword.  
Prepared produce to hexagons – shapes tend to regulate.

–

The sun is removed for a Spotlight.  
Imagine the scene, the characters trading places.  
Midnight behind a bulky red curtain, taunting your eyes,  
A bull, vibrant, tangent, placing, queer.

–

The bulking threat – the star – returns.  
Everything fills us with ideas.  
The purple petals absorb sweet lemonade sunlight.  
Paper thin tissue overflowed with:

–

Warmth and stubble, tiny children playing,  
Innocent bubbles, euphoria, endless cash.  
You foreign a class act in a vast world,  
Bombarded with stimuli, it's not a new day, it's a new age.



Pavement phase? No, Trailhead way.

—

A Smidge collects on a crackle of green.

Wind brushes and fixes the Tree's hair, the droplet flies through the air.

The same spec, shredded at a waterfall, birthed from a cloud- to relax  
ing on a single leaf.

How does one do it? Experience human relief.

KAIA LOVE KING-HALL



*FWIENDS!*

## Sessions

I. To be perceived or not, it is the brink of existence. Technically you are nothing unless you are perceived, but could you be perceived by yourself? One day you don't want to be looked at, be in the proximity of anyone else. Sometimes you understand Emily Dickinson. At one point in your life, you heard her story and thought it was silly to be locked in a room and write, but now that is all you crave. The craving for solitude while also being unable to be alone with yourself. This leads to the cycle of being online for hours, looking at faces and talking about their lives or other people's lives. Some days all you want is to be perceived on a small screen, and others you would love to be on the big screen. It is the time when you want validation, but you don't want to go through the steps of getting validation. You wish to gain validation all on your own without having to small talk or make eye contact. I guess that is what Emily exactly was able to attain. How do you leave your mark without marking anyone else.

But having to deal with everything that comes with being perceived seems to hit a nerve that you don't like. The pit feeling in the center of your chest dripping down to your stomach leaves your hands and toes a little colder than the rest of your body. This leaves you cold overall, always craving validation from perception.

II. Your favorite part of being perceived is the rush. From when you wake up in the morning to when you fall asleep with the pen in your hand. The cursive seemed to get sloppier, the notes are dragging and rushing, your makeup is getting patchy and uneven, the cooking seemed to need seasoning and extra minutes, your bags seemed to get droopier and heavier, with your face flushing more than usual, and your brain foggier than mornings by the beach. Somehow

you seem to drag your feet still, with your eyes lifeless, and everything you loved and cared for pushed to the side. You seemed to get so addicted to the trophy, like a 12-year-old playing video games on a summer break. It seems like you are a hamster running through the ball. Your father tells you this is what life is like, but you can tell if you are both workaholics.

Schedule me this schedule me that, yes, I can make it, in the ten-minute gaps I have I can make it work. I don't need a break, there is no time for a break here. You need to have so much accomplished before you graduate high school and before you graduate college. You need to have it all done with 10 awards, 20 extracurriculars, 3 job experiences, and a 4.0, don't worry about the kid next to you, he doesn't need to do all that.

It is the time that you let the candle burn without the wax.

The wick is barely  
holding on with nothing to exhale.

III. Women are accounted for the sins of men.

To be perceived as a woman is to be seen as a sinner, from the beginning of the bible. The woman is always at fault. You can be the perfect daughter, but you won't be enough because you don't carry your father's name. It is to be given toys that will be lobotomized into your subconscious to have kids. It is to wash the dishes for your family while your brother gets to play outside because he is a boy. To be a woman is the constant urge to prove yourself to everyone. Prove yourself that you are just as good in sports, prove yourself that you are just as good in maths, prove yourself that you can do anything. It is to prove others that you don't talk too loud or too much, that you stay modest, that you aren't slutty, that you are smart enough, that you work hard enough, that you aren't too emotional or irrational, that you have self-control, that you are perfect. To be a woman is to try ten times harder than a man.

No matter how hard you try you won't be taken seriously. To be a woman is to constantly perform. And I can't keep complaining since it isn't lady like.

IV. To be perceived by Love.

It comes from childhood. The spotlight is on you once you are born, you are watched by all your loved ones. They comment every Christmas how much taller you have gotten, and they ask your mom all your measurements, height, weight, shoe size, what toys you play with now, the number of friends you have. Everyone looks at you with the face that you remind them of someone. It is one of the most beautiful ways to be perceived by a loved one. Then you get to middle school, and you give them a little more attitude than you should, and you stay quieter, and everyone still looks at you with that warmth but with a little bit of judgement. Although the judgement sticks out to you the most, and you think to yourself did I do something wrong?

You were an overachiever even with the angst, you still cared what your parents thought about your grades and who you hang out with. You still put your all in those long hours of homework, papers with droplets smudging the ink off the page. But your mom brags about you, you are the trophy child, you are the only child. You need to be everything perfect that your parents sought you to be. If I exceed their expectations, I will be worthy of their love.

It was from when I first saw you. The spotlight hit on you, and I hoped that the spotlight hit on me when you saw me. You told me you liked my hair in braids, so I braided my hair more. We both found many similarities in each other, so whatever you liked I as well started to indulge in more.

How much I love being seen by you. Your eyes with admiration and the warmth of a 5-wick candle. How beautiful I felt in your eyes, how beautiful I felt with your touch, how beautiful I felt with your words, how beautiful I felt in your presence. The solution to all problems, who cares how the world sees me if it isn't you. Please tell me you love me one more time. Please tell me you like the way that I am. My imperfections are the problem. I am the problem. It seems if I stop being perfect, you stop loving me. The different look in your eyes is stabbing me. I am sorry I said that. I am sorry I said this too late. I am sorry I wasn't feeling my best so I couldn't be fully whole. I am sorry. Maybe if I lay my feet on seashells, I can be what you need me to be. How I miss the look in your eyes when you see me. What did I do to make you this upset? Maybe if I wore something different, if I said it in a prettier tone, if I was just perfect that instant.

You seem to be colder today than yesterday. Why didn't you tell me I looked nice? You are secretly mad at me, and I don't know why. The suspense is killing me, and I can't help it but to feel the eye throw up coming. How stupid of me to be crying over this again. I am 5 years old again confused at why I made my parents mad.

Maybe it's the beautiful curse of being perceived by someone you love.

[All of this will be forgotten at our 7PM Dinner]

V. In the circle of the light

I perform.

I prepare for you,

Hours after hours

Perfecting the same measures.

I have practiced my technique to put on a show.

A show where I make my hands bleed a little

Louder for you. \

A show where the light makes my forehead drip a little

Harder than the others, my heart doesn't skip the beat,

But it overworks upbeat.

The life is in the rhythm of the snare,

The winds and brass are in the battle,

If I miss a note, I have everything

To lose. I will not see their expressions

the shadows of the crowd.

Hopefully I blend with the melody.

In the arpeggios we skip,

In the scales we follow,

The tuning Bb we hum.

Instruments need to blend.

If the oboe is too confident, it would need to be

Tuned down. We need to be perfect to

Keep the show going, to keep the reputation going.

Everything we need to prove to ourselves,  
It doesn't matter if the light doesn't shine on us anymore,  
The show will keep on going.

NATHANIEL EDU

## The Joe Fella Profile

Paul Laurent-Clerk is a journalist based in the Inland Empire who specializes in music, drama theory, and addiction. He received his B.A. in Philosophy from Columbia University and his Masters in Journalism from USC. He has published articles for a variety of newspapers including *Want to Be*, *Carolyn's Oats*, and *Real Paper*. Today, he self publishes articles on topics that interest him on his personal blog while working as a bartender in Redlands, CA.

### I. Rough sketch

Joe Fella fell down the stairs on March 4th, 1994. On the way down his big toe hit the stairwell at a perpendicular angle, bending inward, beating the bone down 3 times in total. He later reported that had it not been for those impacts, the fall “wouldn't have been that bad.” In fact, it might have even been “fun.”

Brows furrowing, one might wonder aloud, “How could falling down the stairs be in any way fun?” In response, Joe Fella, a dark haired man; a man with freckles on his nose and ears like frog feet (they are webbed and slimy), would begin raving about the natural human need for danger. He would denounce those family men and armchair theorists for living boring, vapid lives. He would cite aphorisms like “life's spoils go to those who take risks.” And he would not fail to exclaim through frantically waving arms that God is dead, and he knows firsthand because God told him at the bottom of those stairs.

### II. January 14th, 2024

Witnesses report seeing Joe Fella enter the Walgreens off of Highland avenue in Beaumont, California on January 14th, 2024. It was a



very cold morning. There were no clouds in the sky. A homeless man who camps near the Walgreens reports that “stepping into the sun on a day like that was like stepping out of your mother’s womb, or like returning to your mother’s womb, except that you were an adult and you were alive.” A police officer stationed outside the Walgreens reports seeing Joe Fella enter the store wearing a “very loud Hawaiian shirt.” He does not report seeing Joe Fella carrying a mid-sized blue duffle bag. All correspondents report that day, a Saturday, hearing dogs barking. “Definitely more dogs barking than usual,” an eye witness attests.

After entering the Walgreens, Joe Fella “made a beeline for the energy drinks section,” reports the manager of the store. Camera footage corroborates their statement. The footage shows Fella grabbing a can of Rockstar Energy™ and walking towards aisle 13, the aisle with all of the alcohol. There, he pulls a white shirt out of his duffel bag, wraps it around his fist, and uses it to smash a hole in the glass meant to protect the alcohol from theft. An alarm does not go off, but a security guard begins moving towards aisle 13, presumably having heard the breaking of glass.

Undeterred by the blood flowing from his wrists, Joe bites the lid off of a bottle of Maker’s Mark™ Straight Bourbon Whiskey. He puts down the shirt and opens the can of Rockstar Energy™. He begins pouring both drinks simultaneously into his mouth to the point that it overfills and drips beside him. The security guard arrives as the mixture forms a puddle beside Joe’s shadow. The footage is silent, though reading his lips, one can deduce that the security guard says something like, “Stop that!” as he begins sprinting to tackle Joe. Joe Fella stops drinking, and proceeds to throw the bottle of whiskey like a tomahawk, directly at the head of the security guard. The tomahawked bottle explodes over the face of the security guard, knocking him unconscious. The security guard, Mason Ri, would soon die of blunt force trauma.

Onlookers gather around the aisle and multiple people bring their phones to their faces, some presumably recording, and some presumably calling the police. With quiet sophistication, Joe Fella reaches down and picks up the shirt. He points it at one of the onlookers and fires a compact Glock™ 43. He fires once and hits no one. All of the onlookers begin running towards the door. Exactly 47 seconds after firing

his first shot, Joe Fella sprints at an impressive speed (for a 40 year old man) out of the aisle in the direction of the exit. By the time he exits the aisle, everyone has escaped the Walgreens. Joe Fella fails to check for the manager hiding behind register 1. He sprints by and exits the Walgreens.

Eyewitnesses say that Joe Fella stood outside the Walgreens to aim and shoot 6 bullets before he was himself shot and killed by Officer Louis Goldenboy. With those 6 bullets, Joe Fella shot and killed 27 year old Yanna Granite, 20 year old James Joyce, and 17 year old Devon Simmons.

### **III. Joe Fella’s apartment: first look into his world and inter-subjectivity**

Upon entering Joe Fella’s tiny apartment, one is confronted by a world melting odor. Corpses of roaches, spiders, and ants litter the floor and give off a stench of death that augments the natural environment: one’s tone of voice wavers and cracks, the walls bend inward, and the floor threatens to open up. There aren’t any pictures in Joe Fella’s apartment. Nor are there mirrors.

Surveying the room, one finds a sticky note with a cat holding a balloon shaped like a heart. In comically bad handwriting, the note reads, “I really wish I had a girlfriend.” Joe Fella placed this sticky note on his nightstand next to the door. Other than the nightstand, there is one king size mattress placed unceremoniously in the center of the room. Surrounding it are multiple bottles of Dos Equis™ beer, Shonen Jump™ magazines from the mid-90s, and piles of pencil shavings but no pencils. There is nothing on the nightstand but the sticky note and an empty black BiC™ lighter.

### **IV. The few who knew him, loved him, or tried to understand him**

Joe Fella began visiting a bar in Redlands, California called Pixie Sticks Bar in August of 2022. I visited the bar a few months after the incident. The owner of the bar described him as a “stingy, ghoulish Jew.” When asked for further comment, he leaned in and whispered something about “the power lines.” Pixie Sticks Bar regular Don Bergman reports having received various “oodles of wisdom” from Joe. Ac-

cording to Don, Joe would say all kinds of interesting things, though when pressed for examples, he only scratched his head and looked at his shoes.

Joe Fella had been unemployed since 2016. Before then, he was working as a sanitation worker in Beaumont, California. “He cleaned garbage out of the water supply,” explained sanitation chief, John Green. “His main areas were...”

## V. Coffee with Alexandera Minneapolis: morality as contradiction

On the corner of Palm and Sixth is the home of one Alexandera Minneapolis. Ms. Minneapolis (Ms. M. for short) is a 2nd grade teacher at Anna Hause Elementary School. She moved to Beaumont from Ohio with her husband, now dead of cancer.

I met Alexandera while walking the cleaning route taken by Joe at his sanitation job. She was standing outside her house as though waiting for me. I asked her if she knew Joe Fella and she invited me in for coffee.

“Joe was a really swell guy,” she said, putting a small espresso pod into a Nespresso™ machine. “You talk to him and you feel like he really listens. When he talks, you’re pulled into this mystical world. I imagine the inside of his head looks like a kaleidoscope.”

“What do you mean by that?” I asked. Alexandera pressed a button on the top of the black box. It began droning and sputtering and spraying steaming liquid into a styrofoam cup.

“Well, for example, he had this thing about God,” she said. “He used to say that God is a contradiction, that we people are all contradictions too, and that life itself is a contradiction. I never really could understand, but he would talk about infinity and stardust and art and music and all sorts of things and even if you didn’t understand, something inside you sort of understood anyways and you went somewhere, you know?” She placed the warm styrofoam cup in front of me on the table.

“Thank you,” I said.

After making a cup of her own, she returned to the table and sat in front of me.

“What did you tell him about?” I asked.

“Oh, my husband. The kids at school. My neighbors. Ohio and my

hometown. What music I was listening to; honestly, it didn’t matter. Whatever you said to him, he made it seem grand and important.”

“Why do you think that is?”

“I don’t know, but I remember one time he said something really interesting. He said that everything in the whole universe is absolutely tiny.”

“...”

“It was like, because everything was so small, it didn’t matter what you were looking at. It was just as big as everything else,” she continued.

“I’m not sure I follow,” I said.

“It’s like, take that spider over there.” She pointed towards the window. A large spider had crafted a web stretching towards the ceiling. “I keep him alive. I let him stay with me. A lot of people would kill him, cause he’s tiny or they’re afraid of him, right?”

“Sure,” I said.

“Well, the way I see it, big and small are relative terms. Sure, I’m bigger than that spider, but compared to the sun, we’re both *proportionally* pretty similarly small, right?”

“Sure.”

“So who am I to kill the spider?” she asked. In a sense, it’d be like if I killed another human being. You follow?”

“Yeah, I follow.”

“But I know what you’re thinking,” she said.

“What’s that?”

“You’re thinking: ‘Joe killed people. He did kill people, so why’s this lady here sitting in front of me praising a murderer for spouting some cosmic nonsense?’”

“...”

Taking my silence for agreement, Alexandera leaned a little over the table before she continued talking.

“What is a murderer?” she asked.

“I guess it would be someone who kills someone else without a good reason.”

“Can that be?” she asked. “Then anyone can kill anyone if they think they have a good reason.”

“Sure, but if their community doesn’t think they had a good reason, they would be called a murderer,” I said.

“So it’s up to a general consensus then.”

“I think so.”

“How general does the consensus have to be?” she asked.

“What do you mean?”

“How many people need to agree that one’s motives were good enough?”

“I don’t know if it purely has to do with the amount of people,” I said. “It just depends on the relevant factors in the environment. For example, the laws in place or the lawyers arguing for him or the people in his jury. I think that two people could commit the same crime with the same motive and still come out with different charges depending on the environment they’re in.”

“So it’s contingent on the result. It doesn’t matter if a lot of people think he had a good reason if it turns out he dies for it?”

“Well, I don’t know. I guess it seems like we can say that someone in the past who did a lot of killing but got away with it was still a murderer.”

“So what is it?” she asked.

“What’s what?” I asked.

“Is it the people you ask or is it the consequences of their actions?”

“I don’t know,” I said.

“It’s gotta be the people you ask!” she exclaimed.

“Why?”

“Because the consequences of one’s actions are determined as a result of what the people in their environment have to say about them.” She waved her empty styrofoam cup through the air as she spoke.

“Okay,” I said.

“And so how many people?” she asked. “Is it a thousand? A million? One who has a lot of power? One with infinite power?”

“Out of those options, I’d say one with infinite power,” I said.

“And what is infinite power? Infinite scope, infinite size, infinite perspective?”

“God,” I said.

“It’s a fiction,” she said. “Because infinity is forever, and giving it an opinion also gives it a time, a place, maybe even a name. That isn’t infinity.”

“...”

“There isn’t any center anywhere whatsoever,” She was looking just over my head. “A monk said it on the radio a few days ago. What about you?” she said, reclaiming my eyes.

“Me?” I asked.

“You think Joe was a murderer.”

“...”

“You’re just staring at me,” she said. “Do you think that Joe was a murderer?”

“I don’t know,” I replied. “I don’t know.”

“Well, most people don’t have a right to ‘I don’t know,’” she said.

“What do you mean?”

“Do you want more coffee?”

“I think I’m okay.”

“You sure? I have decaf. Something to do with your hands,” she said.

“Okay.”

Alexandera grabbed my styrofoam cup from the table and walked over to the Nespresso™ machine. She pulled two espresso pods out of a nearby drawer, placed one into the machine and pressed the button on its top. After it finished groaning, sputtering, and spewing, she placed the cup in front of me.

“Thank you,” I said.

Seeming to ignore my thanks, she returned to the Nespresso™ machine to replace the used pod and press the button again. This time, as she waited for the coffee to pour, she wandered over to the window by the spider. Her hair was short and bobbed. The skin on her neck looked to be made of silk.

Ms. M placed cupped hands over the spider and then turned from the window. The spider’s web stuck to her body. It tore from the wall and drifted after her. The way the sun’s rays shone through the window pane, the spider’s web looked like a tangle of ghosts straining after heaven. As the Nespresso™ machine finished spewing coffee, Ms. M placed the spider inside the cup. She tried her best to tear the strands of web from her body and place *them* inside the cup, too; then she swallowed the cup’s entire contents: spider, webs, coffee. All of it.

She just ambled over and sat down in front of me as if nothing had happened.

“Where were we?” she asked.

“You said that most people don’t have a right to ‘I don’t know.’” I explained. “And I wasn’t sure what you meant.”

“What I mean is that you have a point. You definitely don’t know. How could you? You aren’t God. More than that, God doesn’t exist. But even if He did, you aren’t Him, and you never will be. You’ll never have any idea what He thinks about anything. So, in short, you don’t know.”

“...”

“Nevertheless, you have to have faith in Him.”

“Huh?”

“Faith in unity. A whole. In infinity. In truth,” she continued.

“Why?”

“In order to live. To survive. You have to have faith in yourself. That you have some piece. At least a little, of the truth.” She paused. “You cannot stay forever nowhere,” she explained. “Joe said that to me once.”

“I really don’t understand you,” I said.

“Well, that’s only natural.”

I didn’t know how to respond.

Then she said, “Do you know about the secret compartment under his mattress?”

## VI. The Joe Fella Profile

If you pull Joe Fella’s mattress from the center of his one room apartment, over the magazines and bottles of beer, you will find a wooden trap door. Upon opening the trap door, you will see a ladder descending into darkness. Forgetting what it means to talk about yourself in the third person, the world would expand for you. Summer blends with the hot chocolate you had on Christmas morning with your family. You feel the nervous sweat on the hand of Susan Caroline in 2006 as the warm condensation of the mug. You struggle to distinguish between the two: the mug and the hand of your middle school summer sweetheart, who dumped you for seemingly no reason a few days later. You realize that it was all too clear the reason that she dumped you. It was because, rebelling against your mother’s frequent recommendations, you had failed to begin using deodorant. You stank and for some reason the possibility never crossed your mind. Now you are dehydrated. The sky is forming on the ceiling. Forming and reforming over and over

mother when she doesn’t know you’re there (you see her for the first time in utmost privacy). The statue is Joe Fella with a gun in his hands. The statue is the screaming and running 27 year old Yanna Granite, 20 year old James Joyce, and 17 year old Devon Simmons. Devon Simmons had a mole on the left side of his chin that he hated. His mother knew about his insecurity, and always looked forward to the day that he realized that it was one of his most handsome features. Joe Fella certainly wonders if it really was a handsome feature. He wonders if Simmons ever would have realized or if it is possible that he will. He wonders if Knowing is Love, or if Love is Not Knowing. Furthermore, if admitting you don’t know is Fear or Love, or if Knowing that you don’t know leaves you complete. With panicked embarrassment, you fail to know the difference. You try your hardest to escape but the statue calls you and holds you. You are climbing, but there is no way out. Who knows what you do there. You just don’t tell people about things like that.



JAIME ALBA



*Image\_1417*

KIERA LLOYD



*Seeking*

## Pomegranate

I sit alone peeling a pomegranate  
the soft cracking as I split open each section reminds me  
of the sound you make with your knuckles  
I extract the rubies  
careful not to shatter any  
or they will bleed  
and I wonder what it's like to be in love  
will I ever tell someone  
I'd peel a pomegranate for you  
and in the same careful way  
knock each seed into a little bowl to eat by the spoonful

## the sage green urn

I threw it out when the wick burned to the bottom  
what else are you supposed to do with a candle once it's done  
I don't know I might have to stop  
wasting my money on a flame that can't eat wood last week I saw  
someone swallow fire and people laughed  
but I didn't think it was funny no  
I was scared that it would come back up and everyone would have to  
stop  
laughing and have to start running with  
their boxes of photos and  
baby clothes and  
their father's ashes in the sage green urn and  
their dried bouquets from their weddings that they lost half the petals  
to when  
snatching it from the wall and  
books that spill out of their arms that they never got the chance to  
read and oh  
definitely some stuff they don't need like  
the oregano from the pantry and  
the old bottles to turn in to the recycling center for some quick cash  
because  
they'd like to do their part and save the planet so  
I threw out the candle and wondered if I should've  
scraped the wax and soggy wick from its still-hot bottom  
and brought the glass to the recycling center  
because I'd like to do my part and save the planet.

## Triple Double Red Hot

Frankie and I cease our worship of the sheet metal pantheons on the desert highway shoulder when Jean's car slams into a pothole. My breath whips against the roof of my mouth, Frankie grabs the *oh shit* handle, and Riley screams the way he did when we were fourteen on Medusa, inching towards the one-hundred-and-fifty-foot drop. We go flying for only one second, which is more flying than most people ever get to do in one lifetime, and then Jean cracks his shoulders backward and keeps driving like it never happened.

A stranger drives this car up the 15 through the Mojave. A childhood friend sits in the front seat, I share the back with a mirror of myself. And once we get to Vegas, we'll join a group of thirty freshly twenty-one year olds like ourselves in a hotel room at the MGM for a three-day novena of our youth. I know adolescence doesn't solely encompass "youth", but its magic is seldom retained through its passing, even in the young at heart. This is second puberty, I think, and it's a steamrolling thing. Forget the acne — this time it's all about the scars.

I lean back and stare at Jean's rosary dangling, tangling Caduceus-like with his navy Vegas car dice. He's the stranger, and maybe that's why he doesn't talk much, but Frankie and Riley know him. I wonder whether or not he likes the pit-stop frozen coffee he'd stumbled out of the car one hour into the drive to get, if he actually did piss on one of the barrel cactuses and that's why he took so long coming back.

Frankie's eyes dart at me the way they do when he wants me to say something first, maybe something like *Is everyone okay*, or maybe even *Jean what the fuck!* but instead I look at him, tapping his knee, creasing his tailored pants, and ask "How far are we from the world's biggest Chevron?"

He's fond of the whole Americana deal: its seven-lane freeways and

megaplexes, its gas stations with neon lights nobody's replaced in ten years spelling *C v on* or *E x n M bil*, its fraying billboards screaming JESUS IS COMING, JESUS IS HERE, JESUS IS YOU. He's two heads taller than me and speaks like he wants you to catch every word, quick-witted and sardonic, well dressed in a haphazardly deliberate way.

Frankie opens his mouth, but Riley cuts him off. "We're pretty close."

"Like an hour," Jean says.

"Probably shorter." Riley looks over his shoulder, back at me. A weak, fatigued light pierces through the foggy dashboard, branding his face with shimmering barcodes. Has he always had facial hair? "I shouldn't have worn a white shirt. It's gonna stain."

I press my hands against my eyes and see red, a carmine kind of red, a *look Sadie look at how much blood drools when I squeeze the eyeballs out of this cottonmouth* red. Riley in the sixth grade in the hills behind the school, severed tetherball a trophy in his callused hands, ICEE-dyed tongue pointed at the principal. That kind of red. "You won't stain it," I say. "Just don't be dumb."

Riley sticks out his tongue. It's blue this time.

I close my eyes. Jean's a fast driver. I think about what my mother's told me under flickering kitchen lights, her fork stabbing three perfect, equidistant holes atop the yolk of an egg: *Men used to die more than they killed*. So, the unspoken: *Watch out what kind of men you surround yourself with*.

Would Jean drive too fast and kill me? I'm sure he wouldn't want to. I'm sure he wouldn't mean it. I guess this would be a beautiful place to become the sky. The clouds are like eggshell paint splatter, almost stucco. I've never seen this many shades of ochre in my life, seen boulders so cartoonishly round. I lean against the window and see red until it becomes black. It's the sort of sleep I drift in and out of. I wake up to sounds in intervals: ice forcing their way backwards up a straw, Riley's dulcet serenades, the desert wind whistling through the slit of somebody's open window. But between, like farmlands pinwheeling, there are holes, troughs. I don't dream of anything anymore, and I haven't in a while.



The world's biggest Chevron sits off the Nevada State Route 161, next to a Terrible's Road House. The elbow of nowhere, where all of your sweat collects. I was born in the urban tropics, raised in riparian woodlands. I know mist. I know water. I've been headlocked by hills and I've leveraged my way out of them, here, to this dry blanket wild. I don't like that I don't know the desert. I stare out at it, smacking my parched lips together, frightened of its flatness, the visibility of its vanishing point. If there is emptiness to my right, to my left, and behind me, is it so unreasonable to think that there is only emptiness in front? I see the proof. I see the sky stitched to the sand brown earth. It's hard for me to believe heaven exists between its seams.

I want something to fill the space, something other than Terrible's Road House with its fitting room lightbulb letters and sister saguaros. But I should, according to Frankie, be ever thankful to stand before the Parthenon of the Southwest, so I second his vote to enter. When we go inside he babbles about the seventy-two soda fountain heads and the Red Bull lounge — *Red Bull gives you wings*, I say with Riley at the same time, the moment we see the sign, cowering beneath a Racelis 4 large, bizarre statue of some Yeti creature. Lights, affixed to dark trusses on the ceiling, cast blurry spotlights on the floor, overlapping vignettes on shiny, squeaky abalone gray.

I'm a bull in a china shop the way my motion sickness disorients me, makes me stumble through the open aisles of the warehouse. I lead with my head. I'll fall forward if I'm not too careful, knock the wrong IPA can out of a Jenga catastrophe waiting to happen. Frankie's too excited to notice. Riley's folded his hands carefully over a stain he's incurred while I was sleeping, dawdling behind, focused on himself.

It's Jean who asks me, an afterthought after a yawn, "Are you okay, Sadie?"

"I'm fine. Are you?" I don't know why I ask it. It's a reflex, a hammer to that spot under your knee. Up goes the leg, out go the words. "I mean, you've been driving for almost four hours now."

He smiles a downward smile. I look away before he notices I'm looking. In the next aisle somebody is laughing. I imagine them staring holes through the rows of Dixie cups and napkins, knowing I'm making a fool of myself. I told Frankie once at a party, ten shots in, my right shoulder mashed against his left arm: *I'm scared that whenever I*

*tell somebody something I notice about them, they'll think I'm in love, when I just pay attention.*

"Four hours is okay," Jean says. "It's not as long as it used to feel like."

I want to tell him *I get that!* When I was seven, four hours was eight to twelve, breakfast to lunch, the cold sting of evergreen mist to the impish heat of the noontime sun, a million years. Jackets on, jackets off, hair up, hair down, skirt or pants today? And then, at thirteen, four hours would only be arduous at the end of the day, a resistance band, a medicine ball. But now, four hours is Irvine to the world's biggest Chevron. It's supine on my bed staring at the ceiling, all its popcorn grooves, canyons writ minor, trying to remember. But instead of telling Jean all this, I ask him: "Should we buy our own chasers?"

He says we should. Frankie and Riley have the same idea, somewhere else. Everyone is always having the same idea somewhere else, dreaming asleep and awake, and here I am sick with some sort of fever, some permanent itch. If I were sixteen I would have fallen asleep the rest of the way to Vegas and dreamed I told him, but I'm not sixteen anymore and I never will be again.

Near where West Harmon Avenue becomes East Harmon Avenue, intersecting the Las Vegas Strip, skies are stone blue and a chain of cars have rear-ended each other like the passing of years. December is suddenly January, the hood of somebody's Audi becomes the trunk of somebody's Subaru, and everybody gets loud about it. Oh, I hate how time gets a runners' high and forgets about the relay race. I've dropped the baton somewhere, maybe when I was still a little rotten, still a little angry, still little. How long can you roll hope in your palm until it becomes formless, until it falls right through you?

Jean's got his music turned up so loud his subwoofers sound hungry. Riley turns around and tries to say something to me. I pinch my nose and try to pop my ears. A dull pressure radiates from my nose to my temples — I can't hear him, not over the change in altitude. After a brief, inaudible exchange between us that goes something like *What? Hub? What? Hub?* he mouths *Later*, and I nod. It's always later with Riley, but this is okay. He's the sort of guy everybody always waits for.

Instead I take pictures of the Strip. I wipe my phone lens first with my thumb, and when that gives the camera astigmatism, I scrub it with



my shirt. I'm always sweating, always damp, no matter how much I wash my hands or stand up straight or try my hardest to be any way else. I hold my phone a centimeter away from the car window and bear the shutter down every time I see a name I've heard somewhere before. The Bellagio, the Cosmopolitan, the Luxor — would it be better, if I took these pictures in the nighttime? Vegas during the day is lethargic, insistent, backstage. Its palm trees are chicken wire, stuffed with gift tissue, propped lanky tall against a parade float backdrop. Just like being behind Toontown: staples in cardboard, lurid colors up in arms.

Frankie texts me *Is Riley bouncing his leg?*

I say Yes, even though I can't really see it. I just know that's what he does, because I know him. I add another thought: *I feel like throwing up.*

*Practicing for later?*

I shoot back at him, because he doesn't mind my punches: *You'll be throwing up for the rest of your life.*

He smiles. *Looking forward to it.*

Then Riley texts, too. All caps, to me and Frankie and Jean: NOS-TALGIA IS A TRICK. He likes to deal spontaneous wisdoms. I think about this while watching a horde of middle-aged men spill beer over each other near the small Statue of Liberty. A trick is something you fall for, and I've always been very gullible.

I wait for Frankie to reply before I decide how to answer. The way his smile twists like a stubborn zipper, when he passes judgment — that's how I look, when I have something to prove. The devil in him is a brother to mine. He's told me the same thing, in different words, our backs flat on top of a table at a party: *sometimes I think we're too similar.*

Frankie asks Riley *Are these your sober thoughts?*

Riley texts back *Stone cold.*

It takes us another thirty minutes down the same road to reach the MGM. A parked car self combusts near Tropicana. When we pass its skeletal wreck, parked too neatly on the side of the street, we rubber-neck. We make sure we don't recognize its blackened frame, as if we've ever picked apart anything physical long enough to excavate its skeleton.

The MGM is a vertical labyrinth. It's less exhausting standing in an elevator, waiting turns of eternity for it to slingshot to the top floor, than if we were to take the scenic route through the casinos and restaurants with all of our luggages. Jean and Frankie find parking while Riley and I lighten the load. He takes all of his personal luggage first. I leave my blankets behind so I can take up a case of water.

We don't use the main lobby, the one I looked up before we left with the golden lion atop the two-tiered alabaster rotunda and the concave, sequined dome above it. I follow Riley to the one we do use, a smaller, sterilized, hexagonal room that reminds me of an elegant leasing office. Its elevator's big enough to fit the two of us and everything we're carrying. But its silence makes it feel smaller, smaller like home.

I get distracted by the sand underneath my fingernails. I don't know how it got there, the dryness of everything. Couldn't it remind me nicer? That I could have my head in the mouth of the lobby lion, that this elevator could fall, and I'd feel yesterday before I felt now?

Riley eases his luggage against the elevator mirror and sits on top of it, slumping forward. He wrangles an untameable cowlick that sprouted from the top of his head when we were thirteen that's refused to die ever since. I wonder — does he think of all this nothing the way I do? Does he take inventory of every change he notices? Does he remember our last party before leaving home, when I shotgunned a beer to impress Jamie Alarcon, who I only think about twice a year now? I found Riley curled up with a pillow on the couch. He stuck his thumb in his mouth so he could throw up, and I caught his vomit in a garbage bag.

Riley groans. "Do you have wave cream?"

"I have mousse in my luggage." I wonder if the pressure's messed with it. Or any bottles I've brought with me. I did tape them down, but I couldn't have cared enough to do it right. "What were you going to ask me about?"

"Just if you've got a Tide stick, too." Riley rests his elbow on the elevator railing, exposing the stain he'd been covering with his hand. I'd forgotten about it already. "I think you're like the kind of person who carries around Tide sticks."

"I bought five before the trip and forgot to pack a single one."

"Do you think I can just put some water and soap on it when we get in the room?"

“It’s worth a try,” I tell Riley. “Need to wash my hands anyway.”

We unload our stuff into the suite. It’d be massive if it were just the four of us in the car, staying here, but I know I’ll suffocate once everybody else arrives. There are some luggages parked already, shawls strewn about olive loveseats, sunglasses stacked on the kitchen island. Someone’s Zyns lie open on the shoe rack, a wedding proposal sandwiched between beat-up Birkenstocks and a lone yellow Onitsuka Tiger. Nobody’s here. Everyone’s out on the Strip with their own groups and it’s up to us to join them or meet them back at the suite by seven o’ clock tonight. I’m as relieved at this as I am nervous. The bathroom’s untouched compared to the common areas. Off-white marble in all places but the shower, some milky obsidian. After Riley washes his hands underneath the tap he sits on top of the toilet seat and goes to town on the stain, glaring in whatever minerals run through the pipes of the MGM and marry in the water.

I think about three questions I can ask Riley while he’s fussing, invested enough in himself that I don’t feel his attention envelop me. One is *Do you think I’m a better person when I’m drunk?* Another is *Do you think I’m a different person when I’m drunk?* and the last is *Is it normal to feel like the sky is blue and the earth is brown and your body is yours, when you’re drunk?*

I deliver none of the above, when he stands up. “Did you think that out of all the people we grew up with back home, that I’d be the one watching you scrub a stain out of your shirt in a bathroom in Vegas today?”

“Never thought that far ahead,” he admits. “Did you think that far ahead?”

“Yes,” I say, honest. “Well, did you think it’d be me, then?”

“No,” I say, again, honest. “I didn’t think there’d be anyone. I thought I’d grow up to do nothing at all.”

“You?” Riley laughs. “That might be the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard.”

Before I can smile, or remember what it’s like to look reassured, he says “I’ll buy a Tide stick when we’re out later,” with an alien conviction. “And maybe two for when somebody forgets.”

I watch Riley leave through the open bathroom door. His footsteps are far away before I remember to follow him.

The lights on the casino ceiling flicker, alarmist. Zoltar from the Zoltar Speaks machine dispenses me cheap fortunes. He tells me my future’s got ulcers, and it hasn’t even crowned. Frankie’s at the bar. He’s been twenty-one the longest out of all of us. I watch how animated he is without trying, how comfortable he looks on that thumbtack round stool. In a month he’ll be twenty-two and over things he’s forgotten he’s told me about, but right now he’s got enough salt on his lips to keep the vampires out.

The bartender throws her head back laughing at something Frankie says. She’s older and radiant, wrinkles glossed over with a rare sort of happiness. Silver gray hair, coiffed like Brat Pack era Molly Ringwald, the kind of smile that takes up half your face. I want so terribly to know if her happiness is real.

Frankie pulls out the stool next to him and I hop up. I look young and nervous so of course I’m carded, but I know my address so I pass. I almost order a whiskey and Coke before I remember: I’m in Vegas with my friends, and I don’t know whether or not I’ll be cool enough, nice enough, fun enough to be invited to go again. Will I be so severed from my body if asked that I cannot tell hello from goodbye, suggestion from rejection, pity from eager consideration?

I tell the bartender I’ll do a California Lemonade. Her eyebrows knit together into a fine wedge as she informs me, drawling honey, of the ridiculous price of a California Lemonade, or any other cocktail for that matter. I wince when she takes my card, and close my tab right after. “Getting a headstart?” I ask Frankie.

He picks up his drink and swishes it around. Half-melted ice chimes against the glass. “I thought I’d feel better about spending money on the drink after it’s been drunk,” he confesses. “Remind me to lock my card after this trip.”

“I won’t.” The bartender puts my drink on top of a coaster. I play with the straw, pin-straight and black, unbendable. I take a generous sip. It’s all sour. How do you know people want you around? How do you know that when they laugh at your jokes, they’re being honest, and not sorry? “I need to fix my personality.”

“When was it last fixed?”

“I don’t remember.” Another sip. “Or, well, maybe I do, but you

know, I'm not sure. I feel like I make up what I remember sometimes. Like autofiction. What about you?"

"I could use more imagination." Frankie pats his lips with a napkin. I resent him for being so neat. "When I remember how I used to be I get mean to myself about it."

I take a larger sip for this next confession. "I wish I could be like Riley."

"Sometimes I wish I was a dog," he muses. "Wish I could foam at the mouth and it'd be cute."

"Or Jean," I add. "I don't even know Jean and I'm sure. I wish I could drive fast and not get scared."

Frankie downs the last of his drink. "Lately I've decided the best way to be is to never mean anything at all, and never think anybody else means anything at all. Better to get disbelief out of your system when you're young."

I can't explain why that feels like a slap in the face. "Who told you that?"

"Father Carmichael at the church in Lakewood after I told him he wouldn't want an agnostic for a youth leader."

"That's not disbelief," I say. "That's just playing it safe."

Frankie shrugs. "It's playing it scared, I think."

I let him take another sip of my drink before I finish the rest of it, expecting an epiphany at the bottom. But nothing comes to me, no gospel buzzing, no bashful sermon. I order another California Lemonade. Open my tab. Close my tab. Forty dollars: the price tag on sensation.

Police mummify the wreck on Tropicana with yellow tape. Combustion's done the embalming for them, heat-stripped chemical paint off the car's lanky frame. I stand on my tiptoes and peak over a shallow sea of heads and see Jean a block down. I can't see his expression with how his hair falls over his face. His attention's on his phone, not on the movement of the block, the people stumbling up and down the Strip following the common walkers' rule: stick to your right, no matter where you go or what you do, and you won't bump shoulders with anybody.

A text from Riley pops up: *we're in the pizzeria if you're looking for us.*

I smack my lips. They're dry, and I'm drunk off the sweltering heat, a swarm of invisible bugs on my skin, more than I am those two California Lemonades. I almost reply *Always looking for friends everywhere*, but that's too honest so I backspace and say *Sure, will be in soon.*

I think about walking up to Jean, but I don't know what I would say. I feel like I have to acknowledge him because I see him there, and I know him, but I don't *know* him. It's just that I take up a small amount of space in his life — in most peoples' lives, really — and I want to make sure that that space I take up is worthwhile, because if it isn't, it's like having a skin tag or a birthmark in a place you can't make work. You wouldn't miss it if it was there and you wouldn't miss it if it wasn't, but I still think I'd rather be noticed and removed despite the violence of it all.

Instead I duck into the crowd staring at the wreck. It smells like armpits and booze, feels as suffocating as it does to get spit out into the world after growing up. The sun glares on my screen. I text Jean since I have his number for the drive. *Are you okay?*

To my surprise, he responds quickly. *All good just freaked out.*

By what? *My friends laugh like old people. Did you ever have family parties when you were younger? I used to fall asleep and listen to my cousins drink beer and laugh in the next room. I think I had too much to drink Sadie and I know we're not close and all but I swear I fell asleep for a second over burgers and I thought everybody laughing sounded like my cousins*

I see a woman take pictures of herself in front of the wreckage. Her lens flare flashes the world in white. *I know, it's crazy to realize how fast everything goes. How you're a kid and then you're not, but you still feel like one. I want to remember being young but with all this drinking I don't think I will I just want to feel it when it's here, for once, I confess. I don't care where it goes after that.*

*Glad to hear that's more normal than I thought.*

When I look back at my phone I spend a minute crafting a response to Jean that goes something like *Didn't mean to talk about myself* (delete) *Do you want to go somewhere else? Not in a weird way I mean just to breathe* (delete) *I'm sorry I'm not really good at this* (delete) *I don't think it's normal deep down I think maybe something got messed up along the way and we're here to feel like it's not* (delete) *I'm here to talk if you*

*to talk if you need anything* (delete) *Was it weird for you to drive me here?* (delete) Instead I send back a screenshot of Riley saying NOSTALGIA IS A TRICK.

From where I am I can see Jean's shoulders shake in what could be laughter or maybe sadness. I try to be aware of my shoulders and what they are doing but I cannot find them in the crowd.

The same woman who took a picture in front of the scorched car taps me on my shoulder and asks me if I can take a better picture. She might be tone deaf but she is gracious. She tells me she likes it blurry, because it makes her look better when she leans on a wreck.

When we all go back to the hotel room I drink a legendary amount of alcohol and smoke a criminal amount of weed until I can't tell wreck from woman. I'm climbing on tables, pressing my shoulder against Frankie's again and this time asking him *Do you think we're good people?* to which he'll laugh and say *Oh, God, I don't know*, and because I can't help it I'll drink some more until it's all holes and troughs, and say *It's not that serious!* to which he'll laugh again, a full-body belly laugh, and drink to that, *It's not that serious!*

And Riley will grab my arm and point out at the city sprawling underneath us, lambent buttes woven into gilded little Paris and New York and Rome and Cairo. *Sadie, when we're older and our kids are friends with each other, will you tell them I was a top dog?* I'll blink and I'll see it, Riley who definitely does have facial hair, his kids who have faces like that boy who cheated off my tests, and then me with my kids who have faces like mine, shark-tooth sharp and sleepyeyed, and I scream either out of hope or horror —

and then there's Jean, who's not a stranger to me anymore, in an Uber cartwheeling to the nightclub, and I do tell him! This doesn't feel like a million years! This feels like it's happening, right now in front of me, and I'm watching it face pressed behind a screen door, and before I know it I'll be under Barstow, staring down the maw of a sheet metal Leviathan, is there something after we die?

And he'll tell me, he *tells* me: "I don't know, Sadie, but if there is, I think it's something like this."

It's all pinwheeling, troughs and groves, rows and rows of memories, branches jutting out into each other, limbs tangling in crowds, until I

stumble into harsh light, this gives you wings, this is flying, this is falling asleep on a slot machine, a Triple Double Red Hot slot machine, and dreaming of nothing. Riley and Frankie take turns carrying me back to the hotel. I'll know this because they'll send me pictures in the morning, when I'm hungover, embarrassed, ashamed, terrified.

But while I'm not they ease me awake, warm. Someone pours a shot into my mouth, and I walk with my back straight and my chin high all the way to the elevator.



## CONTRIBUTORS

BRIANNA SMITH is a third year literary journalism major at UCI. She currently enjoys playing chess and collecting stickers, but fully expects her hobbies to change within the next month. As of now, she has a long to-read list that includes manga, ancient epics, fairy tales, fantasy, and light novels.

CAMILLE LE is a student at UC Irvine.

ELAINE VINH lives in Orange County, California and studied English at the University of California Irvine, with a minor in Creative Writing. She calls herself a fiction writer, but cannot stop writing poetry. During her days off, Elaine enjoys writing at cafés and reading literary fiction, with the frequent fantasy and romance. She always craves bubble tea and has peculiar hyperfixations with Yu-Gi-Oh and Pixar Cars being the most recent.

HAILEY HOANG is a second year English major, minoring in creative writing. Taking W30 sparked her interest in writing poetry and she hasn't stopped writing since. In the fall, she went through an intense obsession with pomegranates, eating at least two a week.

IAN ERICKSON is a senior at UC - Irvine, a Teacher's Assistant for a special education highschool in California, and an aspiring novelist currently seeking publication for his Young Adult Thriller novel. Being a former foster youth individual, he seeks to better the lives of other foster youth and at-risk youth through community efforts and to highlight them and their struggles through his writing. For more of his written works, see Mr. Erickson's creative writing/travel blog at [WritingErickson.org](http://WritingErickson.org).

JAIME ALBA is a freshman student artist from the LA area. Inspired by intimate locations like bus stops and metro stations that bring humanity together, Jaime has been using his digital and film photography to capture moments of casual intimacy and compassion in the world. Exploring themes of love and connection at any place that

pushes strangers to stop and talk to each other. Jaime will continue his studies and practice of film and photography at UCI.

JEREMY GUADALUPE is a philosophy student who is fascinated by concepts of death, love, and happiness. Through studying medical ethics, moral ethics, and metaphysics at UCI, Jeremy's perceptions of death had changed. He saw that death could be just as compassionate and gentle as it can be cruel and devastating. When writing "Saint Vanta, Dearly Departures, and Partying Like There's No Tomorrow", Jeremy hoped to capture feelings of unexpected joy and comfort despite great loss. Jeremy hopes to one day become a successful writer as well as a great cook, the President of the United States, a professor, a cafe owner, and a lawyer.

KAIA LOVE KING-HALL is an interdisciplinary artist, curator, and student. She is currently working towards her BA in Art at UCI. Taking form through painting, sculpture, video, and drawing, King-Hall's work is inspired by the struggles and perks that come with being a woman, such as objectification, harassment, chivalrous gestures, and the potency of feminine sexuality.

KASPER OWEN is a fiction writer and literary journalist whose first short story Parallel Lines was published in 2024 by The Wall literary journal. Obsessed with the macabre since childhood, Kasper uses the medium of fiction to shed light on the weird, morbid, and uncomfortable truths of the human condition in all its diversity. A self described "video camera firmly trained on the unspoken", their work likes to ask the question "Will you look away, or will you keep watching?"

KATY NGUYEN is a graduating Sociology student with an English minor. She enjoys literary fiction, creative nonfiction, and music journalism. Otherwise, cultural sociology and humor studies are her academic interests. Katy is an overthinker; it brings her relief to put her thoughts onto the page. After graduation, she hopes to continue growing as a writer and person. In her spare time, Katy likes birding, going to the movies, and catching up with friends. This is her first publication.

KAYLEN CHANG is a third-year undergraduate majoring in French and English at UC Irvine.

KIERA LLOYD is an Orange County based artist who grew up in the Central Calley. She has always loved creating and crafting from a young age, when her painter grandmother first inspired her. She is recently interested in ceramics and works as the ceramic lab technician for a studio where she mixes glazes and loads kilns. This has taught her more about the nuance processes of working with raw materials which make up clay and ceramic glazes. Kiera is an art student at the University of California, Irvine and the current conceptual interests which inform her work are processes of change and growth.

NATALIA VILLARREAL is a graduating English major and Creative Writing minor at UC Irvine. She is a first-generation Latina who grew up between the San Diego-Tijuana Border. Currently working in the PR and Communications field, Natalia wants to continue writing post-grad and wishes to pursue an MFA in Creative Writing in the future. Her goal in life is to write as much as she can, from a completed novel to a screenplay to a poetry collection, she wants to do it all. One of her biggest goals for the future to work on writing a screenplay and compose its soundtrack. Natalia wants to continue working on vulnerable pieces that emit a unique experience that create conversations.

NATHANIEL EDU is from the Inland Empire. He's graduating from UCI in the Spring of 2025. He had to take a fifth year because he was goofing off. "When fish move through water, however they move, there is no end to the water. When birds fly through the sky, however they fly, there is no end to the sky. At the same time, fish and birds have never, since antiquity, left the water or the sky. Simply, when activity is great, usage is great, and when necessity is small, usage is small. Acting in this state, none fails to realize its limitations at every moment, and none fails to somersault freely at every place; if a bird leaves the sky it will die at once, and if a fish leaves the water it will die at once...This being so, a bird or fish that aimed to move through the water or sky [only] after getting to the bottom of water or utterly penetrating the sky, could never find its way or find its place

in the water or in the sky..." Dogen trans. By Gudo Nishijima and Chodo Cross. Pretty good, huh?

OSCAR ORTIZ is a fourth-year Film and Media Studies major with aspirations of becoming a film director and director of photography. Born and raised in the Coachella Valley, Oscar spent much of his childhood writing stories inspired by everyday life and the movies he loved. With a lot of time to imagine while his parents worked, he developed ideas he hopes will one day become films. Though he never had the full opportunity to express his ideas in writing before, he is excited to finally share a story he has been wanting to tell for a long time.

PATRICIA LOUISE RACELIS is 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 MEADOWS is a second-year student at the University of California, Irvine, majoring in Game Design and Interactive Media with a Creative Writing minor. He considers himself to be a creative person and likes to express himself through music, visual art, and writing. He hopes to employ one or more of these interests in any future career, hopefully in the games industry after getting his degree.

RYAN TRANG is a fourth year English major. He loves attempting to understand language and its many complexities through his poetry. He enjoys gaming in his free time (if he had any time to begin with).

SERGIO IÑIGUEZ is a fourth-year senior artist who finds that observation is a great way to inspire his work. Observing intently has taught him how to improve and advance his job over time. It all began in his dad's mechanic shop, where he would sit and observe how his dad moved and how tools fit in his hands instead of drawing. Those nuances were his teachings. Observing how individuals engage with their surroundings influenced his perspective on art. He understood that observation is a means of innovation, not merely a means of looking. Nowadays, the main focus of his work is to take the mundane and

transform it into something fresh. He incorporates whatever he sees into the process.

SOPHIA BRANDT is a first-year English and creative writing student at UC Irvine. When she's not writing fiction, poetry, or research papers with run-on sentences, you can find her teaching dance classes, giving tours of her college campus, or trying new snacks from Trader Joes. Her work can be found in Flare Journal, Body Without Organs, The Underground, and more.

WILLIAM AUGUSTUS MILLER focuses mainly on oil paintings and drawing. He is interested in all things painting, figurative work, observation, surface treatment, the painting as an object, perspective, working from drawings, and committing to a painting. He is a diehard painting and art history nerd, he is very interested in art history and how that plays in his work.

FICTION BY Kaylen Chang / Nathaniel Edu  
/ Jeremy Guadalupe / Camille Le / Katy Nguyen /  
Oscar Ortiz / Kasper Owen / Patricia Louise Racelis  
/ Natalia Villarreal POETRY BY  
Sophia Brandt / Ian Erickson / Hailey  
Hoang / Ryan Meadows / Patricia  
Louise Racelis / Brianna Smith / Ryan Trang  
/ Elaine Vinh ART BY Jaime Alba / Sergio  
Iñiguez / Kaia Love King-Hall / Kiera Lloyd /  
William Augustus Miller COVER BY Kiera Lloyd



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