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Greenleaf Review


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Spring 2023

2023 Greenleaf Review (no. 36)

Sigma Tau Delta

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THE GREENLEAF REVIEW

ISSUE 36 | SPRING 2023

The Greenleaf Review is edited and published by Whittier College students to reflect the wide variety of voices and experiences comprising our dynamic community.

We hope this unwavering representation of who we are can help guide us through these challenging times and contribute to the experiment of openness, inclusion, and leadership that is Whittier College at its best.

Welcome to the “Born Again” issue, which we hope reflects this time of renewal and growth.



LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

Our journey would not be possible without the hard work and extraordinary dedication of every member in *The Greenleaf Review* 313 English class. Our team worked day in and day out to cultivate this beautiful collection. Creating a 36th edition to the *Review* is no easy feat, but the devotion of our staff has paid off. We would also like to thank our partner, Sigma Tau Delta, the English Department, and the Associated Students of Whittier College for their essential contributions to the creation of this literary journal.

Now, it's time to share it with the rest of the Whittier College community, especially our contributors, whose immense creativity and talent made *The Greenleaf Review* possible. Change is the only constant in this world, and sometimes it's painful, but with it comes reflection. This year, we wanted to give students a chance to look back on their lives up to this moment. To document all the good, the bad, the smiles, the laughter, and the tears that turned us into the people we are today. We wanted to give us the chance to rise out of the ashes of the people we used to be. Thank you, all of you, for allowing us to showcase your ever-changing selves.

Finally, we would like to express our appreciation for Professor Joe Donnelly. We couldn't have made this without your knowledge, guidance, and insane stories. We hope you have successfully been appeased.

Emily Henderson, Editor-in-Chief
Jayson Smith, Managing Editor

LETTER ON BEHALF OF SIGMA TAU DELTA

Here at *The Greenleaf Review*, we have felt the strain of the past few years. We've looked at the ashes of the lives we once had, and the people we once were. From it, a phoenix was born, pointing us towards the future we are destined for. In this edition, you will find stories about transitions and rebirths; chronicles of the past, present, and future. To say the creative minds that make up Whittier College delivered is an understatement.

We would like to extend a thank you to everyone in the English 313 class for being such hard-working idea machines. Our Art and Design staff came in with designs that were bang-on with the theme: each member presenting beautiful original works that may have found their home between these pages, or anywhere else in the course. The committees that went through the difficult selection process with graceful maturity and thoughtfulness. And finally, Emily Henderson and Jayson Smith, who guided us through the process and kept us tight and together. This *Review* is a product of many hands, many minds, and many bright futures.

Thank you to everyone who had the courage to submit their work. We appreciate each and every one of you. To our readers, we hope you have a great journey taking in the creativity the students of Whittier College have to offer.

Abigail Padilla, Sigma Tau Delta President
Angélica Escobar, Sigma Tau Delta Treasurer

“I can’t go back to yesterday,
because I was a different person then.”

- Lewis Carroll



AWARD WINNERS

PROSE

First Place – “An Open Letter To A Girl I Once Loved”
By Meylina Tran

Second Place – “Walk the Night”
By Alexandria Amaya

POETRY

First Place – “Mujer de Dos Lenguas”
By Alejandra Ortega

Second Place – “The Tire Swing”
By Madalynn Wible

ART

First Place – “The Tattooer”
By Julia Centeno

Second Place – “On a Hillside Where You’ve Never Been”
By Aislinn Burley

PHOTOGRAPHY

First Place – “La Catrina”
By Abel Diaz

Second Place – “Die. Tomato. Corona.”
By Hailey Garcia

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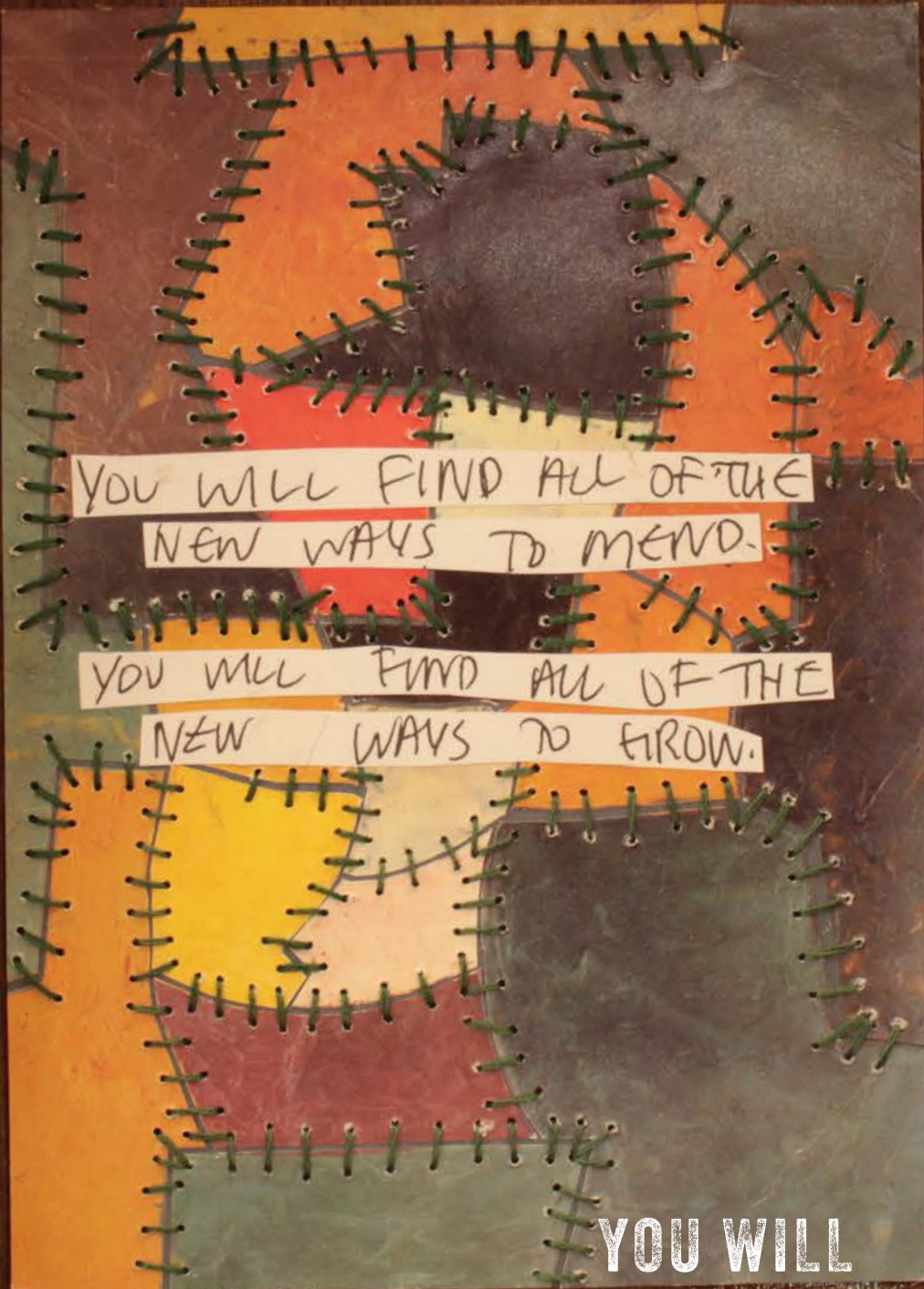
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YOU WILL

SOPHIE FUDIM

TWICE BORN

ISABELLE BROOKSHIRE

If I am the moon and the stars I am broken but healed, perpetually.
I am dawn, creeping, kissing, waking into the sky.
I am midnight, aching, reaching, revealing star-hunter. A bare
whisper loves my dichotomy

And:

I am twice-born,
Rising from ashes,
Burning as light
Struck and sparked like matches.

HOW TO BE STRONG

ELLIS B. WALKER V

Content includes references to illness, grief, death, racism, childbirth.

For my ancestors with love.

It was May 9th, 2004: Mother's Day. As per usual, that Southern spring day was an unbearably hot one and I seemed to be the only one who didn't really care about that. Of course, things were much different back then and I was so unaware about what was going on around me that I could've damn near called my life simplistic. To an extent, it probably was.

I was still calling that humble house at the end of the Georgia cul-de-sac my home. The rose bushes in the front yard were healthy and well-taken care of, even in the presence of a heavy heat that was almost as oppressive as the white men who redlined the area long ago. The dark blue (almost coulda sworn that mug was black) roof was still intact and the bricks were a pale reddish-brown color, almost pink. Those were the times when my mom would braid my hair, when she would have me grab a pillow from my room so my butt wouldn't get sore from the harsh texture of the carpet. I miss the feel of her thumbs coating my scalp with thick, translucent hair grease, usually the Softee brand. She would take my hair - the kinks, curls, and coils that were stuck in between the teeth of her giant comb - and place it in a small cup to be burned into ashes and tossed into the grass. Mom would explain to me that our ancestors, whose names we might never know, would do the same thing. Back then, my mom would cut the grass on a Sunday (we wasn't going to church yet), wiping beads of sweat from her wild eyebrows. I used to watch her, even then in my young

age reminiscing about the good old days. Back when the family was still together, I would follow her at a distance with that off-white toy lawnmower - dust now collecting on top of its plastic surface - contemplating the fact that I was considered too young to actually help her do yard work. That might've been part of the reason why I was called an old soul for most of my childhood (what kinda kid looks back on life?), but I like to think that my ancestors had rubbed off on me without my permission.

Regardless, that Sunday was the day that the ritual had been broken for my mom and I because, quite frankly, we had had more important things to tend to. It was Mother's Day, after all, and we had set off for Lake City a couple of days before. Lake City, South Carolina was an approximately two-hour drive from our home and each year our large family would embark on a deliberate journey to that small country town to spend the entire weekend with our matriarch, a dark-skinned woman with Coke-bottle glasses, a sweet-sounding voice, and a smile that I had inherited. The majority of our large family called her Big Ma or Dee or Mama or Mother Fulmore, but I refused to call her any of those things. Despite the fact that her firstborn child was the one who gave birth to my mother, I have, even to this day, called her Grandma.

In modern times, I've heard it be labeled with the term "gynocracy," but however you decide to describe it, traditional indigenous American society was woman-centered. One can argue that without female leaders, entire families would have crumbled to bits. Women

were the ones who passed down the family name after marriage, not men. Women were the ones who taught the children, who shared important tribal knowledge with the younger generations. Women were the ones you would call on if you needed guidance, the ones who were spiritually inclined and passed down this otherworldly expertise onto their children. Who else is best suited to take care of the community? Why would you expect a man to lead spiritual rituals when women are the closest to the Creator? Why would a Native woman - whether Blackfoot (allegedly) or Cherokee - be subservient to a man in her own home, the home that she built herself? What power could a man have that was not granted to him by his mother or his wife? When the white men set foot on our lands, where did their audacity come from, stripping women from their rightful place? Does nature not sustain us all like a mother cares for her child? It is unwise to bite the hand that feeds you, of course. But who am I but a man that paid close attention to his ancestors? Too many of us don't. Sometimes, I feel like I'm the only one who still does.

When we had first arrived at Grandma's house - that gray house next to the wheat field - I was trying my hardest not to bounce out of my car seat. I had picked out the Mother's Day cards myself this time, writing my remixed Arabic name - a name I will never go by again - in big letters so that my elders would be able to read them. All of Grandma's living children were present and accounted for except for one (but Aunt Betty never leaves her house no way). Their cars were parked all throughout the yard like filthy shreds of trash scattered across a New York City subway stop or like bits and pieces of a broken heart that didn't even know it was shattered yet. I had run excitedly up to the house almost as soon as my mom parked her 2001 Honda CRV, ignoring the warnings from my other relatives to watch out for snakes. I knew that Grandma would have been inside like she always was, cooking up some delicious food for us to eat, but I was on the hunt for her daughter, my grandmother. To

me, her name is Nina and - despite the fact that my Papa's white Lincoln Town Car was parked at the left side of the house - she was nowhere to be found. My mom's cousin told us that my grandmother had suddenly felt like baking a sweet potato pie, saying that she went to the Piggly Wiggly right off of Ron McNair Boulevard to buy some ingredients. Mom decided that we should go and surprise her (that and she wanted to buy some Newport) so the two of us got back in the truck and set off to find her while Grandma stayed behind in her kitchen, pink apron dirtied with grease and flour, waiting for her babies to return.

The time was 2353, 11:53 pm for those who are unfamiliar with "military time." Seven minutes before the 7th of July, I dramatically entered the world and was quickly rolled into the NICU to make sure that my under-developed lungs could properly sustain breath. My parents were prepping for the arrival of a healthy newborn. All of them - biological and not - were serving in the United States Army at the time. Apparently, when you fall in love with your (allegedly) lesbian best friend who desperately wants to have a baby, you help her out by impregnating her under an arrangement that will be broken not too long after the child's birth - but that's a story for another time. As you might have guessed, my mom - who, at the time, was called SGT Walker - was the best friend in question, eager to have a child after a series of failed inseminations and miscarriages, most of which I found out about only after she died. Her partner, AKA my other parent, was SPC3 Bachand, a young woman who at the time couldn't care less about having a baby. Her prerogative was "if that's what you want to do, I can't stop you from doing it," usually accompanied by a shoulder shrug and a chuckle doused in anxiety and discomfort - at least that's what she normally does when she tells this story. With that being said, when the two split up, Shelly (that's what I call her) left for Massachusetts, interacting with her now ex-partner as if they had gone through a very messy divorce.

Wanda Walker - the woman I call Mom - was Afro-Indigenous, proud of both her African and Native American heritage. Michelle Bachand - my other mom - is a white woman who, if you questioned her about it, might assure you that she's not Jewish or Italian in a way that her dark hair might have implied to some people (ie. my grandmother initially) but is instead French Canadian. Being raised by both of them, mostly in separate homes, was an interesting time while it lasted, but I digress.

El Paso, Texas, is usually mentioned in news headlines in regards to illegal immigration, which is hilarious because back then, my mom would hop into that red Thunderbird - the same car that my parents drove me home in - and take the "scenic route," the backroads, into Ciudad Juarez on Sundays to buy beer. She took that exact same journey about a week or two before she found out that she was pregnant with me, leaving the apartment complex on Alabama Avenue and driving past the hospital that I would eventually be born in. I honestly don't remember Mom saying anything about her taking another pilgrimage after that, but the border might have actually been militarized by the time she got those orders from Uncle Sam that moved us to Georgia six months after.

For the most part, I was developing well, I suppose. My mom didn't really complain about her pregnancy too much - at least not from what she told me. She craved pretzels and cheese every single day and had to have it or else she would throw up. I guess that might've been the most annoying aspect of her pregnancy besides the stretch marks, gas, and swollen feet. The most terrifying part was probably my birth. Imagine going to the bathroom to pee and blood gushes out of you profusely like Niagara Falls, your partner panicking and screaming at a 911 operator.

Michelle was never the best at handling medical emergencies, so when she inevitably hands you the phone, despite the fact that you're dizzy and scared shitless, you give the operator everything she asks for: your address, blood type, your active-duty military status amongst the anxiety that builds in your chest like that one IED your battle buddies

hadn't found until it was too late. Imagine being transported to the hospital on base via ambulance, relief setting in as you lay on a stretcher, only to be quickly turned around because the Army medical staff isn't properly equipped to help you deliver your child after all.

Imagine giving birth to a baby the size of a Nerf football, born a little over two months premature, with underdeveloped lungs filling up so rapidly with fluid that the NICU doctors don't know if the little one will survive the night. Imagine your own mother being so distraught by the news that she prays to God on your behalf, asking for spiritual intervention - for her youngest grandchild to live - in exchange for her personal health and wellbeing. Imagine witnessing a miracle. Your baby somehow survives and was cleared to go home from the hospital just a couple of weeks after birth, growing up into the young man who wrote this anecdote. In an aggressive tone of voice fueled by anxiety, your mother made your father (technically stepfather, but that don't matter) promise to keep her secret and doesn't tell anyone else what she had done that night, about how she offered her life in exchange for my survival, but once she receives the call that the fluid in the baby's lungs miraculously disappeared, she knows that the Creator heard her and would one day expect her to hold up her end of the bargain. But, of course, when your mother flies in from New Jersey - alone - to hold her newest grandchild, you can't help but wonder why she awkwardly embraces the baby with a smile on her face and pain in her eyes - like she knew something terrible was going to happen, something you didn't.

* * *

Nina had waited until she was weak and frail to tell me what she had done to save my life, her head and hands trembling uncontrollably. Her skin, normally my shade of cool caramel brown, mirrored that of her white great-grandfather, the one who fought in the Confederacy to keep his children as his property. She had just survived a heart attack about

a week prior: one that could have very well killed her if she had stayed at home like she wanted to. A small smile crept upon her face, a solemn one that she normally would only give when she was telling me some bad news - like when someone had passed away. I knew then.

"Nina..."

"Hm? What's wrong?"

"If you wan' me to stay, I'll stay. I ain't gotta go out to California. I can help take care o' ya. I can tell 'em I ain't going. I could call 'dem peoples right now -"

"No."

"No?"

"No. You got schoolin'. I'll be alright here. I got ya Aunt Jackie here and ya Aunt Pattie brings me breakfast in the mornin'."

"But what if -"

"Jackie will call you when you needa come home. Now you 'member what we talked about right?"

"But you never wanted to be in a nursin' home! I told Ma I'd take care of you, I promised! You know COVID going 'round them homes, Nina. You too weak. I don't want you in there. It ain't safe -"

"You sound just like Wanda."

When she mentioned my mother by name, it caught me off guard for a moment, her sad eyes staring directly into mine. It was the same look Nina had given me multiple times before, a look I had only started seeing after May 9th, 2015, the day before Mother's Day: the day my mom - the war veteran turned life insurance agent - ironically died on our living room floor. "Nina..."

"Hush, I on wanna hear that."

"But -"

"I know what I'm doing."

"I can find you a home health aide!"

"Wit' what money? That money there is fo' yo' schoolin.' You thinkin' I spent all that time savin' up all that money for myself?"

Tears rolled down my face. I felt exasperated. Helpless. Scared. Weak. I didn't know if I was angrier at Nina for bargaining with the Lord or God for answering her prayers like that.

"Now you listen here," she commanded, her lips trembling into a stern smile.

"You go back to Massachusetts. You pack up. You finish up them summer classes. You go to California. You get your schoolwork out. And if God calls me home -"

"Imma come back home for Christmas. Imma come see you for Christmas, okay? I ain't going back up north. Imma fly straight to Carolina, okay?"

"Sure, pooch. Sure you will."

The short silence that followed scolded me for holding on to that false hope, to the idea that she would be around that long, and it took everything in me not to scream. When I asked the question, the words forced their way out of my throat in a harsh whisper that hurt my vocal cords, but eventually, I had taken a deep breath and found my voice again. She needed to hear me.

"...you said you wanted a yellow dress right?"

"Huh?"

"A y-yella dress. You wanna be buried in yella."

"You remembered."

"And Imma still get you yo' flowers when I can for Mother's Day! I ain't gon' forget."

"Okay, pooch. I didn't think you woulda done that no time soon."

"Do what, Nina?"

"Forget."

* * *

"Grandma!"

As soon as I saw a flash of light pink, I was bracing myself for a big hug. Nina had to remind her to wash her hands first - unless she wanted to cover me in gravy. Her jet black hair was in a bun and her thick glasses (which now that I think about it, they's about the same as Nina's) were perched on the edge of her nose, as if they were waiting in anticipation for a big event. "Hey, baby," she exclaimed. I remember the wetness of her hands as her arms wrapped around my tiny body, the smell of her almost sickeningly sweet perfume invading my nose; although I normally would have gone into sensory overload from stuff like that, Grandma's entire aura had always

managed to calm me instead.

“I got you a card!”

Both my mom and grandmother hurriedly came over to shush me, scolding me for being so loud, but Grandma shook her head before ending the embrace. “Let de baby talk,” she said. “Eben God knows dat chirren’ are precious.” Too excited to be phased by the interaction, I abruptly jutted out my right arm, a cute little Hallmark card held tight in my grasp as the left arm flapped like a baby bird trying to fly for the first time. Grandma laughed before gesturing for me to sit down with her on the couch, humbly asking me to read it aloud for her; I didn’t know that she was basically illiterate until I got much older, but even if I had known that then, I don’t think that would have stifled the joy that I felt reading that card for her - the one that I handpicked at the store just four days prior. She waited patiently until I was done reading to give me another hug, asking me to read it one more time for her before kissing me on the forehead and turning her body in that worn out sofa to face me. When she finally spoke, her voice - a natural tenor, powerful - was so soft that it was almost a whisper and yet, even with all the commotion going on around us in that full house, I could somehow hear her loud and clear.

“Listen here, ma’ chile’,” she said to me. “You’s a special chile’. You know, you comin’ from a long line of strong women. Ya gramomma a strong one. And ya mama a real strong young lady to be goin’ off an’ fightin’ in dem wars.”

“Are you strong, Grandma?”

“I guess I am, baby, ‘cause God shall don’ blessed me wit de strength to hab me lib long ‘nuff to see you.”

“I wanna be strong just like you, Grandma!”

“Trust me, baby. I know you’s definitely gonna be a strong one. But better den that, you’s smart. You’s so bright. I just know you gon’ go far in dis life. You just might be givin’ a ol’ lady some hope. I’s so proud of you. You don’ touched my heart today and dat’s a blessin’ to me so I know dat de Creator did likewise.”

“Grandma?”

“Yes darlin’?”

“What’s your favorite color?”

She paused before giving an answer. At the time, I thought it was because it might not have been a good question to ask; at that point, I was used to being “curious,” I suppose, about the wrong things at the wrong times. Honestly, now that I’m older and know that she was technically enslaved until the 1960s (Emancipation Proclamation my ASS), I wonder if she had ever given herself the space to enjoy such things.

Finally, my Grandma gave me a big smile. It was at that moment that I realized that her oldest child - my Nina - was just a lighter-skinned version of her; interestingly enough, it wasn’t until after Nina had passed away that I’d realized that my own face mirrored hers. “Yella,” she said. “Yella like de sun.”

That was the last Mother’s Day I got to spend with Grandma. I was the only one who didn’t shed a tear at her funeral, and when her eldest daughter ultimately became the Big Ma of the family, I knew then that life wasn’t as simple as I’d thought.

Our family doesn’t get together for Mother’s Day anymore.



LOVEBIRDS (I IMAGINE)

AISLINN BURLEY

STREET SMART

SHELBY SILVA

The Artist Known as M. is Getting Her Close Up

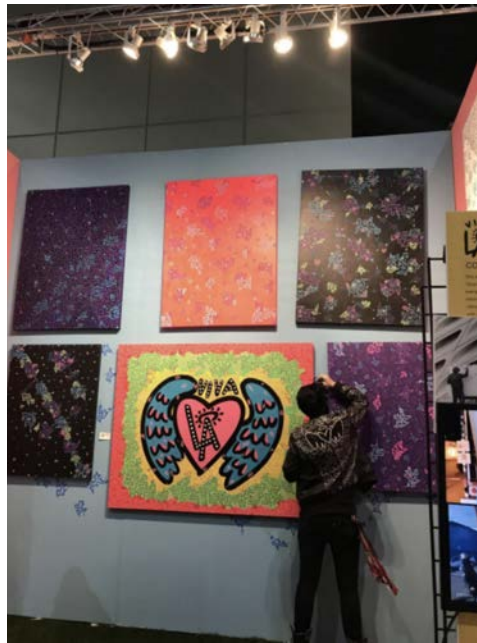
Within the labyrinth of booths surrounded by grotesque sculptures, replicas of ancient pottery, mesmerizing NFTs, silky paintings, and crowds of people speaking different tongues, Viva LA's exhibit at the recent LA Art Show (Booth 203 and Booth 1204) served as a portal into a realm that fuses sacred geometry and art to form a universal language. The LA Art Show exhibited Meghan Hall's artwork at the LA Convention Center from January 19 to January 23, which is regarded as the most comprehensive international contemporary art show in America. On the fourth day of the five-day show on Saturday, M. crouched and twisted her body while drawing on the walls around her artwork with the back of her iconic black leather jacket adorned with the Viva LA HeartWings logo and her unique drawings on full display. From the art on her jacket to the drawings on her black combat boots made with white acrylic paint, Hall seamlessly blended in with the art she created surrounding her.

Hall is first and foremost a street artist who is artistically known as "M." and this is her first big solo show and long-awaited debut into the world of fine art. While she stands inside the Viva LA booth with its pink and blue walls she reveals and laughs, "I started doing it on walls; street art and paintings, but mostly just street art. This is the first time I've been a fine-art type of individual. As you can see, I'm still playing around on the walls because I'm a street artist at my core, so I'm going to kinda bend the rules a little bit." From doodling on the side of a page during class to going out into the city and creating art on the walls and surfaces of the LA streets, M. is excited to finally be creating in the world of fine art by using canvases and is optimistic about the future of her journey with art.

This is the first time I've been a fine-art type of individual. As you can see, I'm still playing around on the walls because I'm a street artist at my core, so I'm going to kinda bend the rules a little bit.

With the support of her sponsor and the co-creators of the brand Viva LA, M. has gained a lot more exposure in the world of fine art at the LA Art Show. M. is the first artist that Viva LA has collaborated with to promote the creative culture of Los Angeles. Additionally, the creators will continue to fuel the creativity that resides and is born in Los Angeles by promoting a sense of unity for people who love Los

Angeles. Andre Miripolsky, co-creator of Viva LA and pop artist based in Los Angeles, pointed at the vibrant rainbow-colored canvas in the center of the wall and explained, "I did the Viva LA logo and color and she did the rest of the hieroglyphics. The combination is LA! It has the vibe."



M. drawing around her artwork at the LA Art Show on January 22.

Located on Viva LA's second Co-LAB showcase in Booth 1204, co creator, Christian Mitman, describes M.'s artwork in response to a young man who asked him what the shapes and symbols meant: "Math is underneath anything across the world, and so M. picks up on the energy of specific locations and translates those vibrations into her automatic writing style."

Whether her canvas is a piece of clothing, a pair of shoes, bags, or even longboards, M.'s creativity

oozes out of her hands. Mitman comments, "She's always wearing her art. She draws on everything. My sports coats are covered in her art. We actually launched a line of clothing with her that we launched on Christmas." He describes M. as an artist devoted to her craft: "M. is extremely focused. I have never met an artist who is more hardworking and with a more intense follow up strategy. I love that because I'm a workhorse, too. I appreciate someone who is like that. She's very creative and she knows that it's 99% hard work and doing the grind over and over again."

M.'s family and friends are very supportive of her and her work as well. She brings up that her mom has been calling her every day telling her that she is praying and sending her love. She proudly says with a smile, "My family is awesome."

Despite never taking an art class before, M. is proudly a self-taught artist and has been consistently creating art in a unique style that incorporates the use of symbols and the relationship between straight lines and curves. Right around when she was six or seven, she started coming up with these symbols when she was doodling in class on the side of the pages. Initially, she did not think much of it, but then she started realizing that she was actually saying something.

She meditated on the revelation and learned that her symbols seemed to be informed by concepts of Sacred Geometry. Essentially, her art is a reflection of the energetic field that surrounded her. As soon as she realized that she was channeling through a language that comes from a bigger source like consciousness, she started looking into sacred geometry and discovered that the Tree of Life and other symbols are part of the creation of the universe.

Even before she knew that what she was subconsciously creating would become her artistic voice, she has always been a big fan of line artists, such as Keith Haring. She talks about the importance of line artists, "There's a lot of us out here and we haven't really made a name for ourselves yet ... but I really want to hone into all of the different line artists because ultimately, they're channeling something too. They are saying something in their lines and in their language. I'm kind of curious to dig into what that means as I continue on with the journey." The street art she did in her hometown in Virginia was very limited, but once she moved to Los Angeles, she was able to be free and more productive. Los Angeles is M.'s canvas. The streets inspire her to capture the soul of a specific time and space.

Although M. can make art by herself, she loves the energy of being and creating art in public. She loves when her art resonates with people at such a high-level consciousness that they are compelled to come up and talk to her about it. That is when she knows she is on the right track. For instance, a Korean couple, a few older Armenian men, and a Hispanic family were just a few of the people who were drawn to the magnetic pull that M.'s art has during the LA Art Show.

She explains further, "I feel like when people see art, it resonates with you, and it makes you feel good, and now you've put that rippling effect on that person, and they're going to go and make people feel good. If we can do that and vibrate there, we'll get better than what it has been because it's pretty rough right now..." Ultimately, she says her artwork can activate something within the viewers' DNA, which helps them to understand themselves and the universe.

"I feel like when people see art, it resonates with you, and it makes you feel good, and now you've put that rippling effect on that person, and they're going to go and make people feel good."

Originally, Mitman, co-creator of Viva LA, and M. wanted to find a location where M. could create her series in view of the public, such as creating a studio in one of the many vacant storefronts on Hollywood Boulevard, where passersby could watch M. painting, like an artist in a fishbowl. When they could not convince a single building owner of the value of turning their empty unused space into a public art event for just one month, Mitman decided that he would create a mobile studio just for M. in the back of a 26 feet long truck clad in artwork from Viva LA's "Celebrate LA" exhibition from earlier this year, of which M. was one of the featured artists. Between December 5, 2021, to January 5, 2022, M. and Mitman took an exhilarating excursion all over Los Angeles to create artworks that are directly inspired by people, nature, and the energy present.



M. and Christian Mitman at Santa Monica Beach in front of the mobile art studio. Image courtesy of Christopher Mortenson.

Over the course of 30 days, M. created 30 stimulating artworks at 30 iconic LA locations that come from the mobile art studio project called "Channeling LA" and several of those pieces were present at the LA Art Show. Locations ranged from the Urban Lights at LACMA and The Broad to the parking lots of Venice Beach and graffiti-saturated Santee Alley under the I-10 freeway in Downtown LA (DTLA). M. and Mitman packed their schedule for each of the 30 days

to make sure they met their production goals.

For example, on New Year's Eve, they went to three different locations in a single day. Around sunset, they went up some stairs that led to a sacred temple in a secret garden, located somewhere in the Hollywood mountains, where M. created the piece called "Secret Garden". Afterwards, M. created artwork on the deck of a Hollywood Hills house, which was owned by 1970s band, the Bee Gees, with a 360° view of Los Angeles, at night, in all its glory. Then, at midnight, with fireworks going off, painting the skies with illuminating colors, they blasted the mobile studio with light, and drove down Sunset Boulevard with the back open, so everyone could see M. creating a "Viva LA" painting inside.

While M. was creating art in specific locations, such as Santa Monica Beach, she wanted to feel what she calls "zero point", which is when you are in the zone, in the moment, and you are not worried about anything. She points at one of the small screens on the pink wall that show small snippets of her in action at Santa Monica Beach, "I knew I would get to my zero point if I could be hitting right where the water is hitting the sand. So, to be sitting there feeling that and drawing was just BOOM!"

As M.'s cinematographer and production manager throughout the expedition, Mitman made sure to support her in any way possible, and recalled their time at Santa Monica Beach. "I was in the surf in Santa Monica holding the canvas from the waves, so that the waves didn't take it away, and she was painting there. I'm behind the canvas holding it, and she's in the water painting and the waves are coming up to our thighs and then our waist and finally we had to move out because the canvas was going to go underwater."

I was in the surf in Santa Monica holding the canvas from the waves, so that the waves didn't take it away, and she was painting there.

M. reveals her favorite site from those thirty days. "On Christmas morning, I met Christian at 5 a.m., and we rolled up to Runyon Canyon, and it had been raining. The rain stopped and a circle of clouds started culminating over my head while I was drawing with hummingbirds flying over, and I was just like 'OH MY GOSH!' I'll never forget it ever because it was so magical. Then, on Christmas evening during magic hour, we rode the truck up to the Griffith Observatory and I did the light pink one when the sun was setting with cotton candy skies. Later, when it got dark, I popped the canvas right in front of the Astronomer's Monument and I was feeling all of it with the stars above me. So, Christmas, the whole day felt like an out-of-body experience the whole time."

Mitman recalls that same morning where M. created the piece, "Blue Canyon." "When we were walking toward the Runyon Canyon site, this old couple in their early 80s or late 70s saw us carrying the canvas and they asked, 'Oh what are you doing?' I said, 'She's doing a painting at the top of Runyon Canyon.' and they were like, 'Oh that sounds nice.' I think they

thought she was going to do a landscape or something and we saw them like half an hour later walking down, and they are looking at the painting with sacred geometry, and the woman turns to her husband and goes, 'You know, I thought I have seen everything.'"

In between laughs, he says, "It was hilarious. It was actually really cute."

M. believes that her art can serve a higher purpose, such as for healing, because she has used her art for animal therapy, specifically with horses. M. brushes her short, jet-black hair with her fingers and explains, "You know how healers can heal? It's like that flow, but I'm saying it in symbols."

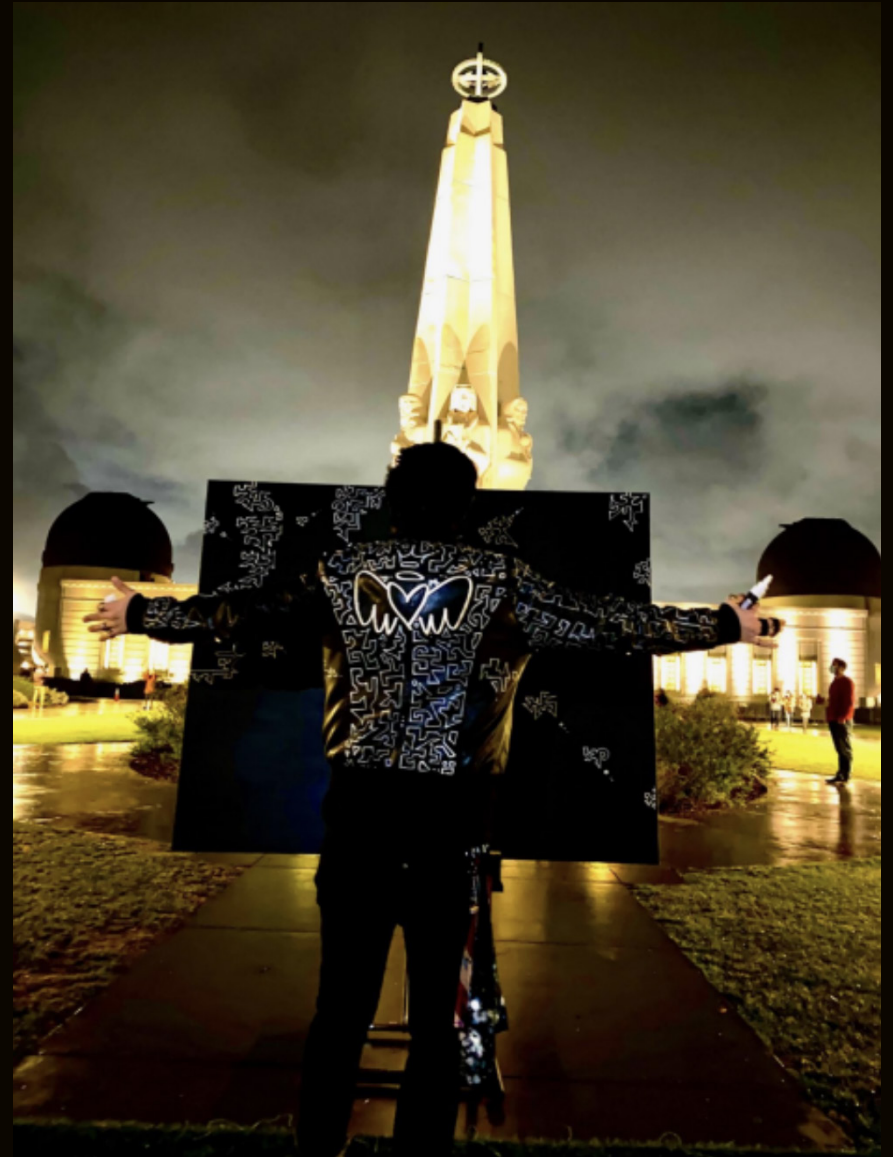
She loves going to sacred places and hitting locations that resonate with her or that need healing. She did exactly that for thirty days, and hopes she can work with Viva LA again because she says their mission is on point. M. shares that she wants to take this to a global level to create healing, powerful art, even statues, or whatever it might be as she evolves with her craft.

In Booth 203, she profoundly declares her intentions and her goals, "I want healing for Mother Gaia. I want the highest timeline for all of humanity. I want us all to be able to heal and do anything that I could do to be of service... I know it's great to make money here and there because we want to be artists full time and then we don't have to work two or three other jobs. However, when we focus on our mission of being artists and healing and utilizing that for the greater good of humanity, the money comes... When you get there, the universe provides. That's kind of where I'm at in my journey and I'm learning every day."

She points at the artwork from the co-LAB around her and explains, "This is a culmination of some of that learning in LA. So once I'm done with the LA Art Show, I really want to do this on all of Mother Gaia's Chakra Systems like Mount Shasta and that would require my art selling to do that, but I feel confident in my work and I feel I'll be able to do it."



M. creating the piece called "Blue Canyon" on Christmas morning at Runyon Canyon. Image courtesy of Christian Mitman.



M. in front of the Astronomer's Monument at Griffith Observatory creating "The Astronomers".

SANTA MONICA

ABEL DIAZ



GIRLHOOD

MEYLINA TRAN



BEASTS ANGÉLICA ESCOBAR

My roots run deep.
Deeper than the oceans my ancestors drowned in,
And longer than the branching rivers they crossed.
They are embedded into my fair flesh,
Reminding me that I am a traitor,
Backstabber,
La Malinche.
They grow curled like the fruit on trees,
Spirals of iron wire
That don't let me in,
Cueing that I still don't belong.
Unkept,
Unprofessional,
A chupacabra.
Enticing,
And exotic as a tiger,
But I am still told
I am a beast.



EADEN JULIA CENTENO

CYCLES

RHE NAE LEACH

I saw him as I saw the world, a living organism that rotates around the sun, graciously granting people the opportunity to love. He gave me the delusional opportunity to love him, and I did. I realized later that was not what he wanted. His world never intended for me to be loved. It all started with a DM.

“Hey.”

Such a simple word, but to me it contained so much. An introduction with the potential to change a person’s life, if you allow it to.

“Heyyy,” I replied.

“I’ve seen you around school. I wanted to tell you that you were very pretty.” These were words that you never say to an adolescent girl with no desire for self-worth.

“Aww thank you, you too!!”

That’s it. That’s all that you need to know because those were the only words that I think he actually meant.

Now, it’s a Sunday and I’m walking up to his door, waiting for my brother to drive away before ringing the doorbell.

“Hey,” he said before I could even knock on his door. It’s the same word as before. The word with the potential to change everything.

“He-”

“You should come in,” he interrupted me, giving me the feeling that he didn’t even care for me to speak.

As I walk in, I’m fascinated by his house’s elegance. By characteristics I had never got from him.

“Your house is so beautiful.”

“Yeah, my folks really put a lot of work into the interior, I guess,” he replied as

he slowly led me up the stairs. As I walk into his room, I let out a little giggle.

“What?”

“Nothing. It’s just that your room looks nothing like other parts of the house. I guess it fits your personality more.”

“Yeah, I express myself in my own way,” he says while slowly leading me to the bed. “Cool.”

We started out watching a movie and cuddling, but then I felt a hand on my thigh. I had been preparing for that moment. My first time ever being touched like this by a man, but it’s a move I’ve heard about so many times from my friends gossiping:

Yeah, he put his hand on my thigh, and I asked him to move it. They do this to check where you are with the link up, but I’m not that type of girl, you know?

I’m not that type of girl either, so I just followed in my friend’s footsteps and told him to move it. She must have left something out because he didn’t move his hand. Instead, he began squeezing my upper thigh. Maybe I said it too low, and he didn’t hear me.

“Hey, can you move your hand?” I repeated louder and more assertively.

“Come on, don’t be like that.”

“Be like what!?”

“You’re really pretty.”

He said it again because clearly, he knows exactly what an insecure girl likes to hear. We began to make out, which was fine; it was just the inviting hand on my thigh that made me uncomfortable. I tried to like it. I tried to make myself feel like it was what I wanted, but I couldn’t. I wasn’t ready to be touched like that.

“Okay, stop.”

“Why?”

“Because... just stop!”

I hate that I couldn’t express myself. That I couldn’t think of just one out of fifty ways I could have said no.

“Just relax.”

So, I did. I relaxed my neck and I guess that is his way of thinking that he could push my head down.

“What are you doing?”

“Just suck on it for me, just for a little.”

“I didn’t come here for that.”

“Then what did you come here for?”

I paused because I didn’t have an answer. I didn’t know what I came over for. I just wanted to try something I never had before. But I knew this is not what I wanted. I wasn’t ready for this. I’d thought about it, but I wasn’t ready. That I knew: I am not ready. And yet, instead of saying that, this was what came out of my mouth:

“I don’t know.”

“Just try it then. You’ll never know if you’ll like it.”

“I don’t think I want to.”

“How do you know if you don’t try it?”

So, I did it. I didn’t say yes, but I didn’t say no. Why didn’t I say no? What is wrong with me? I thought I had made it clear, but maybe I hadn’t. The last thing I remember is him lying on my chest while my heart beat too fast. Why didn’t I say no?

“Do you want to go smoke a blunt?”

“Oh, I don’t smoke.”

“Today is a day full of firsts.”

The most depressing part about college is that it is supposed to be lonely. It is a place where you learn how to be alone. You walk to class alone; you eat in the cafeteria alone. Everybody even fights to get the single dorm rooms. I have had to learn to be alone, too. To sit and listen to the quiet swooshing of my half-missing dorm blinds covering my window. It is the only sound that gives me comfort and peace

as I try to write a paper that I could write in ten sentences and still get the point across. Now, I am staring at a glowing screen with double-spaced paragraphs about the history of an irrelevant white man that probably didn’t participate in one Civil Rights march. But they say he was an “intellectual.” Then I heard a knock.

“Knock, Knock!”

“Who is it?”

“The only person who would knock on your door, silly,” she says with a slight laugh.

As I put my computer down to open the door, I took a deep breath to calm my nerves before turning the knob. Which was redundant, because I held my breath as the door opened.

“Come here, I’ve missed you.”

The right response would have been to reply, I missed you too. But I am mesmerized by her eyes. They do it to me every time, glowing in the darkness of my melancholy room. She knows they do, too, because of the way her eyes stare right back into mine.

“Hey, I missed you too,” she replied to herself in a very shallow tone, as best friends do. “Why are you in the dark? Get some light in here, I want to see your beautiful face.” A comment that only an insecure girl would find so flattering.

I smiled too hard at her calling me beautiful. Her words are too dangerous. “I’ll open the blinds and you sit down; I need the light to roll anyway.”

She sat on my bed, which is an enticing spot for her to sit. I sat down right next to her as I reached inside of my desk drawer to grab my rolling tray and get to work.

“I’m still amazed you can roll like that. If you weren’t entertaining every guy in the school, you could pull every female with this party trick.” What does she want me to say?

After smoking half a blunt in a dorm room that has the smoke detector covered with a reusable trash bag, we sit and chill. Her eyes are low and bloodshot red, but they still sparkle in the darkness a little. I can barely

look at her eyes. I can't lie to something so pure.

"Can I kiss you?"

"Of course, we're all we have when we're horny and high." Another reply with that smile on her face.

So, I kissed her. And then I kissed her again.

She stops me in the middle of a dream come true and says, "We're only gonna do this when we're high, right?" with the same smile on her face. This time, it wasn't the same type of dangerous feeling as before. This felt like a nightmare I couldn't wake up from.

Nights where the elevation is high and the emotions are low. The sky is dark, but foggy, so it creates this bubble of warm air in the atmosphere. What a perfect night it is to drown my sorrows in the bottom of a bottle, take tequila shots, and have strangers buy me mixed drinks that taste like mango. Prepared for the night by downing a hamburger and water, so if the night does go south, it won't be too bad.

My friends always show up fashionably late because they know I'm never ready on time. I put on my shoes, get in the car, and say my greetings while I simultaneously put two bottles of Smirnoff in between my legs. Just for the pregame of course, just to start the night off well. My friend zooms down the boulevard into a neighborhood that I only have seen in the dark, surprisingly, heading towards my friend's house that I've never seen in the day.

As we pull into the driveway, we stay in the car for a minute because we have to rush to the door as fast as we can together. This neighborhood is dangerous at night, especially for people who wear a body like me. As we approached the door, I heard music getting louder in the silence and someone erratically opened the door. A face appears that is so familiar, but a face I have only seen when drunk. Serotonin runs through my bloodstream before the alcohol gets a chance to, and I hug all the people I only see under dim lights.

I take my first shot of tequila and lick the back of my hand covered in salt. I throw

back three more to the point the liquor begins tasting like water, and the friendly uninvited arm making its way around my waist starts to feel like a warming hug. I slapped his hand away after and, instead, he thought it was okay to hold it.

"What are you doing...did you not get the hint?" yelling at him while slinging my hand from being interlocked with his.

"Oh, but leaning on me to stand up was okay?"

Stumbling over my words and stumbling over the counter, "Well I-I said no!"

I wish I could remember the rest of what he said, but this is the point where I began to black out. I heard ringing in my ears and the shot glass in front of me began to blur. The guy that I was arguing with caught me and the rest is history.

I wake up the next day in my bed to a seven in the morning alarm with a note in my bed.

Dear bestie,

I know you weren't going to remember last night, so I decided to leave you a note lol. You blacked out at the party after taking like ten shots. YOU WERE SO LIT GIRLY! Anyways...but I found you passed out and took you home girl, and then put you in bed. Call me when you're awake to make sure you're good.

Love, Mandy

I swear up and down I had three shots, I don't remember the other seven. What did I drink, and who gave it to me? Why do I do this to myself? Why do I love the feeling of being on edge? Instead of figuring this out, I'm gonna decide to do a little wake and bake instead, something to take the hangover away. I go in my stash drawer and get my lucky bag, head out to the concrete porch where I can see the morning caste, and the sounds of cars honking with people trying to get to work on time.

Taking the first hit of my pre-roll and getting a nostalgic feeling from smelling the mixture of the scent of marijuana and my neighbor's trash can is not the best smell, but it is one I rely on every day to get through.

As I cough and the oxygen neglects to flow to my brain, my highness gets stronger, so that my thoughts and my limbs grow weaker. I got what I needed, an excuse to forget my night of the fatal brink of alcohol poisoning.

The sky is filled with a baby blue color and white clouds, the atmosphere is still filled with warmth, but a humid warmth, a warmth that my hair isn't too fond of, so it is a warmth that leads to me staying in on a Sunday afternoon. Hearing the children play, like they don't have school tomorrow. Riding their bikes while one of their grandmothers sits outside to watch.

What if I miss it? What if I miss being carefree and playing in the front yard looking for ladybugs? What if I don't want to be numb? After smoking, I watched this movie. The father was talking to his son at the end of the movie. He said something into the camera, making it look like he was making eye-contact with me.

"We rip out so much of ourselves to be cured of things faster, then we go bankrupt by the age of thirty and we have less to offer each time we start with someone new."

The father simultaneously said this with a tear rolling down his face, which instinctively made a tear roll down mine. I didn't wipe the tear, I let it drop on my thigh because my body grew paralyzed. I felt as if my soul was resetting everything that I ever gave to the people that I only saw in dim lights while drunk. Everything I sacrificed while voluntarily giving away my innocence, while involuntarily giving away my body too.

I found out at the age of twenty-six I have nothing left in the tank. Every sip of alcohol has drained my life equally as much as it drains my sorrows. Weed has made me feel like I'm flying when actually, my ankles are changed to cement. The worst part about it is I probably just smoke a joint later to forget about it.

* * *

Ms. Therapist is nice. Ms. Therapist really wants to help. Ms. Therapist hates when I call her Ms. Therapist. I just don't want to call her by her real name because it'll just mesh with my last thirty therapists' names I've had, so what is the point?

I'll skip the beginning of the session, it's the same thing every time. A mixture of 'How are you doing,' 'When's the last time you used,' and 'dId yOu ImPLeMent tHe HeAlThY CoPiNg MeChAnIsMs?,' while sitting in a neutral-color painted room, four different plants sitting in each corner. So, let's just skip to the good part. "Yes, you have a relationship with substances, but have you ever had a conversation with them?"

Even more irritated from confusion, I say under my breath, "What does that even mean?" rolling my eyes in the process.

"It means personify it, imagine every substance you've used was sitting right in front of you, what would you say?"

"I'd say...I would say..."

You changed me as much as opening a window lightens up a room, my room. I was scared of the things that were hiding in the dark. But now...you changed me so much; I don't need you anymore. I bought a chandelier, the light it shines allows me to look at myself differently in the mirror. Yes, I have an addictive personality, and yes, I will probably take anything you give me just out of pure curiosity, but that means I can easily form good habits and start a different cycle, a better cycle. I'll miss the way you've opened my eyes. I always cherish the feeling of that first puff in the morning, but I always hate the feeling of when you wear off. Forgive me for abusing you, and I'll forgive you for almost killing me and disguising it as a good time. We'll let each other go and live with the memories.

But what I really said was, "...I like the way you make me feel."

"That's it?" Ms. Therapist asked.

"Yep...that's it."

WOULD YOU TANNER SALAZAR

“You’d love me if I was an animal?”

A question that I’ve heard too many times.

“Love a beast like I love you is unwise”

“If it was legal, would you still love me?”

I knew the answer, it was three letters,
But should I answer this TikTok question...
Yeah, just an animal of suggestion
Because the wrong answer will upset her.

“Maybe my favorite, a mantis shrimp”

I knew it gave her that love struck smile.

She trapped me in this game for a while.

“Would you marry me if I was that shrimp?”

“Of course I would”, burning hot like love’s flames,

“But you are not a mantis shrimp, are you?”

My mischievous comment killed the game,

I saw her eyes shift and knew I was screwed.

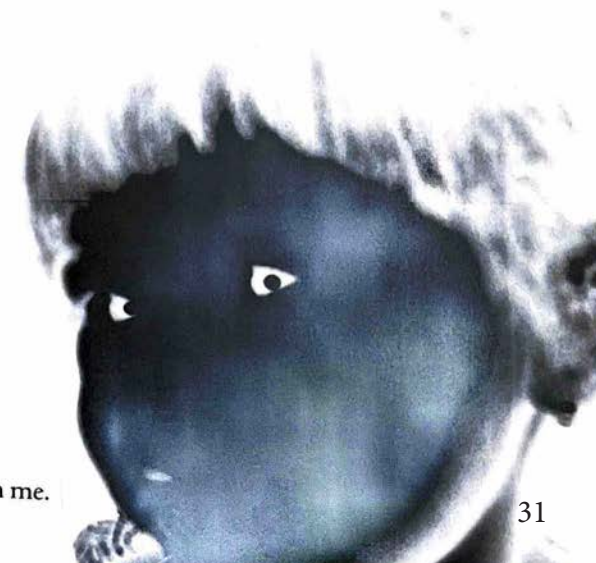
DECEASED HAILEY GARCIA

The sun, the sky,

the night, the day

will cease to be

along with me.



MÉXICO I GO

ALEXANDRA ROMERO

Quiero ir a los pueblos de México,
A las montañas,
El pueblo donde nacieron mis abuelos
Quiero tomar chocomil en una bolsita que esta floja
Y el popote es un color fuerte.
Quiero recoger tierra en mis zapatos
Mientras camino por los caminos de mi cultura
Quiero tomar una foto con un burro
Para burlarme de los estadounidenses
Si, en México hay burros
Pero no son los que nos representan
Idiota...
Quiero dormir bajo de las estrellas
Y cuando cierre los ojos
Mis antepasados plantarán su sabiduría
Sobre mi cuerpo y mi mente.



FRUITY

AISLINN BURLEY

POST-GAMERGATE CULTURE AT WHITTIER COLLEGE

MATTHEW ENRIQUEZ



Courtesy: Quaker Campus

Since the inception of gaming, video game developers have been challenged with the task of cultivating immersive worlds that provide innovative and entertaining ways for their audiences to have fun. However, sometimes finding a way to create fun forms of escapism for audiences comes with a price. Back in August 2014, women in the gaming industry and gaming journalism attempted

to expose misogyny found in several games and within the gaming community.

In response, those calling out for progressivism were met with harsh backlash from members of the gaming community. In the cultural war that became known as Gamergate, predominantly white male activists launched death and rape threats in combination with other harassment and

abuse tactics, that included trolling and gaslighting women. Targeted towards women in the industry, this was an attempt to intimidate, overwhelm, and make them doubt their sanity in hopes that they'll be silenced as a result. These traditional gamers demonstrated an eagerness to isolate gaming from developing progressive movements in the medium.

It can be said that all events leading up to Gamergate, the misrepresentation of women in gaming, the harassment of those outcasted by the traditionally white-male demographic, and the isolating of gaming culture from social mores were experienced and felt by many minority groups who partook in the medium.

Though Gamergate was an unpleasant time for the gaming world, and resulted in the degradation of mental health for women, it allowed voices to come forward to speak out against the bigotry they faced, including the voices of several individuals who now attend Whittier College.

"In the past, I used to actively game more and put myself out there through game chat, but once people found out I was mixed, they automatically resorted to using slurs against me. They tried to find a way to harass me for who I am," says Isaac Aldana, a fourth-year attending Whittier College.

One of the common ideas spread by Gamergaters (supporters of Gamergate), was that minorities would be welcomed into the gaming community as long as they conformed to the status quo. In the mindset of Gamergaters, the status quo is that everyone is anonymous (also stated as everyone is default) until proven otherwise. By remaining anonymous, marginalized groups are awarded the protection of being in the anonymous majority. The only drawback being the annihilation of one's identity or a willingness to subsume aspects of one's identity that are out of harmony with what Gamergate dictates is normal. One assumption that the majority of Gamergaters think

is normal is that there are no real problems with inclusion or representation.

Though there are still issues of diversity found within the industry and its communities, Aldana is optimistic about the changes happening across gaming culture concerning ethnic representation.

"Now, I honestly just ignore the traditional gamers and continue to push for diversity in the medium," says Aldana. "Supporting games that push for diversity can go a long way too... I've seen diversity in Pokémon with the inclusion of characters with different hairstyles and skin tones when characters from older Pokémon titles were all white presenting."

Madeline Acosta, also a fourth-year attending Whittier College, says, "I've been playing video games since I was six, I had a Playstation 2 as I was growing up. The first time I was in an online lobby was on Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2, I knew not to use the microphone just because I'd always hear the people on my team yelling at little boys, calling them squeakers, making me think that it wasn't welcome to have a high pitched or feminine voice."

Acosta's treatment online prior to Gamergate is indicative of the beliefs shared by many members of the movement. Through the lens of Gamergate, the ideal woman is generally passive, conventionally attractive, and generally voiceless. This is proven upon analyzing Gamergate's mascot, Vivian James.

"We see most of the guys on there not getting sexually harassed or threatened [as] women do."

Various interpretations of Vivian James illustrate a woman who never imposes herself or her identity into the shared space of the traditionally white-male demographic. The idea is that if she were in a game lobby with someone, they'd never even know she wasn't a man. This begs the question, apart from wanting to stay in the aforementioned anonymous majority, are there any other benefits for remaining anonymous

online as a woman?

Acosta believes so and argues that avoiding sexual harassment from men online is more than a good enough reason. She describes identifying oneself as a woman online as a barrier to entry into the gaming scene. “We see a lot more women wanting to enter the gaming space, such as on [the live streaming platform] Twitch, but then, again, we see most of the guys on there not getting sexually harassed or threatened [as] women do,” says Acosta.

Despite her disgust with the treatment and depiction of women online, similar to Aldana, Acosta also thinks that gaming culture is improving. “It’s not the way that things should be, [but] it is nice to know that there are women out there trying to change the status quo of a [predominantly male medium],” says Acosta.

As for what people should do to support feminism and progressivism in gaming, she says, “Supporting creators and organizations that stand by progressive ideals and that include women that are in line with feminist values.”

Women in Games, a not-for-profit organization that seeks a games industry, culture, and community free of gender discrimina-

tion, is one such organization that stands by progressive feminist values.

Indie game developers are the front runners of the progressive gaming scene. Indie developers are credited with creating inclusive stories from the hearts and minds of marginalized groups because said stories are less likely to be told from larger development studios. Events, such as the Game Devs of Color Expo, dedicated to amplifying the creative power held by people of color in games are proof of the growing progressiveness in gaming culture.

The decline of the overly-represented, traditional white demographic of male game developers and gamers provides a valuable opportunity for new demographics of developers to start making games and new demographics of players to start playing them.

Reaching almost a decade since Gamergate, games no longer have to only value fun. Games can value empathy, mental health, and an ensemble of progressive, diverse, and inclusive stories. Trends since Gamergate advocate a desire for games that confront players in new ways and speak to ideas that players might appreciate hearing about.



ALL ABOUT PERSPECTIVE

SOPHIE FUDIM



**FIXING THINGS THAT
WEREN'T BROKEN**

KIRSTIN DEMARQUEZ

I HAVEN'T FORGOTTEN

KAELIN FRANCISCO

Content includes depictions of sexual assault.

I'm crying in the shower again. My tears feel just as hot as the scalding water that I know will make my skin more dry and cracked than it already is. I want it to burn my skin away. My hands are on my heart and around my throat. I'm staring at the top of the ceiling and I'm gaping so much, trying to hide my sobs, that the shower water keeps shooting down my throat, burning that too. It's taunting me. It's telling me to shut my mouth; like everyone else. I don't. I cry harder. There's a single song playing over and over and it envelops me in its grief. I can hear it ringing in my heart, I can taste it on my tongue and I can see the lyrics glaring at me as it emits from my phone in my shower caddy.

The handle squeaks as I turn it to the right and the water sputters to a stop. I'm shivering already. The song is still playing. I can feel it rest itself in my chest. My hands are numb and I don't feel them even as they pull the towel around my body. I do not want to be here anymore. I pull the shower curtain open and am met with my reflection. I feel like I could shatter the mirror. I want to scream, but I'm in a dorm and people already think I'm crazy; already think I'm lying. My mouth still isn't shut and my eyes are bloodshot. I want to break the mirror. I want to bleed red. I want to cover my skin in something else but myself. There's another girl in the bathroom, she's on the track team, she doesn't believe me; she doesn't believe I was actually sexually assaulted. When she asks if I'm ok I fight the urge to laugh in her face. I'm tired of people acting like they care.

When I step into my dorm room my shower shoes squelch against the flooring and my hair drips everywhere, some of it still stuck to my face. I sit down in my chair. The shower caddy drops to the ground and I dig out my phone from it. It's sopping, but I open up the notes and my fingers tap against the screen. I still can't feel them.

When the tapping ceases, I stare down at my notes app, my vision blurred. I didn't realize I started crying again. My fingers tremor. I still can't feel them. I scroll over the words, reading over again what I had just cut out of me. The cursor blinks at me at the edge of my last sentence. It's taunting me too. It's taunting me to write more; to cut more out, to cut deeper, to rip past the lies I had been telling to keep myself sane.

There were 502 words that I had pulled out of me; shaking and panting and wrestling with them. I'll send this to my family, I think. They deserve to know first.

I read it one last time. I read it for my own sanity. I read it to make myself cry harder. I read it over like a scream until my throat goes raw. I read it and I can feel my fingers again.

I cried in the shower tonight when I realized that this body was not wholly mine. When I realized that I let this body be used. And I held my hand to my throat and my heart and I looked up to the ceiling and I cried. I cried because the last time I was in a shower with you, you sexually assaulted me. I cried because the last time I was in a shower with you I kept saying "no" and "please" and "stop" and you still decided to put your hands on my body and your dick in between my legs and when I turned around to try and avoid you, you frowned; like you did every single time I didn't give it up in Hawaii. and I felt the need to smile then and pretend that I was sorry. I stood there in that hotel room, your family just behind that door, and I smiled at you and nodded my head and pretended that everything was ok and I was just joking I DID want you to touch me like that, I DID want you to slide your dick in between me and do that low chuckle into my ear. I DID want to feel like I was being used. Every. Single. Fucking. time. I got into that shower with you. At the end of the vacation, the last two days left, I insisted on taking a shower alone. I'd say I just wanted a quick shower, just

wanted to be in and out, but then you'd frown again and I'd step out of that tub, naked and dripping and cold, and I'd open the door for you so you could hop in that hotel shower with me and make me feel used all over again. And you know what? I let it happen. I let it happen over and over again. I nodded. I grinded my teeth together into a smile and said "Ok" when you asked for sex because what else was I supposed to do? Was I just supposed to let you get sad and mad at me and then walk out of that room with you not even turning back for me or talking to me, and let your parents' faces drop into disapproval of me? No, I wouldn't. I couldn't. Because I was on vacation with your family. Your family who paid for me to come. And fuck, it was my ONE JOB to keep their precious little son happy. So yah, I gave it up. I let you into that shower with me. I opened my legs for you when your parents and little sister had fallen asleep in the other room. I let you use me to keep you happy. I let you use me to keep me safe. And no one will ever believe it was rape, because I opened my legs, smiled through tears that I didn't let fall, and nodded my head before you ripped into me.

* * *

It was 10 PM on a school night when I sent the ugly blue text paragraph to my family group chat. The ample chats about when to pick my sisters up from school and what to eat for dinner were covered by my confession of what had really happened on vacation with my ex and his family.

It was 10:10 PM when the texts started to pour in. Their own big blue paragraphs covering my own. I didn't have the heart to read them. It wouldn't make any difference anyways. When I didn't immediately respond on the family thread my mom had opted to text me separately. I didn't answer that one either.

Her call lit up my phone at 10:15 PM. My thumb hovered over the answer button before it settled down onto the screen to swipe right. I pressed the phone up to my ear. "Hey," she said in the way only moms can sound.

"Hi, mama," I said back, my voice lowered. I was already nestled into bed. "How are you?" I could imagine her face then. I could imagine the lines of her forehead wrinkled with worry.

"I'm just—" my voice caught. That was something I always hated about myself: how quick it was for me to cry.

"I'm just," my voice caught again, fuck.

My mom waited on the other side of the line. I wondered if she was angry. I hadn't been able to feel angry about what happened to me yet. I wondered if she felt the rage for both of us. "I'm so tired," I fought the urge to trip over my words.

"Are you ok though Emma? Do you need to get off campus? Do we need to alert authorities? Tell me what we can do. Do you want us to pick you up right now?"

"God, no mom."

"Ok. Is there anything I can do?"

"I don't know."

She sighed.

"How can your dad and I best support you?"

I want to say 'I don't know' again, but

I'm tired of this conversation already. I'm tired.

"I think I just want to go to sleep."

"Ok sweetie....I love you."

"I love you too Mama." I ended the call before she could say anything else.

* * *

A week from when I sent the blue message to the family group chat, the presence of it loomed over my mom and I. The message was long buried in the family chat now, but I felt as if it was plastered on my face every time my mom took a glance at me. Everything she did was too soft, too gentle; I was afraid her eyes might fall out with how much they sloped down when she saw me.

I came home most weekends, but I'd barely be in the house. I took the keys for the beat up Honda Odyssey that was older than me and drove anywhere I wanted (in a 15 mile radius). When I came home early on Friday I went straight to my room, not even bothering to close my door. My mom passed by my hallway every hour, peeking her head in to see me still in bed drifting between sleep, staring at my ceiling or rolled over on my side aimlessly scrolling through tiktok; anything to block out the noise in my head.

My dad and sisters had gone camping, but I had stayed in bed, refusing to go. I mumbled a half-assed goodbye as they stepped out of my room, their bags in tow. I heard the RV start up and drive away and then the front door open and lock shut. My mom's footsteps drifted towards me and she stepped into my room looking determined, her eyes no longer too soft and sweet.

"You're coming with me to the beach tomorrow."

row. I already had the hotel booked for Auntie Maryan and I.”

“I kind of just want to sit in bed mama.”

She stepped closer to my bed, looking down at me, her eyes pleading.

“Come on Em! It’ll be fun. You can go shopping and lounge on the beach.”

“Mm.”

“I know you like the ocean. You and your dad are out there all the time.” “I don’t feel like getting up.”

“It’ll be fun,” my mom stepped even closer and bent down a little, “you can pick any friend to come with us.”

I looked down at my phone in hand. Her offer was tempting. I hadn’t seen Ari in a while.

“Can I bring Ari?” My best friend. She was the only person I had confided in when I was in Hawaii. She knew the before, the during and the after and I missed her. I needed a hug. “Of course! Let her know we leave tomorrow at 10 AM.”

I typed an invitation into the message thread with her and hit send. “Ok. I’ll let you know what she says.”

My mom paused for a moment, her eyes going sickeningly sweet once again before turning away and padding out of my room. A few minutes later my phone buzzed with Ari’s response: an enthusiastic yes.

When we got to the hotel room the next morning, with Ari right beside me, my Auntie Maryan was already waiting for us. My mom dropped her stuff in front of the bed closest to the balcony and joined her outside.

“Lay down and relax girls! Do whatever you want!”

She shut the sliding glass door before we could answer.

“What time is it Em?”

“11 AM.”

She groaned before dropping her own stuff at the foot of the other bed.

“I’m not usually up until 2.”

“I know, stupid. Go to sleep.”

“Yay!” she mumbled, jumping onto the bed and sprawling out on the right side before lifting herself up into a sitting position. “Come here first though.” She opened her arms and I joined her on the bed.

“Love you Ari,” I said into her hair, “Now take a nap.”

She mumbled a thanks before untangling

herself from me lazily and all but throwing her head on the pillow, her eyes already closed. Her body sunk into the bed and I lazily scratched her head, my eyes on my mom and her sister through the glass sliding door.

“You should sleep too, Em. I know you’re tired,” Ari mumbles.

I had gotten a full 8 hours of sleep last night, but she was right. I was tired.

I woke up before her. My mom and her sister were still out on the balcony. It was an ocean view, but they were too busy turning to each other to see it.

“Em?” Ari rubbed her eyes groggily “Are they still out there?”

“Yah, they’re arguing about something.”

“Hm, probably family shit,” she turned towards the sliding door now.

They traded words rapidly, their faces both painted with frustration and their hands waving in the air as if they were swatting at invisible flies. I could make small slips of their conversation, but the words tumbled out of their mouths too fast and too quiet for me to catch anything meaningful. And then when I finally felt like I was onto them they both stood up.



As the sliding door pulled open we’re both hit with the sticky salty breeze and the stench of weed. Ari and I both sat up as they stepped into the room.

“It stinks out there.” My aunt pinched her nose and we both nodded our heads even though she was already turned away from us.

They picked up their convo, their voices a little more hushed and their backs turned to us as they both began to unpack their things.

Ari nudged me softly before leaning back into the pillows.

“Are you going to ask them?”

“Mm, sure.”

“So,” I rested my arms on my thighs and leaned into my palms “What were you two talking about?”

They both turned to me then, their faces scrunched slightly

“You weren’t supposed to be eavesdropping, silly goose,” my mom says. “Ok, but I was and I’m interested,” I made the same face back. She rolled her eyes and sidestepped away from me, moving towards her stuff on the table.

“Come on, mom, tell me.”

“Mhm, not until you tell me what happened.”

She said it so quickly it’s almost as if she knew I’d be prying to know her business and finally saw an opportunity to pry back into mine. I leaned back into the bed and snuck a glimpse at Ari. Her eyebrows were slightly raised and she mouthed his name. I nodded my head once, then flicked my eyes back to my mom. My aunt was looking at me now too, no doubt concerned after reading my mom’s expression. She was terrible at keeping a straight face.

“I told you already,” I swallowed.

“I’ve just been dealing with a lot of victim blaming with the track team and what happened...” I stared down at my fingers in my lap already picking at each other. I didn’t bother to look at Ari to see her face, she already knew this story.

“Well, what happened?” My aunt is the one to break the short gap of silence and I looked up at her then, meeting her eyes with mine as much as it hurt to do-so.

“I just felt coerced a lot by my ex. He kind of...” I trailed off, the words getting stuck in the roof of my mouth. My eyes ached.

“He kind of forced me a little bit I guess, I think...to- to have sex.”

And in those words I revealed two things I know they both don’t want to hear: that I’ve had sex and that I am a victim of some sort, and they could not stop it. The long pause stretched between us, but they kept staring right back at me, expecting me to keep talking. So I did.

“With the track team,” I knew their response even before the words left my mouth, but I didn’t stop talking. “I posted writings on my private account about what happened and someone spread them around.”

“Well,” my mom said, “why would you post writings about it.”

At this point everyone sounded like a broken record. Ari and I both took a deep breath, both of us equally exasperated. I had the words on my tongue already, stored like a weight in my chest from the countless times I

had defended myself to everyone else. My hands instinctively clasped together, my index picking at my thumb nail.

“It’s how I cope. It was a private account with my closest friends. I trusted them not to spread it around.”

“But still, things like that always get out on social media.”

My aunt nodded her head in agreement with my mom. I pulled at the leash inside of me, telling myself to reel it in, like telling a dog to yield, but I snapped against it.

“Ok but why shouldn’t I be able to write about this regardless? It just feels like they’re trying to silence me. As if I don’t have a right to write about what happened to me.”

“We’re not saying that, we’re just saying to be careful of what you put out there.” Ari began to open her mouth, but I shook my head slightly, calling her off.

“Ok, great,” my words hung in the air before the next ones came crashing down, “Ari and I are going to get breakfast now.”

I pushed myself off of the bed, not bothering to turn to them before making my way to the door. I hear Ari shuffle off behind me and her presence at my back as I slipped on my crocs.

“Well, I’m sorry you had to go through that Emma,” my mom’s words hit my back, but I still didn’t turn.

“Yah, me too,” I mumbled half-heartedly. I slipped my tote bag over my shoulder and opened the hotel room door before I even took a glance at them. They were both still standing where I had left them.

“We’ll be back in a few hours mama.”

I opened the door wider so Ari could step through into the hallway.

“We’ll talk more later. Have fun and be safe.”

“Ok, I love you,” I called out before letting the door begin to shut.

“I love you to-”

It was a Sunday night, which meant my mom was driving me back to College. I hated Sundays and everything it stood for. A new week at the same school with the same people. I conversed better with my mom when we’re driving. We both don’t have to look each other in the eyes. It creates this illusion of a safe space, a clunky moving box where our emotions can be let loose without seeping into

everything else (or anyone else). I think my mom and I work best when things seem less real.

"Tell me more about Hawaii."

We don't waste time when we're in the car.

There's no use mulling the words around in our mouth or thinking too hard. The time is fixed. Once we reach our destination, the conversation is over; the moment lost.

"You know what's funny? My therapist says I'm downplaying it. Like, I don't want to say I was raped, it's easier to say I was sexually assaulted, but she says I was raped." My mom blinked like there was something caught in her eye and her glasses pushed a little forward with her brow furrowed so tight. She was trying not to cry.

"I mean, you read my writing I sent to the group chat."

"I did. It was very...vulgar, Emma."

"I know."

"Next time maybe don't send it to your sisters.

You know...it really messed up Sofia?" "What do you mean?" This was the first time I'd heard of this.

I reached into my memory, the past two weeks swimming around and evading my grasp. It had been a blur of crying and headaches and sitting in therapy wondering how I had let myself be a victim; a statistic. The night after I sent that message I asked my dad to come out to my college and he jumped at the chance to see me, broken and all, only thirty minutes away.

I had run down the stairs, my hair wet from another shower where I couldn't stop crying, and saw my sister, Sofia, jump out of the car. She ran to me and when her arms were around me I buried my face into her shoulder and my body slackened against hers. I was supposed to be the eldest sister, the rock, and I was failing miserably. I think Sofia knew it too, so that night she held me up instead. I didn't know she would be coming, it was a school night, but she still did. "Emma?"

"Yah?"

"Are you even listening?"

"Yah, sorry."

"Sofia wasn't able to go to school the next day.

She came up to me that night and couldn't stop crying."

"Oh. I didn't know."

"You know how much we all care about you. It was hard."

"It was hard on me too."

She turned her head away from the road to take a quick glance at me, but I had already turned my body away, my knees resting on the passenger side door

and my back to her. "I didn't mean it like tha-

"It still is hard," I can hear my mom's thoughts: *don't snap at me.*

"We're all worried about you."

"I know."

"Have you talked to the school about it?"

"No. You know they talked to him instead?"

They somehow found out and instead of coming to me about my story they went to him and then they closed the case," my voice inclined slightly at the end, *don't snap.* "Isn't that just so stupid mom?"

"Well, are you going to try and talk to them?"

"I don't know, I just want this, all of this...to go away."

"Hm."

"My therapist says I have a problem with facing reality sometimes."

"Hm."

"Like if I pretend it doesn't exist for long enough then it just won't exist." "I'm glad you're talking to your therapist."

"Yah, me too."

"I support you no matter what, but I think you should at least tell the school. You don't want to allow him to do this to someone else."

"Ha," I breathed out. "I don't think he could."

"Why?"

"Why? I practically did him a service. Everyone said I could do better. God, I could do so much better." I hated him. I wish he knew how much I hated him.

"Well, anything's better than an assaulter."

"I mean yah, but he also just wasn't my type.

I went to the beach everyday by myself in Hawaii because he just refused to go. Why even go to Hawaii then if you're not going to go to the fucking beach," my hands flared around. I mean, aside from being assaulted on that island, his refusal to step outside with me most days still irked me.

"Yah, your texts about it confused me. Made me sad. I can't even swim and I still go in the ocean."

"Yah, I KNOW. Like goodness gracious how is my mom more adventurous than you and she's fucking 40 years older than you."

My mom laughed, her mouth opening and her brows unfurrowed. It was infectious. Before I knew it the giggles poured out of me too and I thought to myself then, *I love my mom.*

We stop at the light. Five minutes away. She turned to me then, the whispers of the laughter still etched

into her face, but her eyes watery.

"I'm sorry I couldn't be there to help Emma."

I swallowed, the streetlight blurred.

"I know Mama. I wish you were there."

"I'm sorry you had to go through that. I'm sorry. You should have never had to go through that."

"I know mama. I'm sorry too," we matched each other's tears. *Like mother, like daughter.* The car behind us honked. It was green. She broke my gaze and stepped onto the gas, the moment gone.

"He didn't deserve you."

* * *

It was only Tuesday night, 3 more days until I could go back home, but everything here felt suffocating. I was holding it together until I could call my mom. Until I could slip away from my dorm with my roommate talking a little bit too loud and past the table of my ex-friends and ex-boyfriend playing cards at fucking 10:30 PM. It was past quiet hours and they were basically being the most annoying fucking terrible humans on the planet. I was holding it in until I could get settled onto the chair overlooking the view outside my room that had started to become my friend and could push the phone into my ear to block out all the insufferable noise in my life.

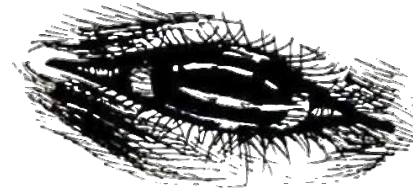
"Hey baby girl. What's up?" My mom's voice poured into me and I broke at the sound of her.

"I feel like I'm going crazy mom."

"What's wrong?"

Her words are quick and honey-coated.

There's shuffling on the other side of the phone and then a door closing and then quiet.



"I just feel like I'm goin fucking crazy. I'm so fucking tired of everything that's been happening. It's so fucking stupid. This whole thing is so fucking stupid."

"Ok, ok, slow down, what happened?"

"I just feel like if everyone's telling me I'm lying or exaggerating, maybe I am, you know? Maybe I'm

just fucking crazy and made the whole thing up right? Because I like fucking crying about this every night. I like not being able to take a shower without crying. I'm just doing this for attention right?"

"You're not lying Emma."

"Maybe I am."

"Did you say no?"

"I don't know anymore. I did give up sex.

They're right about that. I did say yes some of the time even though I didn't *want* to."

"No one should have to convince you to have sex with them."

"I know, but you don't understand. I still technically said yes. Other than the shower the other times were my fault. It's my fault. It's my fault."

"You said no in the shower, right?"

"Yah."

"And he still touched you?"

"Yah."

"Then there you go."

"But no one believes me mom. What if they're right?"

"Right about what?"

"What if I'm just making this all up? What if I'm lying to you right now?"

"You're not," she sighs out, her words sounding rough around the edges.

"I just feel like...if everyone's so adamant that I'm crazy and I'm making this shit up, I might as well play the part, right? Might as well be the crazy fucking ex-girlfriend who throws around accusations about her ex boyfriend."

"You know what Emma?"

"What?"

"Fuck them."

A low laugh escaped from my lips, like a balloon losing its last bit of air before deflating fully and then I inhaled and the balloon rose again.

"You know they also said they thought it was weird that I was asexual, but still gave it up? Like god, does it not say something about the situation I was in if I consider myself asexual and still gave up sex?"

It was weird talking to my mom about sex, but I didn't care then. I needed someone to be on my side. I needed someone to confirm that I wasn't crazy about how invalidated I felt; how I was so easily discarded by the people I called my friends, my teammates.

"Exactly. Fuck them."

“I just-” The balloon popped and sobs bubbled out of me like soda pop.

“I just feel like it’s all my fault. I was the one who decided to be with him. I went to Hawaii with him. Maybe I didn’t say no enough. Maybe I didn’t try hard enough.” *Maybe I wasn’t strong enough. Maybe they’re right for blaming me.*

“Breath Emma, breathe. Take deep breaths with me.”

“Mom I don’t wanna take fucking deep breaths right now,” I huffed.

“Take deep breaths. Ready?” She inhaled loudly and I sucked in the air reluctantly trying to follow her pace.

“And out,” She exhaled loudly and I let the breath I had wrangled into my chest out too. “It’s just not fair,” my tears are quieter now. They cascaded down my face in two messy lines without a sound and dripped onto my lap.

“I know. Do you want me to come pick you up?”

“No...no. I have class at 8:30 tomorrow. I think I just need to go to sleep.” I stood up from the chair, my body tilting from the sudden movement and I felt the eyes of students walking by as I pulled the sleeve of my hoodie across my nose to sop up the snot. “Ok, get some rest.”

“I will...good night mom,” I was about to pull the phone away from my ear when she spoke up again.

“Emma? I believe you. Your dad does too and your sisters and your friends. They believe you.”

“Ok,” I said.

“Ok?”

“Ok.”

“I love you sweetheart. You’ll overcome this.” I wanted to ask ‘how much longer’ but didn’t. “Thank you for talking to me mama...I love you.”

“I love you too.”

“Goodnight mom.”

“Goodnight.”

I ended the call before pulling the door open for the dorm. All the noise poured in again and I fought the urge to scream at them, to scream at him. WHY DO YOU GET TO SMILE? WHY DO YOU GET TO BE OK WITH THIS? WHY DO YOU GET TO FORGET? But then I would have been a hypocrite for yelling. I made a mental note to text the RA. It was fucking quiet hours anyways.

* * *

The weather was starting to feel like fall more. The sky was overcast, the air wasn’t sticky and the breeze picked up the few dead leaves on the street and rustled them across the asphalt. Thank god for Saturday mornings.

My mom pushed open the door of the coffee shop and I waved her over to the table I was sitting at. She had a donut in tow alongside a steaming coffee cup. My acai bowl was half empty already, the spoon still in my hand. She sat down across from me, settling into the wicker chair and Downtown’s atmosphere. Here, mother and daughter, we became a part of the stock photo of this small strip of Brea. There are other moms with toddlers chasing each other around the small sitting area. She opened her mouth and I know this conversation is unavoidable. “How are you babygirl?”

It felt like being dragged underwater all over again. I knew I couldn’t just avoid what happened to me, but on the weekends I wish I could.

“I’m ok.” There was no other way to be; not for her sake, but for mine.

I look down at my acai bowl and scoop a hunk of it, melting already, onto my spoon and into my mouth.

“How are you?” I say between scoops.

“Oh I’ve been fine...just worried about you and your sisters. Always worried. Even more worried about you still and what happened with...Mark,” She said his name tentatively, like if she said it too loud I might snap.

“I um...” I played around with the melted acai “I talked to admin actually.” “Oh yah? What’d they say?” She perked up.

“I just set up a meeting with the Title IX coordinator. She kept saying sorry. Sorry for disregarding me the first time. And sorry that this...happened to me.”

“Well, what do you want to happen?”

“I don’t know. I think I just want to get it out there. I mean, everyones been saying to at least say something so, here’s me...saying something.”

“I’m proud of you. It’s brave.”

“I don’t feel brave, I just feel tired.”

“Well, just take the weekend to rest and relax.”

“I am.”

I scooped some acai into my mouth and she took a bite of her donut.

“How are you doing mentally?”

I shrugged.

“Bad, but it’s ok. It’s not like I can do much but try and recover I guess. But I don’t even know how to do that.”

“Has your therapist been helping?”

“Yah. She’s great. She’s always been great.”

“Have you talked to her about your meds?”

“Shit. Gotta do that.”

She stared at me pointedly.

“I’ll do it.” She eyed me again. “I promise.”

“Ok,” she took a sip “You’ll tell me how the Title IX meeting goes though?”

“Yah. I’ll call right after.”

Another scoop. Another bite.

“I’m actually writing a blog post about what happened.”

“Emma, don’t you want this to go away?”

“Look mom,” I set down my spoon and pushed the bowl away from me, “I need to write this down for me and for anyone else who might be going through this. I want to put my side of the story out there.”

“I owe it to myself.”

She doesn’t look happy, but she doesn’t bite back.

“You do what’s best for you.”

“I am,” I looked down at my hands, “I’ll send it to you when I’m done.”

* * *

The library was quiet and the sound of my shoes tapping against the rug rattled against my ear drums. I wondered if people were watching me. I propped my phone up against my water bottle, the video camera already pulled up. I wanted this moment on film; I wanted there to be evidence that I did this. The cursor hovered over the publish button and the small pressure I put on my trackpad, clicking down on the button, reverberated through my fingers. The

page stalled before it reloaded. There, in big, bold letters, my blog title stared back at me: Sometimes I Wish You Would’ve Raped Me.

I had had that sentence burned into the back of my skull the second I had left Hawaii because I knew what had happened to me would never be taken seriously. I knew people would take his side, like they already did, because how bad could it have really been? Right below it was the date and time of publication: Oct 14, 2022. 4 months since Hawaii. Almost 4 months exactly when I had decided to put myself first and break up with him.

I rubbed at my eyes with tips of my fingers and they pulled away wet and salty. I hit the stop button on my phone and sent the link to my blog post to my family group chat. The estimated time it would take to read it was 16 minutes, but my mom texted the group chat back in 10. She told me that the last paragraph was a testament to my perseverance; a testament to my strength.

I scrolled down to the end of the blog post, just to read it over, and try and see myself from my moms eyes: *For the girls out there who have been sexually assaulted by their partner and are still sorting through the aftermath: It is not too late to speak up about what happened to you. Your partner does not have a right to your body just because you are in a relationship. Your partner should not just assume your consent is given just because you’re with them. You deserve respect and you deserve for the word “no” to carry the weight it should. After two months of untangling my memories, thoughts and feelings I’ve finally decided to file a formal complaint with the school and to put this blog post up. Not to be petty. Not to be mean. But to advocate for myself and for all the other girls out there who are too scared to acknowledge what happened to them by the boy who was supposed to love them.*

Her next text lit up my phone: how do you feel? My thumbs hovered over the keyboard as I mulled over what I felt in my head. My cheeks were still sticky with tears and I sniffled quietly; it hurts, but in a good way.

THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF “CHEERIOS” BY BILLY COLLINS

RYAN BUYNAK

Pieces of time,
Bowls of poetry.

Every day, I stray
Further from Hashem
And deeper into Bushwick.

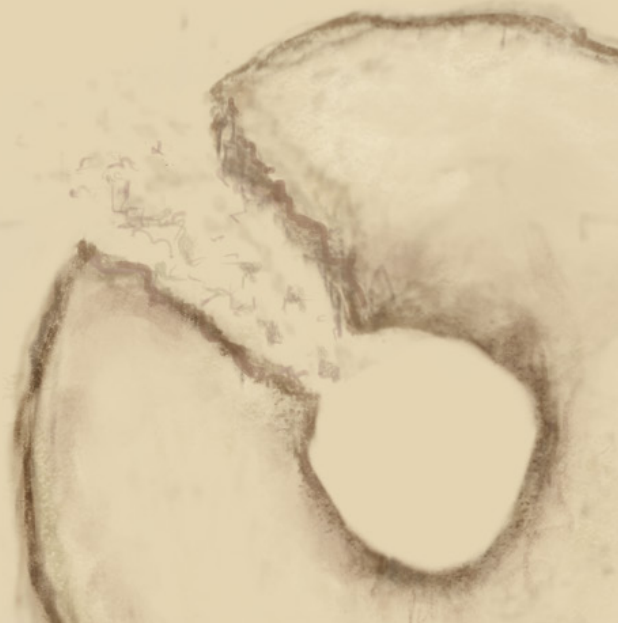
Tying up loose ends,
Resurrecting dead ends...

I live wherever I don't belong.

I am an open wound
Of language...
To say so little hurts.

“A kiss buried in the dark,
But the rest?”
I ask as sunlight drips.

Pieces of poetry,
Bowls of time.



A SIMPLE CUP OF COFFEE

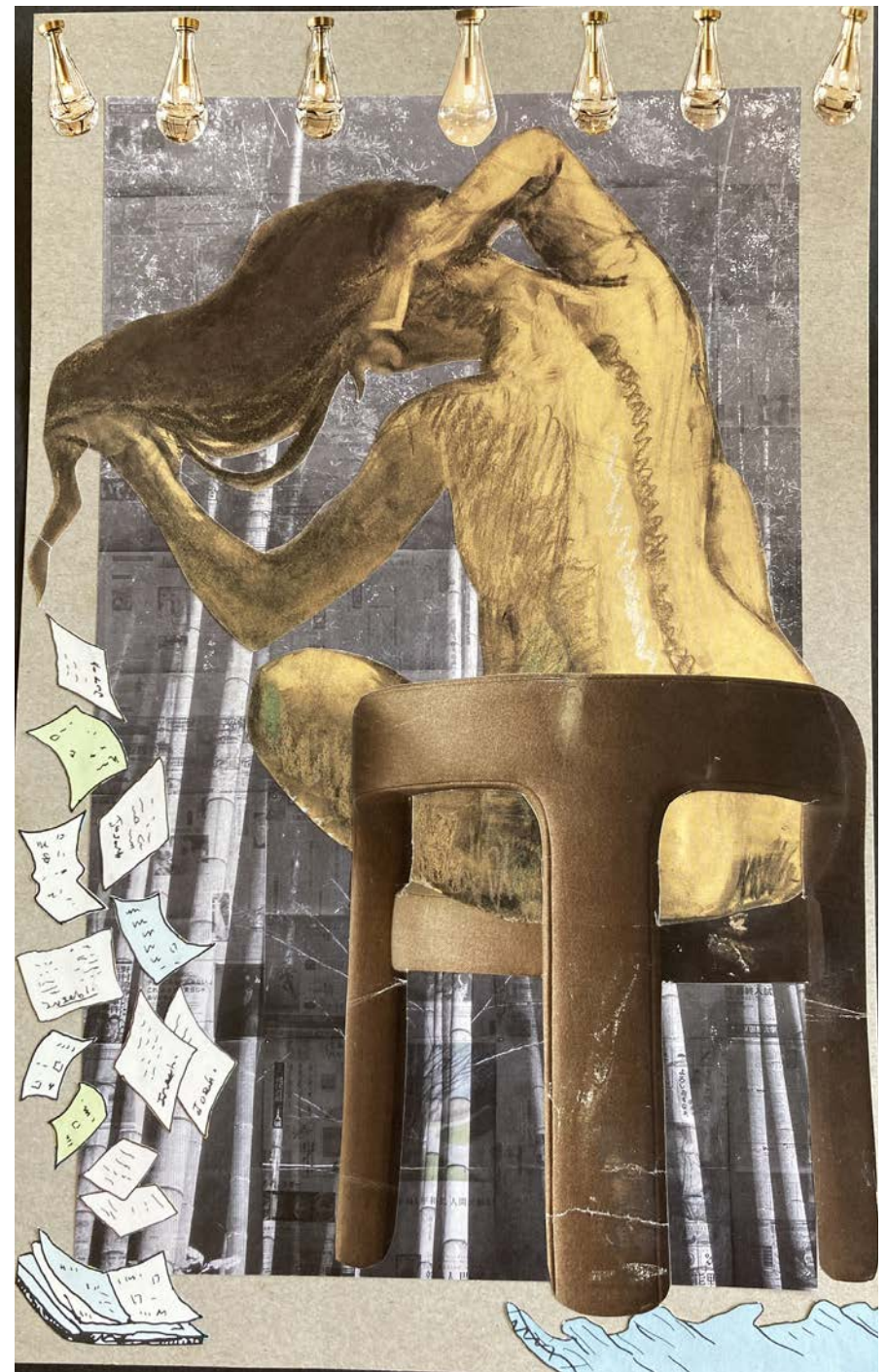
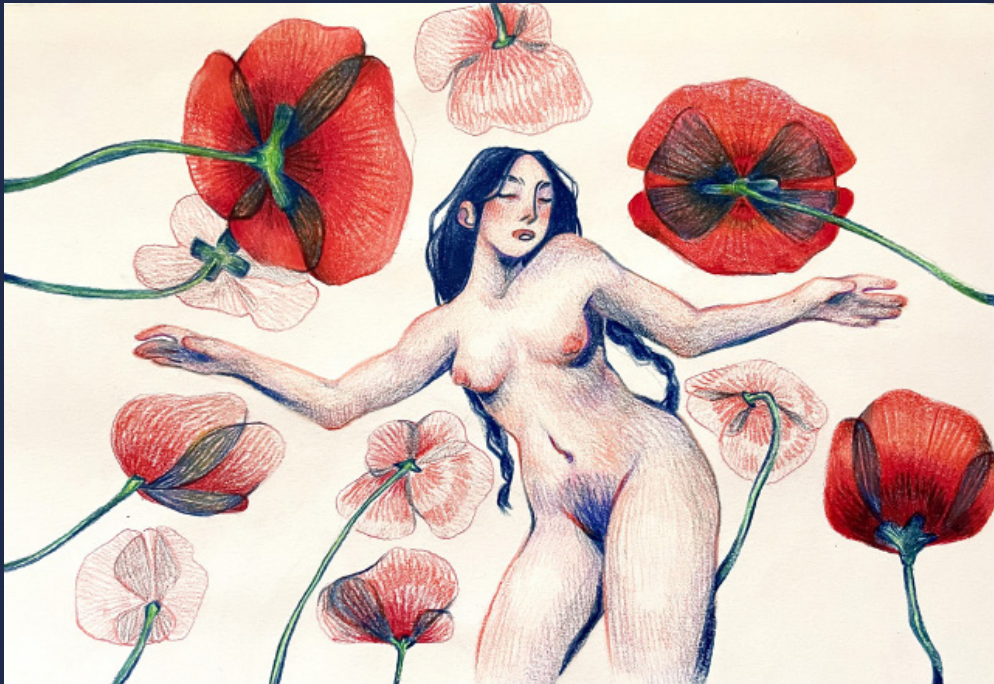
TANNER SALAZAR

A
S i m p l e
C u p
C o f f e e

A drink of pure energy, served at the first sight of the early morning, though some come for this delectably delicious drink nightly. But all come for that burning stream of caffeine and ground-ed beans filling the steam as it's poured into a poor paper cup as the core is slowly filled up to the top, careful not to spill or splatter on the black tabletop counter of this clean pristine perfect coffee shop, currently plagued with rush hour that continues for three long grueling hours making the baristas cower to the snobby greedy patrons needing the chemically addicting energy of the acidic bitterness and milky cream, dreaming of images in foam, oh and those dampening the vibe for one singular person trying to enjoy their oh so precious time of calmly studying, thoughts butting like people nudging while swiftly typing on his beaten laptop, compelled to merely enjoy the lingering smell of the humid atmosphere of where he sits mindlessly fidgeting, consistently letting his mind run free and wild like an untamed spastic child as he fills the core of his screen with many more words, so intense words bound and snaps into reality formed by the taps of the tips of his fingers craving for a sip of a cup of lukewarm caramel coffee, always the same, never a change.

Three shots of sweet cream and one packet of sugar, real cane.

**ON A HILLSIDE WHERE YOU'VE
NEVER BEEN** AISLINN BURLEY



ALL THE KNOWLEDGE
SOPHIE FUDIM



DIE. TOMATO. CORONA.

HAILEY GARCIA

FEEL THIS

TANNER SALAZAR

Feel the nauseating headache that creates dread in every worthless step.
Feel the pounding pain that strains my day and rusts my iron fortitude.
Feel the hopelessness that does not dissipate but clings on for growing days.
Feel the frustration of the lack of control, the lack of a choice, no freedom, no voice.
Feel the distress of the cluttering mess that tests my mental strength and endurance.
Feel the heavy eyes that see through the lies, tired of these false prophecies.
Feel the disgust in the lack of progress made in every problem, yet to be corrected.
Feel it, feel each lingering discomfort and each pointless annoyance, Feel each unwanted anxious thought, each unpleasurable pain.
Feel it and say, "This is undoubtedly ok."





**LOOKING BACK,
LOOKING FORWARD**

ZOË BERKEBILE

THE HOTEL EXCELSIOR

MEYLINA TRAN



The Hotel Excelsior was the one place we could go without having to answer for the blood soaking us to the bone. Coincidentally, the Hotel Excelsior was the one place we were caught.

A freak of nature, an oversight in the staffing schedule crafted by the hotel's upstanding management, a fresh-faced bellboy touring the wrong corridor at the wrong hour. His eyes, blue as the sky after a heavy spring rain. I'll always remember the eyes that turned us in, widened comically at the sight of the four of us striding towards him: Stephen, his flaxen blond hair slicked back and stained with cooling blood. Even now, I find myself thinking about the intense care and precision in which Stephen paid to his hair, meticulous as an epidemiologist in a disease laboratory. Even as the world was falling apart all around us, even as the judge slammed his gavel against the podium and the jury of dirt-ridden common folk cursed us, I could always depend on him to have his hair perfectly styled, showcasing his strong brow and the unsettling green of his eyes — crossed paths with the bellboy before the rest of us, and it was at Stephen's silent discretion that the bellboy fled the corridor. His footsteps were heavy, and we could hear them retreating as far as the stairwell at the other end of the floor. If there had been no door to separate us and the concrete stairwell, then I assume we would have heard the echo of his cheap leather dress shoes all the way to their destination: the lobby.

Irene, her left hand wrapped loosely around Stephen's right, swinging it like a child on the way to the park, was idly picking blood out from underneath her manicured fingernails. They were pink, cherry blossom pink, Catholic school pink, appropriate for Sunday service and charming pedophiles in dark corners. She was as cool as a midnight breeze walking down that corridor, barely casting an uninterested glance in the poor bellboy's direction, but I saw the way in which his gaze was caught so firmly on the sight of her stained fingers. I could see it in the twitch of his brow and in the uptick of his mouth that he was imagining all of the vicious things Irene must have done to gain a hand like that. She must have held the knife with which she stabbed her victim in her long thin hands, and she must have rammed the blade into his chest at least a dozen times, if not more. Or perhaps, she hadn't done anything at all. Perhaps, she had merely stood there and watched as the three of us did her dirty work, and only

when it was done did she approach the twitching body, limp for the most part, smearing her hand in the blood pooling in the cavity of his chest, just to check that he was truly dead.

I suppose the bellboy found out in the next morning's paper.

To my right, three paces ahead of me, was Jesse. Jesse, despite the thick layer of blood coating and ruining the expensive fabric of his brown herringbone suit jacket — goodness, only Jesse would deign to wear his second most expensive suit to an arranged murder, silver cufflinks and all — sauntered down the corridor with the kind of blasé that I could only imitate but never emulate. He wasn't cool like Irene nor was he commanding like Stephen. Jesse was unflappable, incapable of being disturbed for the simple fact that he did not care enough about the world around him to give a damn. The Hotel Excelsior could have caught on fire, and the corridor we passed through now could have become engulfed in flames, heavy black smoke could be restricting the capacity of our lungs and Jesse wouldn't care; he would stop where he stood to light a cigarette with the flames that were licking up the side of the wall, moaning childishly about how we wouldn't leave him alone; how annoying it was that we were dragging him all around. Even now, when the bellboy rushed past to escape us, he accidentally knocked his shoulder with Jesse — who was, I feel it is important to add, in the midst of lighting the last of his cigarettes from his beat-up package of Salem's — who hardly spared him a glance. I'm not sure that he even noticed the bellboy.

Eyeing him, his head ducked down, I wanted to reach out and flatten the tuft of dark hair at the back of his head that had escaped its gel hold, sticking straight up like a flag waving its surrender. Before the tips of my outstretched fingers could make contact with his crown, he lifted his head, a plume of smoke escaping his mouth, and said, "Stephen, my feet are killing me. Open the door."

Stephen answered by stepping up smartly to the closest door on his right — Room Number 625 — and unlocked it with a key that he swiftly procured from the inner lining of his leather jacket. We hadn't stopped by the concierge when we entered the building, so where Stephen had gotten the key from was a question that I let simmer in the back of my mind until a later date, when we were farther away and removed from our incriminations, when we were safe.

I will always think fondly of that room, of its kitschy green carpet, the bedside table that wouldn't close all the way — rusty drawer runners or something like that — and the noxious smell of acetone that had seeped into the wallpaper; into the velvet orange coverings of the armchairs, and into the heavy curtains that Irene insisted on pushing to one side. The two queen-sized beds creaked on rusty springs, and the bathroom door had to be held at just the right angle and shoved with just the right amount of force to close it. Room 625, despite our recent history, was our room; the room that the four of us always vanished into after these kinds of nights. It was the room that we would cleanse ourselves in, letting all evidence of our behavior and involvement spiral down the shower drain, never to be seen again. It was the room where Irene clumsily stitched Stephen's left bicep back together after a failed hit and run last December, and it was the room where Jesse held me down bodily while Stephen snapped my ankle back into place — twice because he did it wrong the first time. Although he apologized profusely, I reckon that he took a great deal of sick pleasure in watching me squirm underneath Jesse's body, in hearing me scream into the towel clenched between my teeth. It was the room where we would drink straight tequila and bitter negronis until dawn to celebrate a job well-done. It was an ugly room, stained and scratched — reader, despite its lofty name, the Hotel Excelsior was not a hotel of fine stature nor was it the kind of hotel where any person with an overinflated sense of self-importance and nauseating self-entitlement would consider stepping foot in — but it was ours.

Irene locked herself in the bathroom the first moment she got, muttering something indistinguishable about hot water and my inability to keep a mental clock in my head. I could hear the twist of the shower knob and the crinkle of the plastic shower curtain as I stood by the front door, toeing off my Converse to toss into the closet. The white toes were covered in flaky blood, the shoelaces were dotted with the substance, and the fabric stained irrevocably. I sighed.

"Could either of you cough up twenty bucks?" I asked, shuffling into the rest of the room.

Jesse was standing out on the balcony, his back leaning heavily against the creaky metal railing. His head was hung back, erect for the chopping block. "What for?"

Stephen was already digging out a crisp fifty from his wallet, holding it out to me between two outstretched fingers. "Have Irene pick out new shoes once she gets out of the shower," he told me. He wasn't looking at me, too busy flipping through the laminated hotel menu, clicking his tongue every so often as he mentally weighed each item in his mind. Hummus plate, house special baby back ribs, french onion soup with a side of sourdough bread. I was starving, but that fact hadn't dawned on me yet, my bones still rattled with the speed of our getaway. I nodded, tucking the bill into the pocket of my jeans. They were filthy and stiff, the denim constricting my thighs and the hem

brushing teasingly against the protruding bone of my ankle, and I couldn't bear to move any further in them. Swiftly, I stepped out of them and left them crumpled in a pile at the foot of Stephen's bed, ignoring his slight grunt of displeasure and pointed shuffling to avoid finding me in his periphery. Whatever.

"Neil," I heard from the balcony, "Come over here."

Jesse was leaning precariously over the balcony railing. I had the urge to reach out and fist the tail of his suit jacket and hold him in place in case he decided to dive off the balcony. Instead, Jesse let out a low whistle, eyes trained on the swimming pool below, lit up like a beacon against the dark atmosphere of nighttime. It was empty and still, a single, striped beach towel draped over the head of one of the poolside lounge chairs, forgotten. He held his cigarette loosely between his fingers, and for that I was brave enough to reach out and take it. I hated smoking, hated how the burn of cigarette smoke made me want to rip my lungs out, but I liked how the corner of Jesse's mouth always, without fail, quirked up in amusement, as if he could see right through me and understood why I did it. I think he knew, but I wanted to know why he never did anything about it. I still wanted to fix his hair.

"Do you see that?" he asked, pointing down at the pool. I peered over the railing, leaning forward, mimicking Jesse's stance. I couldn't see anything but the artificial turquoise of the pool water lapping lazily back and forth against the concrete edge as the faint April breeze swept past. Everything was still and quiet. I heard no cars revving their engines obnoxiously, nor a single shout of the night prowlers, haunting the alleyways and local dive bars that surrounded us. If I had been a little more alert, a little more present, I would have been suspicious of that peace. It was an alarm bell all on its own. Nothing is ever quiet, and even then, it is only ever the precursor to the storm blowing our way.

"What?"

"I'm thinking of ordering a bottle of whiskey from the front desk," Stephen said from behind us. His footsteps were quiet, imperceptible, and I jumped at the sound of his voice. "Fancy anything else?" he asked in lieu of apologizing.

Jesse reclaimed his cigarette from where it was sticking out of my mouth. "Another packet of Salem's if they have any."

Stephen nodded. He tucked the room service menu underneath his arm and inserted himself in between Jesse and I, peering over the metal railing in the same fashion as we had before his sudden arrival. "What are we looking at?"

Jesse pointed. "In the pool. There's a dark spot, no?"

I looked again, scanning the surface of the water for any dark spot, any shadow that might have frightened Jesse — I knew that it was fright that had overtaken him because it is usually I that noticed these things. I was wary of sudden movement and things that hid in the dark, and it was typically Jesse that brought

crossed their minds, not even when Irene or I deigned to suggest it. Arguing with Stephen was the one thing that Jesse would truly wake up for, shedding his blasé attitude until he became a person that I barely recognized. He was spitfire against Stephen's cool. This silent agreement between them unsettled the bile in my stomach even further, roiling and ravaging since we got into the car. I opened my mouth to retort, but the room behind us filled with hot steam and the sickening, heavy smell of vanilla. The bathroom door had opened. "What are you three doing out there?" Irene asked, her voice coy and smooth, a little hoarser than usual, but then again, it was imperative that she scream bloody murder in order for the plan to properly shake out.

I turned around. She was wearing one of the hotel's fluffy white robes that hung in the bathroom for guests to use, toweling her hair dry with an equally fluffy towel. Her skin was flushed from the heat, but her eyes were alert and bright, glad to be rid of the grime of tonight's endeavors. She had the right idea of disappearing into the bathroom the moment she entered the room. Irene gave me an inadvertent once over, one so subconscious that she had to do a double take to confirm that yes, I was not wearing any pants. Her brow furrowed in confusion; the playful amusement wiped off her face.

"I wonder what it could be," Jesse mumbled around the cigarette between his teeth.

"Where are your pants?" She asked me. Leaning nonchalantly against the balcony, ignorant of whatever it was that Jesse and Stephen were looking at. Irene leveled me with a stare that made me want to divulge everything to her; to admit to all of my flaws and shortcomings; to share with her the daydreams I had when we spent lazy afternoons in the library of Stephen's country house. The stare she leveled me with was keen and all-knowing, stern yet forgiving, and I got the sense that Irene didn't need me to say anything. There was nothing I could say that she didn't already know. Irene — I'll never know how, since I never knew her — knew everything.

I opted for a loose shrug. "On the floor," I said, vaguely waving a hand in the direction of the room.

That last hour that we were all together, holed up in our room at the Hotel Excelsior, meandering out on the balcony while the late April breeze swept through us was the only time that I could say for certain that Irene liked me. I was never sure. There was not a single moment before that last hour in the year that we knew each other that I could say with absolute, sincere certainty that Irene liked me, well and truly liked me. I knew that at the very least she tolerated me, and at the most she was amused by me. I was, to her, an interloper, an unworthy outsider that had wormed my way into Stephen's meticulous plans, into Jesse's schedule, into her life. I was going to get them caught. I was going to lose my head and ruin it all.

She held her towel out in such a way that indicated to me that she wanted to wrap the towel

around my waist, to protect my decency.

"It's wet," I protested, but she had already stepped closer to me, wrapping the towel around my hips and rolling it up around the waist to prevent it from falling. It fit snug around me, and the damp fabric made me want to cringe and rip it off, fling it down, so that it could get soaked in the turquoise pool water below. Reading my mind, Irene slapped my hand away from the towel.

"Leave it. You were naked."

"I was not."

"Neil, you look ridiculous," said Jesse. I wanted to shut him up and wrap my fingers around his neck, press the heels of my palms against his windpipe, strangle him, suffocate him. That would shut him up.

"You do," Stephen added, though it was less of an addition to the conversation and more of an afterthought, as he was already making purposeful strides into the room, the hotel menu clutched in his hand. "Irene," he shouted, "Does whiskey sound alright to you?"

"It sounds just fine," she responded. She glanced down at the pool, standing on her tiptoes to lean over the railing more. "What were you two looking at?" she asked, while twisting her head to look at Jesse, who was fruitlessly sucking at the end of the cigarette butt.

He flicked it over the edge. "There's a dark spot at the bottom of the pool. We couldn't figure out what it was." He was rubbing his thumb and index finger together, spreading the ashes around.

Irene studied the black spot at the bottom of the pool with intense scrutiny. I still had no idea what they were talking about, nor did I care enough to make a point of it. "You're right. That's so strange," she said softly. She was leaning so far over the edge that I was afraid one wrong move would send her crashing into the pavement.

"The whiskey should be up in a few minutes. They only had Winston's, I hope that's okay," Stephen said to Jesse, who nodded and waved the comment away impatiently. He rejoined us on the balcony. He was now barefoot, shoes and socks discarded in the bedroom, socks most likely neatly folded and tucked into his shoes. To Irene, Stephen asked, "Can you go across the street and pick out some new shoes for Neil?" He handed her another fifty-dollar bill.

"Why me?"

"Because you're the most presentable of us," Stephen responded, his tone suggesting that the answer was obvious and that Irene should have known it instinctively. He hated to acknowledge that not everyone was as efficiently minded as he was, that not everyone was as clever as him, a genius like him. He gestured to himself incredulously, at the grime coating his leather jacket, and the blood that had stiffened his hair to a helmet on his head. "Really Irene, look at us."

Irene rolled her eyes, put out but not enough to argue. She was never really fond of arguing though, finding it a complete waste of time, especially

if the other option was keeping a grudge that she could nurture and let fester. I knew that she was still bitter towards Jesse for spilling Beaujolais wine all over the front of her expensive leopard print Barbra Streisand mockup coat, which she had just purchased earlier that morning in October. I don't think she'll ever forgive him.

Tucking the fifty-dollar bill into the pocket of her robe, Irene teasingly pressed a wet kiss against Stephen's cheek, reveling in the red-hot flush that crept up his neck. I couldn't look at Jesse in that moment for fear that I would burst out laughing. Stephen would have my head.

"I'll be back," she said.

We settled into another easy silence. Exhaustion had begun creeping into my bones, and I found myself leaning heavily against the railing, the metal digging painfully into the small of my back. Jesse copied my stance, his shoulder pressed into mine. He laid his head down on my shoulder, his cheek pressed against the curve. It was enough to keep me awake. Not even the plaster of my button down bothered me. All I could think about was how awfully warm it was for a spring night; how I could smell Jesse's cologne from my position — spicy cinnamon and smoke — and how lucky we were to have vanished into the car just when we did before that old man wandered into the alleyway, finding the body of the man that we had mutilated.

I would dream about the mutilated man when I finally fell asleep that night, when the police left me alone long enough for my head to fall forward and for my eyes to close shut, the adrenaline of getting caught red-handed having dissipated from my veins hours ago. I will dream about the mutilated man and our last hour in that hotel room for the rest of my life. It haunts me, keeps me awake in the middle of the night, too afraid to sleep, but so desperate to see them again that I always, inevitably, take the plunge. I will never dream about anything else.

"I just remembered that I have a seven-page paper for Monroe due tomorrow," Jesse whispered, and I couldn't help but snort at the mundanity of the confession. How sheerly normal it was, and how strange that Jesse of all people was worrying about a paper for his Baroque art class in the face of a murder that we had just committed.

"What are you going to do about it?" I asked. Turning my head yielded electrifying results. The tip of my nose found its way into the downy softness of his black hair, smelling sweetly of citrus and sweat and lingering blood. I wanted to bury myself in that scent, I wanted to crawl inside of his scent and surround myself in it, swaddle myself like a baby, like a child afraid of the dark.

Jesse shrugged jerkily. "I don't know. I just won't go to class."

There was a sharp, desperate knocking at our door, rattling it against its unsteady hinges. The sudden noise startled the three of us out of our peaceful reverie on the balcony. We stared eagle-eyed, wary

and poised to attack, still as statues. The person on the other side of the door, clearly impatient, knocked again, harder and sharper.

I looked to Stephen, unsure of what to do. "Who—?"

"I don't know," Stephen whispered, inching forward on light feet, careful not to make a sound.

Irene emerged from the bathroom, dressed in a pair of patterned trousers and a thick black turtleneck that we had left stashed in the back of the closet at the end of our last visit. Oh, she was beautiful. She had even pinned her hair out of her face with a brass hair clip that her grandmother had gifted her for her eighteenth birthday. It was a family heirloom, and it shimmered against the backdrop of her copper hair. She wanted to look nice for her trip to the shoe store across the street, and she did look nice, but the lonely clerk at the counter of the shoe store would never see her, would never lay his wandering eyes on her. Irene didn't notice our wide eyes and our frantically waving hands, warning her that it wasn't the bellboy with our whiskey and cigarettes like she thought it was. Her hand was already twisting the doorknob when Stephen finally shouted, "Wait!"

The door was slammed against the wall, and the men in sleek gray suits with matching hairstyles — slicked back away from the forehead, away from the eyes, classic, like Clark Gable — pinned Irene roughly against the wall of the hotel room. She struggled and screamed, swearing at the men who shoved her face firmly against the wall. More men swarmed into the room, their guns pointed at us, the safety's switched off. It was like a tidal wave suddenly crashing into us. I couldn't breathe. I felt like I was drowning.

"Put your hands where we can see them!" one of them shouted, and I was so terrified of the guns, the shouting, and the door being torn off its hinges that I couldn't tell you what happened next. I could not tell you whether we went calmly or whether we put up a good fight, bloodied our knuckles and broke a couple of noses before they finally apprehended us, cuffing us and holding us tight against the metal railing. If we jumped, would we land in the pool? Could we run away?

I imagine Jesse snarling at the men with guns, his muscles coiled for a dirty fight, the jagged edges of broken glass bottles his only weapon. I imagine Stephen standing slightly in front of us, his large frame a barrier standing between us, his gaze frosty enough to send any sane person running for the hills. A gaze like that promised carnage, pain, and revenge. I imagine that hours later, once the police have fingerprinted us individually and blinded us with the flashbulb of the camera, Stephen laid in his assigned cot and hatched an elaborate, foolproof, undetectable plan that would get the four of us out of the prison and out of the country. I imagine—

The breakfast bell is ringing. I didn't sleep all night. I have to go.

MUZZLE

ABIGAIL PADILLA



WARM EMBRACE

SESHA HERNANDEZ-REAL

I forgive you little one
Cómo ibas a saber mi niña?
Te llenaste de ilusiones y sueños,
But don't worry
El amor y aspiración que tenemos reservada por un sueño
Lo puedes usar para soñar más
Take all this love
Y darle a ti misma
I will be here,
Siempre estare aqui,
With you, contigo
Y juntos vas a ver una mujer fuerte,
De niña siempre estuviste fuerte
Pero perdonate,
Como vas a ver el cielo si te enfocas en las nubes?
Those dreams of yourself that you wish weren't taken
Van estar feliz que nunca regresaran
Te lo promoto mija



WALKING ON FALLEN ASH

ELI JUDD

It's funny. In times like this where everything I've ever known is falling apart, I should be more worried about our safety. I watch as the firefighters are telling us to back away, while the rest of the neighborhood sits on the curb, calling their relatives and friends about the news. I mean, not even five minutes ago, I overheard a couple talking about how there have already been three confirmed deaths. That's all they can talk about now. Amongst all the little details they are discussing, no one seems to know where it all began. It's crazy. Of all the things I can think about, my mind is only centered upon my house slowly burning down in front of me. I picture every little thing in my room that is slowly being destroyed.

The walls that were once covered in Janet Jackson and Dead Sara posters. The sprawl of clothes stuffed underneath my bed that my mother is constantly bugging me about. The blue sheets and comforter that I was sleeping in no less than two hours ago. God, my brand-new laptop is also in there; I had saved up for ten months for that thing. Who knows how many shifts I took at Wabajah's Wacky Tricks and Treats. I wonder how my co-workers are doing. Hopefully alright. I still have a shift tomorrow. I also remember the framed poster of The Lord of The Rings that I put on the floor in order to hide the hole I made two days ago, when I accidentally kicked my wall in anger. I had been trying to put it up, but the poster refused to stick. Mom and Dad still don't know, but I suspect Louis does.

I think what makes my heart sink the lowest is the loss of my handwritten story. It was too late by the time I ran out of the house to grab all of it. I managed to grab three out of the nearly twelve volumes I had written. They weren't even in order. I grabbed volumes four, nine, and eleven. I couldn't even grab the first one. Three years I had been writing that story. Months of details and hard work, gone. I would rather the house had just taken my legs.

That room was a safe haven for me. Where will my next be? As I see the ash slowly start to settle on the ground, I wonder which flakes are from my journals. Maybe they are from my pictures of Jake Turner and I going to Monica's costume party. That party was pretty amazing. Monica always likes going all out with everything within her control. And with how powerful her parents are, she has a lot of it. I bet she had control over the fire to avoid her house. Why did this have to happen to mine? What on earth did I do to make this happen? I just wish I could wake up from this bad dream right now.

Every time I open my eyes, I just see the intensity of the heat. It is interesting what the mind can conjure in the face of disparity. I see little eyes floating upwards from the flames. They look at me as if to mock me. Maybe there is a demon that decided to do it. It could be the one from my story, Uther. Uther is quite the monster and capable of dismantling armies, so I guess my house was easy pickings. The thunderous noise of the fire could be his

laughter. The more I think about it, the more I see him within the flames. Or maybe it's Monica mocking me. Maybe it's Jake or Ms. Vigeant, my English teacher. I guess I want it to be someone or something. It would be so much easier to just shout at one thing. Cause right now, everything feels so mixed up inside me, I don't know what it is I'm feeling.

The strange thing about time is that a minute can drag for an eternity, while an hour can pass by in a single glance. When I look up, I see that the last bits of the burning house have been put out. As I approach the remnants of my house, I see that there is nothing but bits and pieces of the foundation left. I look at the ash on the ground. And with each step, the little flakes float back up. It would almost be fun to watch, if it wasn't for the fact that these flakes were once a part of my home. I wonder, what can I do? How can I possibly start again? I have been alive 16 years now, and every bit of my memories and treasures can now be crushed into a small ball of soot. Everything inside of me is building up again as I feel myself finally cry.

Amid the once roaring heat, I feel a gentle warmth against my hand. Looking over, I see the soft lines of a tired smile from my mother. The glow of her eyes seemed to sparkle against mine. The necklace I made for her in fourth grade is around her neck. I know she thought it was stupid, but yet she still wears it all the time. The warmth spreads to my shoulder. My father is standing on the other side of me. His eyes did not bear the same sparkle, but instead

a comforting hazel that I am always able to turn to when times are tough. He has his ridiculous "Procrastinators: Leaders of Tomorrow" T-shirt on, which somehow still cracks him up each time he says it out loud. The warmth spreads through my back, where two little arms wrap around my center. Is my little brother rubbing his nose on my shirt again? For all the times it has made me mad, I would give anything to know he is just being his silly little self again.

Fully turning around, I see my family looking at me: my mother, father, and little brother. They all look so tired, and yet they seem so strong. How are they able to stand in all this mess? They appear like titans before me. As I think this, they pull me in for a full embrace. The warmth completely replaces the scorching temperatures of the dying flames. Uther's final laugh has dissipated. A new sense is starting to fill me up. It's funny, maybe I'm finally feeling...

What's the word? Optimistic? Yeah, optimistic. I love that word. I love it because it makes me think it's possible to start again with the right people.

hand, mind, and womb-envying patterns*

DAYQUAN MOELLER

playing in the sand

 drawing sand up to cover
a doll, or a puppy, or a toy

 in some enclosed place
where he can flaunt his masculinity
wait for love,

 manifest in the body of another
manifest in
Man, the lover

 and his manliness, are
what catches the small boy's imagination
his notions of

 sex unvalidated by his own body
prohibitory
 pleasure

Learning names,

 and
phrases,

 and
behaviours

that have been meted out to them as a boy

a
small, small
“male thing”
a small, small
body.

**"Male and Female" by Margaret Mead*

roots

EMILY HENDERSON

She is gone,

Gone!

Trickling down into the earthly ground,

My roots are gone,

Gone!

She was the only one

Who sang in that tongue,

And now she is gone,

Gone!

The only root of mine is buried.

Where she lives now in her spirits,

She is my spirit,

I wish she didn't live in my spirit.

No one else speaks like

her.

Everyone else is an imitation,

A ruse,

A play on the word.

The words she spoke are gone.

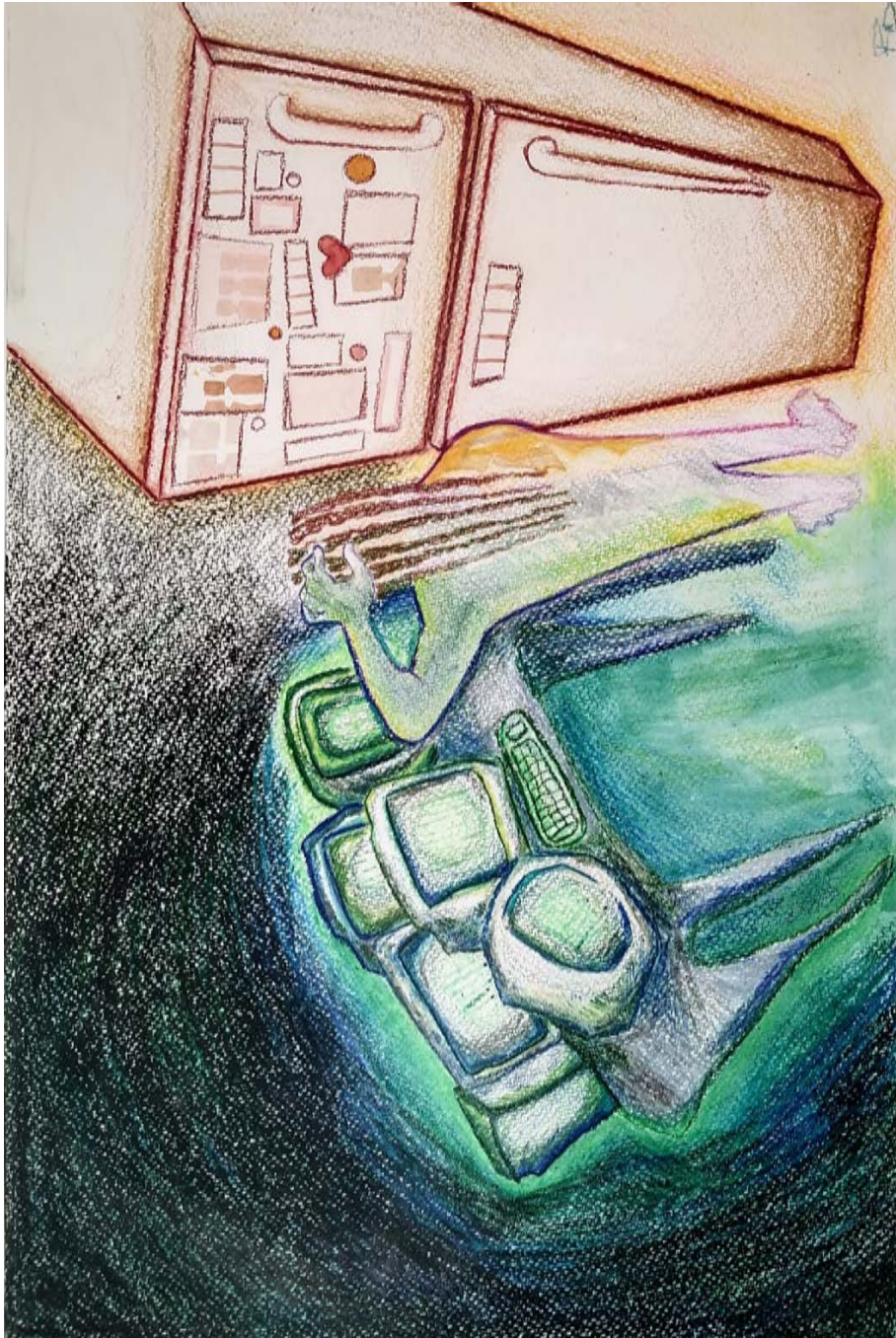
Gone!

A part of me is

Gone

DUDE COME ON

PAIGE MEYER-DRAFFEN



w-h-o-a-r-e-y-o-u-?

KASEY DAVIS

i worship nature as it grows over me and forget the words of my mother's
land, loosen my grip as people try to leave, and feel pain at my mother's hands
there are no tricks up my sleeves, just practiced words i got secondhand

i am still in my father's gaze, a safe existence
i've been told i'm loved, i can't tell the difference

i'm a sinner of the blue light like a fish in any other sea
still i drink water from the blue sky like it was poured just for
me, and watch my life pass me by like a moving picture in a
screen

part of my soul tries to die off, not knowing she will take me with it, the kettle
screams 'til i make it stop, i'll keep my tea with me long after i'm finished

the air has grown heavier and colder, i can feel it even from
inside, it tells me time has passed, i'm older, the clock is ticking,
still alive, the past is never something to get over, but i try and try
and try

i keep my heart on my sleeve, it's under my sweater
i have been worse for the wear, the same, but somehow never better

all the things i do i can't help but know

MOSH AT THE SMELL

ABEL DIAZ



SUMMER IN TWO MINUTES

AISLINN BURLEY



THE CHANGING FACE OF LARPING AND GEEK CULTURE

ROUX DAVIES



The chatter and hubbub grow quieter as I step into the court. All eyes are on me as I take my seat at the long table. I am trailed by a knight and a prince, each adorned in spectacular and elaborate homemade costumes. The lights are low, banners hang from the rafters, Hardrun patterns the white-boards, and a fire is projected onto the screen. The court is relatively empty tonight, only 13 members are seated.

The Queen sits, with the grandeur and decorum one would expect, at the front of the classroom. A beautifully decorated home-crafted foam sword lies on one side of her, the court advisor on the other. The court members bow to the pair as they enter. New initiates, called Squires, scatter the courtroom. They each play their own role in the court. The Squire sitting next to me is a freshman who joined the club at the start of the semester. She is taking notes to be entered into the ever-expanding and delicately documented 40-year-long history of the court.

The Head of Clan Ia-Gondol loudly enters in chaotic and jester-like fashion, a set of bells jangling from his waist. The jester makes a round of the court distributing bottles

of Gondol juice, a fictional in-universe “alcohol” that looks and tastes a lot like Martinelli’s sparkling apple-cider. It’s 8:30 P.M. on a Thursday night, and I’m in Hoover 005 as I’ve never seen it before.

Welcome to the weekly meeting of Whittier College’s own LARPing club, AOKP. AOKP (The Artorian Order of the Knights of Pendragon) is a society that has existed on campus since 1983. The society is a fantasy style LARP (Live-Action Role-Play) club, crafting and living out a continuous narrative and history that dates to its genesis.

“Picture Dungeons and Dragons, but you physically do everything... You make the world whatever you want it to be,” explains court member, Crow Caton.

Caton is a sophomore who joined the club during their first semester. They have always been involved in fantasy, and what is affectionately described here as geek-culture.

“It’s never not been a part of my life,” they tell me. “I have been going to and helping with running renaissance fairs since as long as I can remember. There is a picture of me in my Mom’s arms as a one-year-old with

a renaissance garb on. So, I have been super involved with fantasy spaces and just medieval spaces ever since I was little.”

However, they say they have found something uniquely special here. “We are essentially one big family. We treat each other with mutual love and respect. Oftentimes, it just feels like a bunch of friends that truly just love each other and love being around each other and we just happen to have club meetings,” Caton continues. “This is the most involved and the most fun I’ve had because I have so much autonomy.”

“This is the most involved and the most fun I’ve had because I have so much autonomy.”

Autonomy is a common point of praise regarding AOKP. “It just has a lot more freedom than other groups,” says Josh (Captain Iggy, in Matrix), a member since 2007. “AOKP is incredible in that it somehow manages to remain free in a lot of ways that other larp do not,” Josh explains. “There’s not a lot of rules lawyering down to the ground what you can or can’t do.”

For example, he mentions that earlier in the evening, someone made a clam joke and someone followed up the joke by leaving and coming back as a clam. “Like you can just sketch it and it’s done here,” he says excitedly. “Other clubs are like ‘that’s not a species on our lore list, that’s not approved.’”

Perhaps a more prevalent commonality between members of the club is a shared interest in gaming. Kira (Queen Aneka Banner Caradoc, in Matrix) joined the club in 2012 in search of friends to play Portal 2, a popular video game. “There’s a LARP club, that LARP club is filled with nerds, nerds like video games, so maybe if I join it, there’ll be someone who likes Portal 2, and I can make one friend who’s into this one game, at least, and that is why I joined,” she says. She made several friends to play Portal with.

Which isn’t to say that Whittier College’s accommodating LARPing club can shield AOKP members all of gaming culture’s excesses.

“Holy shit! So many of these gamers are so toxic, and it’s just because they think

they’re better than everyone else!” says Caton. “And they don’t have friends! And they don’t have a community where they can play this game that they like so much, and so they play it by themselves, and they get upset with themselves that they’re not doing as well as they want to or getting upset with other people for not doing as well as they expect.”

Caton says they have been harassed at times by male gamers. “Because of how I sound, they’re misogynistic to me as well. So, male gamers can often be just very toxic and misogynistic.”



Crow Caton at a 2004 Renaissance Fair with their Mom.

Caton identifies as non-binary and is involved in the college’s eSports team. They spend many hours a week in the eSports lounge playing Valorant, a competitive fantasy first-person shooter game. They play in ranked lobbies with others from around the world. I got a taste of how disparagement looks when I joined their party and hopped into a few unranked (less competitive) games.

Though experienced with video games, I was new to Valorant and playing on a PC. I scored a few kills, and we won a couple of rounds, but it’s fair to say I was not winning it for the team. I came to learn communication was key to this game and that without adequate teamwork, a team was at a disadvan-

tage. Voice-chat is a necessity, and that's where things can go amiss.

"I've been called a soy-boy" says Wren Paul, a new member of AOKP. The insult stems from an online right-wing conspiracy theory that the phytoestrogens in soy products feminize men. Caton has experienced similar harassment; "'Go back to the kitchen', people have told me since I sound like a girl. They aren't very original," they say. In that atmosphere, voice-comms become unusable, and the entire game is made worse for it.

"AOKP is absolutely not like that," Caton tells me, and my visit to the court supports that perspective. The court that assembled in Hoover was made up of a diverse group of women, people of color, and those across the LGBTQ+ spectrum.

AOKP remains a bright spot in the otherwise polluted ecosphere of geek-culture. Is it by design or a happy accident?

To find out, I spoke to Dayquan Moeller, a student employed by the Gender Equity Centre here on Campus. He had several explanations for both the toxicity of online spaces, and the lack of toxicity in AOKP.

"I think it is a kind of, like, subculture that is changing now that gaming is becoming more integrated in the mainstream," Moeller tells me. "A lot of gamers are nerds and outcasts and they're attached to gaming. When you're isolated and you need refuge from mainstream society, you cling onto a space and you get very territorial with it."

Moeller suggests much of the toxicity exists in response to a perceived threat that online geeks act in a hostile way to deter women and other minorities from entering into "their" space.

One content creator who rose to challenge this movement was a semi-professional Star-Craft player and ex-toxic gamer turned progressive politics streamer Stephen Kenneth Bonnell II, who goes by the pseudonym Destiny. He came to prominence in 2017 through a two-hour-long, 2.2 million viewer debate with popular geek youtuber Jontron, in which he lambasts Jontron for his ethno-nationalist positions.

In an interview about misogyny in

gaming political streamer, Stephen Kenneth Bonnell II, said, "Internet communities are a big 'boys club.'" He explains his experience of playing CS:GO, a predecessor to Valorant, with a female friend of his, and his experience of hearing the same jokes leveled at her again and again: "It took one day of that experience to realize it's not about being insulted, it's this othering feeling; that you don't belong." Moeller and Bonnell both call attention to the same thing: hostility in the geek community, particularly gaming, exists not only as simple nastiness, but serves an exclusionary function. It "protects" these communities from perceived outsiders, ignoring the fact that women, people of color, and queer people have always been a part of gaming and geek culture.

How is Whittier's AOKP club relatively free of this sort of toxicity?

Tanner Higgin, a PhD who has written extensively about gaming culture and digital media, suggests the toxicity centers around guarding technology. "A need to protect the male exclusivity and control of technology has been evident in geek spaces," he writes.

As Higgin sees it, online harassment is part of a larger history of male dominance and guarding of technology spanning back to way before the conception of computers or games. Whittier's club doesn't have proprietary technology it is trying to maintain "ownership" over.

Moeller thinks much of the difference could be attributed to the difference between online and in-person communications. He suggests digital spaces — particularly gaming spaces — lower empathy and allow for more indecent behaviour due to there being less accountability in gaming spaces. Moeller adds that even in online spaces, moderation and small amounts of accountability do make a difference.

Moeller points to Ubisoft forums, a chat room for the discussion of games published by Ubisoft, as an example. He recounts that while voice-chat players could call him slurs with impunity, "the Ubi servers are moderated so if you say the racist slurs you get banned."

Accountability and moderation are

significantly more prevalent in AOKP. You are there as a student on a small college campus. Your face is inextricably attached to your behavior. You are more connected to those you may be attacking, they are across the room from you, it makes you think twice—if not out of empathy, out of fear of consequences. "It's a lot more difficult to be an asshole face-to-face across the table from someone," says Caton. "It's a lot more difficult to be an asshole face-to-face across the table from someone."

Perhaps, further than accountability, there is something about the club itself, which deters the same exclusionary environment from forming. "One of the great things about AOKP is it's always been led in large part by very strong female leadership," says Josh. This was true even in the late 2000s when he first joined. A short film made by the club shows it was anything, but the "boys-club" one might expect.

Fantasy itself may not be the boys club we expect. Moeller notes that "there is a rich history and connection between marginalized people and fantasy... a lot of queer people are attracted to fantasy." He attributes this to both the desire to see oneself and one's own identity in stories, and an attraction to the freedom of experimentation that fantasy offers in toying with identity.

The queer connection is supported by AOKP member, Kira, who says, "You could just play with whatever you want your character to be and so that gave a lot of people avenues to even kind of express themselves differently." She says that even in 2012, the club was "very gay," but that a lot of people were only open about their sexuality or gender identity within the club. In other words, AOKP has long been a queer safe-space.

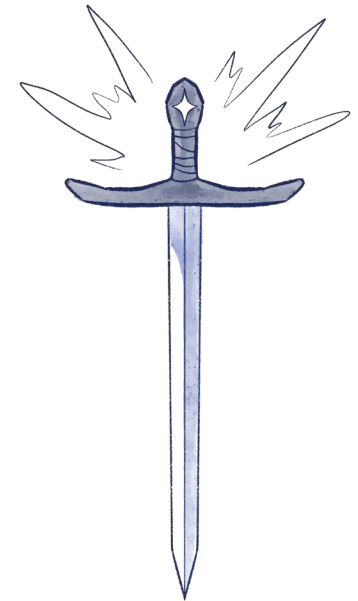
Kira's character is Queen of the court. This position is, ironically, elected by all members of the club. A queer woman of color being elected leader of a geek group defies the white-male dominance of the Gamergate ethos.

AOKP, though, defies assumptions. From the seed of a geeky club formed by Lord of the Rings obsessed college students on a small Southern California liberal arts college

in the 1980's, the club has grown into a vibrant, loving community. All are welcome and all put in serious work to make this club a fun and comfortable space where students have been able to craft innovative stories and express themselves freely for almost four decades.

Josh, humbly, sums up his feelings towards the club, "It's just a really awesome club, and the fact that the story has been going on since the 1980's, and it's still happening... It's still alive and growing, it's one hell of a thing."

The group continues to meet every Thursday, and will take in a new class of initiates at the beginning of the fall semester 2023.





NAIVARA

JULIA CENTENO

SUMMERS IN THE GARDEN

KASEY DAVIS

I fear being the gardener
The grower of things
Fences intertwined with roses
Get rid of the dead
To keep the flowers new
I've been warned of thorns,
But I do not wish to lose them

I long to be the flower
The prettiest of things
Gather me up
Place me in the vase with the others
Tend to me, I wish to be seen,
So see me for all that I am and all I've
become and keep me forever

MUJER DE DOS LENGUAS

ALEJANDRA ORTEGA

Tengo dos lenguas. Una de mi madre and one from my father
What should be a bridge has instead been seen como la frontera que nos separa
Soy una persona pero they see me as the worse half of the other
I don't exist in either of their worlds;
Instead I exist in a strange middle ground
Uno que nadie quiere saber que exista
Me busco en el espejo
I live in an in-between.
It's not real.
Just like my mother
I only see algo igual a mi padre
They don't like it when a woman has a tongue,
Menos cuando tiene dos.



LAS PERLITAS

ABEL DIAZ

CASE #41553,144147624: TELEPATHY SHELBY ZOE

freezing cold paintings
of thunderous gods strike down
upon golden hearts

keeping shut broken
locks that will never clear
thick fog between visions

no-one thinks to melt
this castle of brick and stone
except for dreamers

who are looked at with
eyes full of tearful glares that
stab through the thousands

leaving but two to
stare across blurred skies lying
_worlds from each other



HAILEY GARCIA

MOBY

WALK THE NIGHT

ALEXANDRIA AMAYA

I remember when I first saw her.

It was summer, but not the kind where you swim till it's dark, catch fireflies, and lick the marshmallows melting through your fingers. That night was unbearably hot and the air was sweaty, wrapping itself around you like a scratchy coat.

My favorite thing to do in the summer was watch the stars, but that night the kitchen table held me captive at just the right angle, the air conditioner blowing steadily against the back of my neck. I spread my Marias around me, organizing them by the length of their yarned hair. The sun had gone down and darkness slowly oozed over the sky, washing away the vivid red first to a pale yellow, then somehow into a hollow black.

The house was alight with every lamp turned on, the hot stove defeating the purpose of the air conditioner pumping, and the television blaring. Abuela kneaded the dough of the tortillas through her hands, prepping it for the stove as she cheered for her new favorite show, *Dancing with the Stars*. With the light pouring from our house, the outside sank deeper into darkness than usual.

As I sat there, I watched the window. It became a two-way mirror, reflecting the inside of our home to us, but allowing anyone beyond a clear look into our lives. While I saw Abuela pacing behind me and my dolls playing backwards with wrong hands controlling them, the other side would see us as we were. A snapshot of us, stagnant and endless.

I stared at myself. Is this how others see me? Still? Reversed? The cool room suddenly felt stifling and tight. I stretched in an attempt to pull apart my muscles as they fought me to curl in. Still unable to look away from my spectacle, I watched my reflection as I tilted my head, but another figure stayed

in my place. A single bead of sweat slid down my neck as I tried again by lifting my arm; my reflection mirrored me, but the outline of a shoulder remained, like a stubborn shadow reluctant to move. That night felt like a dream: vivid yet blurred, like something in my peripheral vision. I stood up in a trance as a string tightened in my gut, pulling me steadily towards the window. I saw myself move, but the girl staring back had no rhythm to her walk: no lulls or lumbers. She drifted toward me as I drifted towards the window, the two of us trapped in my frame. I jumped when my belly hit the cold sill, my hands cupped around my eyes to block the light behind me. All I saw was a mass of dark hair.

I didn't know who it was at first. I tried to move to let the light uncover her face, but every time I tried, she just moved with me. She didn't jerk or weave like we normally do. She moved without moving, her body transporting from spot to spot, consuming my view. All I could see was her silhouette, darker than the endless night that stretched out behind her. I saw a dense wind push the limbs of the trees, and yet her white skirt hung limply in the hot, stale air. Her long, stringy hair fell over the sides of her face, layer upon layer of darkness blocking her.

We were barely separated, a mere two inches of glass and air somehow still felt endless. A fracture in the pane was all it would take, close enough to grab, snatch away. And yet, through the divide, untouchable.

I didn't know who else it could be. "Mama?" I tried.

All motion stopped. The trees froze, the TV skipped, and the stove burned. Though I couldn't see her eyes, she held my gaze in a tight grasp. I tried to speak, but I choked on my voice in my throat, unable to

cough up the words.

In an instant, she lunged at the window. A big clang against the glass, her arms reaching for me, scratching at it like a wild animal trying to break open a cage.

I don't remember much after that. Abuela said she heard a crack from the laundry room, but no clang. She said she found me on the floor when she ran in, the corner of the kitchen table chipped off, and hot blood on the back of my head. She said it took me about two minutes to come to, and that my eyes were barely open before the mumbling started. She said I kept asking for her; where did she go, did you let her in.

The only thing I actually remember was Abuela kneeling over me, tears racing each other to her chin.

"Mijita!" she said, grabbing my cheeks tight.

I felt like a voyeur watching myself through the window. Looking into my own home, I was forced to see the moments unfold, unable to look away – like watching a trainwreck. "Abuela, where's Mama? She was there, didn't you see her? Did you let her in? Where's Mama?!"

A layer of stone covered Abuela's typically soft expression. "Rosie."

I looked around, not seeing her. "It's Mama, she was outside. Did you let her in?" I tried as hard as I could to get back to the window, to see if she was out there, but Abuela pulled me down hard and yanked me to her chest.

"Rosillo, stop it!"

I didn't realize I was crying until she wiped both of our faces clean, her touch gentle, but still sharp. "Mijita. I won't tell you again," she said. "Mama isn't coming around here anymore."

* * *

"One more push!" the doctor said.

I groaned, squeezing Daniel's hand harder than I thought I could, letting out another animalistic groan. I silently cursed Abuela for convincing me to do this without the epidural, as I yearned for my lower half to

be numbed and empty.

The next scream that graced the room was not mine, however, but my child's.

"A beautiful baby girl!" The doctor congratulated me, wiping her off and placing her on my chest, her tiny frame snug in the crook of my breast.

Her bowtie lips and button nose erased all else from my mind; none of it mattered. All previous thoughts and anticipation subsided as I lost myself in her perfect, wide eyes. I couldn't look away as she held me in a tight, inquisitive gaze. Do you have thoughts already? I thought it impossible, but somehow, she studied me, as if looking for confirmation: Can you take care of me?

My chest immediately tightened with a hot, searing love, threatening to consume me. Yes, yes, I can. I promise – as a nurse tried to sweep her to the nursery. Immediately, anger overcame me, red and primal. I tightened my grip on her, inching her away from the lady in front of me, daring her to try again. I would have continued my downward spiral if not for Daniel.

He chuckled breathlessly, laying a hand on each of our heads as both our tears fell onto my hospital gown. "My girls," he said.

Someone new came in with the birth certificate. "So, Mom and Dad," they said, smiling brightly. "What's this cutie's name?"

We weren't able to get a word out before the thundering herd came storming in. Women ran in, tears and yells bursting from them as if they had been holding their breath for my entire labor. The men kept a safe distance, staying in the doorway with big balloons and red ears.

"Aye, Mijita!" Abuela cried, coming to my side with a tenderness that only she possessed. She covered my baby's head with kisses, adding a big one on my forehead as she went. We were cooing over her perfect, round face when the Queen stepped in, arms opened wide and regal to grace us with her presence.

"Step aside people, the Grandmother is here!"

Abuela rolled her eyes with a groan

and I sucked my teeth, chiding her. The conversation that our eyes had was quick enough to go unnoticed among all of the commotion, and yet still managed to catch the attention of my mother-in-law.

“You’re not supposed to keep secrets,” she said, throwing a tense look at Abuela.

“Bueno, se supone que tampoco debes mirar a un mono a los ojos...”

“Mother,” Daniel intervened, greeting her with a stiff arm around her shoulders, disdain written clearly across his face. I cleared my throat, sending a scolding look his way. He huffed and escorted her to the other side of the bed. “There she is, Mom. Isn’t she beautiful?”

Her attention was shifted for the moment, thankfully, as she took in our girl. “Oh Rosie, she looks just like you. What’s her name?”

I smiled. “Isabella.”

Her mouth tightened. She allowed a tense smile to poke through, but her eyebrows still raised expectantly. “Lovely. And her middle name?” I looked up at Abuela. “It’s Maria.”

She gasped, unable to talk as tears pooled into her eyes. She placed a firm hand on my shoulder, moving it back and forth with a squeeze, huffing to keep a handle on the emotions before they overwhelmed her.

“Oh!” Viv said. “How...ethnic. Beautiful, beautiful, of course... Let me hold her!” “Mother,” Daniel said, his tone sharp and full of rebuke. “I think I have the right to hold her before you do.”

“Aye, Mijito,” Abuela agreed, still unable to say more than that.

Viv flashed a steel grin, letting loose a rigid laugh.

“Well, I’m getting my hands on her, one way or another!”

* * *

It wasn’t until after we covered his casket that I saw her again.

My Isabella was so grown, holding on to her sister’s hand because I didn’t have the heart to. Their faces were unfocused,

their figures blending into the black-shrouded mass of people in the cemetery. I wanted to comfort them, hold them, tell them that everything is going to be alright. Instead, I grabbed Abuela’s hand, gripping onto her for dear life, like a buoy in the storm. Salty tears flooded my vision and I was grateful for them. I kept my eyes open and allowed them to fill up completely, so the horrific view in front of me could be blurred just a little while longer.

I stood there long enough for the rush of condolences to brush past me until there was only a handful left in front of the grave. The dirt had barely settled over him, constellations of dust still wandering, when Abuela took the girls to the car. My thoughts moved as if pushing their way through a thick sleep, my memories slowly draining to the back of my mind until I jerked awake and they were lost forever.

After I felt the presence of the girls leave my side, I noticed Viv was still seated across the casket. Always a diva, her large sunglasses covered half of her face like a veil, and she pulled pristinely embossed handkerchiefs from the pocket of her sleek black coat-dress: the perfect picture of mourning. Even through her shades, I could feel her cold stare on me. I wanted to go to the car, to my girls, but I couldn’t find the will to move.

Our game of chicken ended when she finally got up, following my father-in-law to their car. I stared at the beautiful black marble headstone I picked out for Daniel. Is it terrible to call a headstone beautiful? Every reflection was shifted, scattered over the broad veins of the marble. A bleak image of the gloomy, hot sky with a procession of black cars lining the block looked back at me. I scratched at the sleeves of my dress, suddenly feeling every line of thread inching up my arms and tying themselves tighter, taunting me to take a deeper breath.

I drifted towards him, sinking to my knees in front of the new lock on the vault that he would forever reside in. I grazed the sides of the headstone with my fingertips and slowly rested my forehead against his name. I wanted to keel over and throw myself against it, but I just let the cool stone send sharp

shocks through my clammy skin.

The makeup that Abuela applied hours earlier was long gone, drowned beneath a flood of tears. Streaks of mascara ran wildly, leaving its own unique breccia pattern across my skin.

I begged myself to move, scared that if I didn’t dry my tears they would just harden and sink into my face, scarring me into a woman who would wait for eternity.

*Do they see the intricate veins of marble?
Or just a cracked surface?*

As I stared at myself in the stone, I saw someone I didn’t recognize. I never considered myself broken, but at that moment, I wondered how I would ever put myself back together again.

A gust of wind startled me; the kind where it knocks you around, taking the breath right from your lungs and holding it over your head in jest. The air became rigid, and I ripped my hands away as the stone turned to ice. As I tried to catch my breath, a figure came up behind me through the glossy stone, stopping to loom over me.

Confusion settled on me, slowly dripping from the crown of my head as I wondered who would wear white to a funeral. It wasn’t until I saw the mop of black hair that the goosebumps went scattering over my body.

I ached to turn around, but she kept me frozen, her head cocked to one side at a disheartening angle. A swift rage flushed through me; my blood flashing white hot as she leaned against our name. The name that I had surrendered my own for, to be forever linked with Daniel, only to be left with his parents as my only namesakes. She looked wrong there; a cascading white figure next to the black engraved script, like a scuff on a new pair of shoes. But it went as quickly as it had come as she began to lean in.

Despite towering over me, her face was parallel to mine in the gravestone. I could feel her presence surround me, her arms snaking, waiting for the perfect moment to snatch me away: another Walker on its way to eternity with her. As she inched closer, the curtains of hair barely moved to the side, still blocking

her eyes, but allowing the smallest glimpse of her pale face.

My chest burned with loss. I was immediately overwhelmed, images of my childhood rushing back to me from before I left Mama. Emotions ran through me without remorse as I was submerged in remembrance; how it felt to be taken from everything you know; how it felt having to start over with nothing except that ugly white dress and that stringy black hair that Mama forgot to wash.

Our faces neared, yet somehow, I felt her sniff the back of my neck, releasing a low hum of amity. As our reflections were at the cusp of a gentle kiss, my stomach sank at the thought of her reaching through and pulling me into the depths with her. When I jerked away, breathless, she was no longer inviting. Her image stood completely still, her hair not even swaying an inch, and I could no longer see myself on the surface of the marble.

I’m not sure how long we both sat there, but my knees began to ache from the pressure. I thought I had gained permission to leave, and nearly turned to go when she reared her neck back and bit at me. The bark she let out was carnal as she continued snapping her head, banging from the inside of the stone over, and over again.

I shot up, repelling myself from her and letting out strangled yells as my breath finally returned to me. New tears broke through to my cheeks as I flailed, tripping over the flowers arranged around the fresh dirt, more alive than the man lying six feet beneath them. A loud smack sounded as my back collided with a columbarium, prompting a scream from my throat that I didn’t recognize. My tights were jagged, the harsh brick easily tearing through them and leaving a trail of blood scurrying down my leg. The Fallen Angel guarding the building looked down on me, his open mouth and furrowed brows somehow understanding my sorrow.

I sobbed, the kind where the noises come from deep within, pushing through your throat with hiccups and leaving your head throbbing with the strain. When I peered through my fingers, she was gone. Daniel’s headstone stood its ground, the surface an

abysmal black now that she had left the frame.

The guests had stalled loading into their cars, staring at me. Most people clenched their hearts in pity, or let more tears fall in sympathy. Viv's sunglasses rested on the crown of her head as a disgraced look passed through her eyes. I looked to Abuela, but her face mirrored Viv's, each of them written in the same font.

"She was here. She was here again," I muttered, looking from her to the grave. After a moment Abuela mouthed at me, a hard, "Get up."

She wrapped an arm around each of my girls, motioned them into the car, and snapped the door shut, leaving my head hanging with woe and only the angel to cling to.

* * *

The door closed as the little girl stepped onto the creaky porch. The wood pushed pins and needles into her feet, stinging until the numbing cold made the pain unnoticeable.

She knew that she should go inside. Mamá would be furious if she found her out here in nothing but her nightgown. She could still hear the dying embers of the fire crackling from the hearth inside, the intricate lace nothing against the shivering night. She felt like she was under a spell. Her mind screamed at her to turn around and get back in bed, but the pleads echoed within her, bouncing into the deep caverns of her body until they were too far gone to return.

Her legs moved forward on their own accord. She left her house that wasn't her house and wandered down the unpaved road. She heard the water before she saw it, her vision blurred with a thick fog all around her. She followed it, ignoring every instinct in her body, and pushed out of the mist, breaking through it with her hands, pulling it away in strands as if she were sifting through a layer of cotton. Her heart pumped, but her breathing remained steady.

A winding river stood before her. It was calm and still, as if holding its breath. The girl takes a long look, scanning the river from left to right. Her head turned too slowly, like she was moving through honey, and her mind moved much too quickly for her body. The sight before her looked like a picture, still and unmoving.

She looked down at the water and saw her reflection.

She looked older, glowing under the harsh gaze of the moonlight. She reached, a single finger hesitantly inching towards the surface, scared to break the glass of the mirror before her. Scared to disrupt the calm that seemed so delicate.

* * *

Isabella's eyes snapped open. She was back in her house, her own bed, and pajamas surrounding her. Although her body was relaxed, her chest heaved as she tried not to wake Sofia in the bed across the room.

She tiptoed out of bed, tucking in Sofia a little tighter before she creaked the door open and closed. The longing in her chest materialized into a big knot at the back of her throat as she snuck down the hall, past Abuela's bedroom and into her mom's. She craved Rosie's warmth, climbing into bed behind her with gentle tears rolling over the ridge of her nose.

Rosie said nothing, she merely turned around and locked her arms around Isabella tight.

* * *

"To Daddy," Isabella and Sofia said, lighting the candle next to Daniel's picture. We had a wonderful picture of him on the entryway table. While he had many precious moments captured with the girls, my favorite photo of him was one I had captured while we were still dating. I've tried so hard to remember what I could have said to make him laugh so hard that day. I've relived the moment so many times, sometimes losing myself in an endless loop, getting stuck with him long after the girls have gone to bed.

Whatever it was tickled him as if I had poked his sides. He continued laughing minutes later, flashing a grin that made my knees go weak. I just so happened to have my camera up, trying to capture the changing leaves behind him, when he gave me a side-long glance with that wonderful smile.

I actually chided him for "ruining" my picture. I never thought I could have captured something so beautiful; his face beam-

ing, turning to look at me for only an instant. I thank God for this picture, for letting the girls see their Daddy's heart and soul in one simple look. A fraction of a moment captured for eternity.

I shook my head, focusing again on the people gathered there with us. My in-laws and my girls. Isabella was so beautiful; tall, strong, independent, her mind much older than she is. She bounced Sofia on her lap as they stared at the picture of Daniel, Viv chatting over their shoulders.

"I remember the day your mom took that picture of him," she bragged. "He brought her to meet me for the first time that night. I can't believe how long ago that must have been."

I felt an acidity flash through me, my hairs standing up and my body tingling, as I too recalled the rest of that day. Whenever I imagined it, I always stopped when our date was over. I didn't let myself continue toward what followed that night. But she forced it to the surface and I almost tumbled down at the force of the memory.

* * *

Viv hands me a teacup, sitting down in the armchair beside me. Daniel's hand rubbing my back and the fireplace roaring in front of me settled me into a warm rhythm, the biting chill finally easing up.

He rubs my shoulders, moving to stand up. "You two be good, gotta hit the restroom." We both giggle at him before falling into a comfortable silence. Viv broke it first.

"Rosie," she said, placing her hand on top of mine and rubbing it in a sweet gesture. "You seem so smart. Compassionate. Sweet. So, I'm going to tell you something because I really feel like I owe it to you."

I wondered what she could possibly have to say? I scoff now at my young, hopeful heart, for thinking a blessing from her already? She tilts her lips upwards, but it didn't reach her eyes, a stark contrast to her gentle hand on mine. "You will never be good enough for my son. I think you're smart enough to know this, and strong enough to be the one to cut it off. We both know that this would just be for the best."

* * *

Things were never the same after that. I tried to keep the peace, but Daniel never fully recovered. He would joke about it in a tone that I knew wasn't teasing, and ask, "You sure you want to be a Walker? I don't blame you if you say no."

I would wrap my arms around him and hold him close, explaining that it was him I wanted to marry, not his family. We repeated this cycle endlessly, even years later, as I tried to convince him that it wasn't a big deal. He was worth it. It was just him and me, anyways.

My skin crawled at the irony, seeing her in my house. On my couch. Holding my children. I shook with anger, the tray in my hand stuttering as I stood frozen in the entryway. A flash of hatred flooded through me as I looked at her. She reached for Isabella and I nearly lunged, until Abuela's hand stopped me.

She smoothly took the tray from my hand, sweeping ahead of me and announcing, "Okay everyone, dinner is ready!"

Viv eyed the large buffet we had set up. "Wow! So festive!" she said. "It feels like Dia de los Muertos." Her broken accent made me shake harder.

I laughed. It came out dark and wrathful, remnants of Daniel's resentment pooling in my stomach and dragging me down to a murky darkness.

"Rosie," Abuela tried. "He's dead," I said. "Did you forget?"

Viv looked like I had slapped her, her cheeks flushing red with the mark I wished so badly to deliver.

"How could I?" she scoffed. "Did you?"

"Excuse me?"

"I guess that grieving really is all for the family," she said. "This is all for your culture, and your traditions, and—"

"For my husband," I seethed. Exasperation oozed from her like puss.

"How is this for him?"

"Tamales were his favorite."

“Rosie, he was not a Mexican!”

The silence that followed was the kind that made your ears ring. I pictured everyone in the room, crimson blood dripping from their ears, begging for someone to talk before the silence consumed them.

I barely had to whisper to be heard. “Take the girls outside.”

Abuela let the back door snap shut, cutting the tension like a spool of yarn. It provided zero relief, leaving the room scratchy and tight and frayed. “I want you out of my house. Now.”

“Rosie really,” Viv said. She took a seat at the kitchen island, taking the time to let out a deep sigh. “I’m not the bad guy here! It’s been four years. Something’s got to give.”

“Vivian,” I said, my teeth aching from my clenched jaw. “Get out of my house.”

“You mean the house that we helped you pay for?”

Instead of letting me respond, she got up to make her way towards me and grabbed my hands. “Look, I know how hard grief can be. You have no idea what it’s like to lose your child. I hope you never know that pain.”

I stared at her. She wiped a tear that had snuck its way down my cheek. I turned my head to the side, trying to keep my lip from quivering to no avail. She gave me a sad smile that didn’t reach her eyes.

“You know how great Daniel turned out.” I nodded. She sniffed. “But I lost him. In more ways than one. I deserve to make it right. I can make it right with the girls.”

I knew the punchline had to come, but I still reeled, stumbling backward at the cunning snake slithering behind her eyes. Some people see red in a fit of rage, but my vision tunneled leaving the edges pitch black. All I saw was darkness, projecting from around her on all sides. Misty black arms spread out, reaching towards me to drag me into her grasp.

I shoved her away, letting out a noise that I couldn’t name as she tripped over the chair she was previously occupying. She barely caught herself before letting out a dark chuckle and straightening her jacket.

“See, I wasn’t sure about bringing this up, but I’m so glad I did. You’re clearly unwell,” she said, looking me straight in the eye. “And to be frank, I don’t want my grandchildren around someone with such violent tendencies.”

I wanted to object, but when I looked at myself, I was somewhere else in the room. I saw someone crouched, ready to pounce on Viv: an animal guarding her cubs, ready to kill. Tears rushed down her face as she heaved for breath, and it took me a little too long to realize it was me that I was looking at.

Viv, on the other hand, was the picture of grace. She would look perfectly shaken, the damsel in distress, if she didn’t have such a telling gleam in her eye.

If she’s the damsel, what does that make me?

She slipped a card on the table as she walked past me. “We’ve got a lawyer. Get your shit together and give him a call. He can help us get the girls settled just fine.”

With that they left, leaving the door wide open for the night to wander in and layer the house with ice. The car peeled off. Leaves swept into the foyer. The food ran cold. I don’t remember putting myself to bed. I only remember walking with Daniel down that winding trail, capturing his smile over, and over again.

She felt her first. A pica on the back of her neck and a dull shake between her ribcage. She looked up, squinting closer past the river and through the switchgrass that stretched for miles in front of her. The hyacinths dominated over the shy dahlias on the riverbank, firing their scent at the girl like long arrows: round after round of still water and spicy floral greens overwhelmed her, sheathing their arrowheads into every part of her body.

She finished her panoramic view back down at the river, and she was met with eyes like hers. The face that held them was pale white and gaunt, the cheekbones stretching the skin tight, and the hair as black as the night sky behind her, stringy and loose. She looked out of place, her bare feet whiter than the dress she wore, contrasting the picture around them like

spilled paint on a black canvas. Everything about her was wrong, save for the eyes that she shared with the little girl. She looked back up, caught in the unforgiving gaze of those familiar eyes. “¿Dónde encontraré a mis hijas?”

“Mamá, ¿qué ocurre?” the girl asked her mother, who was not her mother.

The woman stepped impossibly closer, her eyes the only thing visible, bright with tears that seemed to never stop falling. She shrieked. “¿Dónde encontraré a mis hijas?!”

The little girl screamed back, her own tears freshly falling. “¡Yo no sé, Mamá, yo no sé!” In an instant, the woman grabbed the girl by the back of the neck, breaking the glass of the still river before them and hurling them both into the water. The little girl struggled, but could not break out of the woman’s grasp. She tried to gain her footing, but her bare feet sank into the ground, anchoring her as the mud turned to tar and hardened over them. She screamed, but all that could be heard was the woman’s wailing above the surface of the water, gurgled and distorted in her submerged ears.

The little girl stopped struggling and the woman let go. The rush of the river was strong once again, the stillness forever broken, and it slowly eased the girls’ feet from the quicksand they’d been caught in. As the current dragged her farther and farther, the woman’s screams echoed in her ears before they too, finally washed away.

Sofia screamed awake in her bed, gasping for air and curling her fingers around the sheets. Every breath she took in only gave her more air to scream.

The wails threw Isabella out of her bed and she ran to her sister, grabbing her by the shoulders to stop her flailing arms.

“Sofia!” Isabella said. “Sofia, wake up! It’s okay, it’s just a dream, let’s go get Mama—” She was cut off abruptly as Sofia ripped her arms from her sister with incredible force. “¡No te atrevas a atrapar a esa mujer!

Isabella winced, staring at her sister in wonder. She looked at the girl she had always coddled and protected; as she met her eyes, fear coursed through her for the first time.

Sofia blinked in awareness, finally

seeing her sister in front of her. “Isabella?”

Isabella just got under the covers with her, pulling her in close. She muttered an astounded, “When did you start speaking Spanish?” Just then, Abuela ran in, her robe in disarray and the curler pins falling from her head. But Sofia was already asleep before she could answer.

“C’mon, Mijita,” Abuela said, laying out fresh clothes on the bed. “We can’t be late.” I peeled myself out of the sheets. I knew that the suit and blouse she put out for me would look nice on someone else: distinguished, pressed, well put together. But even on a different day, my body wouldn’t look right in it. I couldn’t remember the last time I ate something or brushed my teeth. I didn’t even remember why she was getting me ready until I saw what day it was.

I stared at Abuela blankly.

She looked back at me, first with darting eyes and her tongue slipping in and out of her mouth to hide her tears. These slowly turned into quick fidgets of discomfort as I stood motionless, and finally she stilled too, hitting me with the hardened gaze I knew so well. She snapped her fingers towards the outfit, ordering me without so much as twitching her lips.

“I’m not going to win.”

My voice sounded harsh and old, like I had rocks in the back of my throat. I tried to clear them, but they only rattled more.

“Get dressed, now.”

“And do what? Go in there and lose with dignity? What’s the point? I can’t pretend to be whoever that is anymore,” I said, pointing at the tan suit that looked too dark now.

“You go in there,” Abuela said.

“And be strong for your girls. If you don’t, who will?” My voice remained hoarse, even as I used it. “Maybe they are better off without me. I’m not who I used to be.”

“And who are you?”

The silence boomed. I didn’t answer. “Ay dios mio,” Abuela whispered,

beginning to pace. “Get dressed. Where did you even get that old thing?”

I looked down at the linen nightdress I wore, just barely paler than I had become. I told her I couldn’t remember.

She came to me and grabbed my shoulders. “Shower. Get dressed. And you go pretend to be whoever you have to. You’re better than this, Mijita. You can do it. You’re better than—”

Abuela just barely glanced over my shoulder, caught in a thought from long ago. Her back straightened and her breath caught, as if she had seen a ghost. I grabbed her arms, still hooked over my shoulders and they were leathery and somehow cold in the stuffy room.

“Abuela?”

She looked me again in the eye, her pupils wide and dark, threatening to swallow me whole. She whispered to me and her breath fanned my face, barely shifting the stale air.

“You can’t let her take them.”

Her arms easily slipped from mine as she rushed from the room, leaving the door open. Though I wanted to follow her, I knew she was right. I forced myself into the bathroom to prepare. To pretend.

I cranked on the faucet, holding my breath to stop the flow of tears as I stared at myself in the mirror. A shell of me stared back, stuck in the glass, begging me to bring her back. *Do you want to switch places?* I thought. How easy it would be; to jump back into the reversed world and let someone else do the talking. Just play with my dolls in the wrong hands and watch the world spin on behind me.

I gripped the edge of the sink hard enough to turn my knuckles white, and sobbed. My head hung so low I didn’t know if I could pick it back up, the running water roaring in my ears. The ache in my chest amplified, burning as my body swayed, stiff, and yet slack at the same time.

I can’t do this anymore, Daniel. All they see is a monster. How am I supposed to do this by myself?

I was not alone in the mirror when I looked up.

It was not Daniel. It was her, lurking behind me, hair still limp, skin still ghostly, and her eyes still blank, lost in a distant darkness. A new rage fueled within me, seeing the both of us there in the mirror, staring at each other with a hunger and a malice that was unknown to me, and yet felt so right.

“You did this to me,” I shook. “You did this!”

My fist reeled back and swung at the mirror, sending glass shattering, an array of reflections surrounding me. I saw a thousand of us from every angle, no side left unseen as each image of us plummeted to the cold, tile floor.

When I slumped against the cabinets in a heap, I saw a pair of bare feet in front of me. I slowly worked my way up, past the hem of her dress, up the seams of the linen, climbing the ends of her hair, and finally to her eyes. They were no longer just black. There was a light in them—a familiar one that stared back at me with the same intensity. I gulped for air, like a fish fumbling in disarray. I couldn’t get a word out. I tried a few times, but they just kept getting stuck in my throat, barely making it to the tip of my tongue before they fizzled out like a Winston hitting the pavement.

Finally, one word emerged; a gasp through the icy water into the blinding sun.

“You.”

She simply put out her hand, her face unchanging, shadows indulging the contours of her face, sinking them deeper into her skull.

I reached for her, my skin finally landing on hers.

When I touched her, we were gone.

“Mama?” Isabella called. “Mama, Abuela just left. She just walked out the front door, I don’t know where she went.”

She entered the master bedroom, scanning for her mother. She grazed the suit on the bed with her fingers as she walked past, towards the bathroom.

“Mommy?”

But her mother was not there, either.

Instead, she was met with the sight of broken shards of glass on the floor and bloody handprints on the handles of the small wooden doors. The faucet continued running, its whispers filling the room with a silent static.

“Mom!”

Though her mother could not hear her, she fought to get back to her. They all did. Every Walker, ones born in and the ones invited. They walked the night for all the little girls, down the long, winding streets to the unpaved road. They went that way for a long

time, pulling their way through the fog until finally they reached the river of glass. They stared over the edge, tears falling from the corners of their eyes, leaving not one ripple in the water. They say you can hear their cries from wherever you are.

But don’t be scared, my child.

They will do whatever it takes.

They will cross the river until the end of time.

They will pretend to be whoever, for however long they can.

She’ll be back. She always comes back.





LEVITATE

KIRSTIN DEMARQUEZ

Bodies and Memories

dried up in the sun

**luminous
shadow**

by itself

I close my ears

and my mouth

I'm afraid.

FEAR

SOPHIE FUDIM

MEIMEI LIU
IN AND THROUGH

pool of tears she went
on planning to herself
how she would manage it
you ought to be ashamed of yourself
i'm sure those are not the right words
would it be of any use now?
would you like cats if you were me?
it was high time to go
for the pool was getting quite crowded

who are you?
what do you mean by that?
why?
is that all?
what size do you want me to be?
and now, which is which?
well! what are you?
i can see you are trying to invent something

they stood so still
she quite forgot
they were alive
if it was so, it might be
and if it were so, it would be
but as it isn't
the time has come to talk of many things
of shoes and ships and sealing wax
of cabbages and kings

she was considering in her own mind
there was nothing so very remarkable in that
presently she began again
there was nothing else to do
this bottle was not marked "poison"

the first question of course was?
in that case
what I was going to say
you promised to tell me your history
with no jury or judge
i shall do nothing of the sort
this speech caused a remarkable sensation among the party
i wish i hadn't mentioned dinah
alas it was too late to wish that
the great question certainly was, what?

could you tell me, please, which way i ought?
you might as well say
that i like what i get
is the same thing as i get what i like
you might just as well say
nobody asked your opinion

THINGS UNSEEN

ARLO TINSMAN-KONGSHUAG

The shadow watched the man ride away and followed him, as it had countless times before, ever since the man had been gifted the curse of rational thought. It followed the scent of his thoughts. It was a scent of despair, desperation, confusion, madness, and loss.

It had followed him for five days now, the man hadn't slept at all during that time.

His mind was getting weaker by the hour, only being kept running by the methamphetamine coursing through his veins. He started to twist his fingers into his curls, a coping mechanism of some kind, and began to violently pull pieces of hair from his scalp, doing so without seeming to notice the pain it surely caused him.

It wouldn't be long now.

Soon he would lose what little of him remained there in the realm of the unseen, and the void would devour him.

It always did eventually.

Ezekiel looked behind him to see if his shadow was still there. He didn't know why he kept looking back at it.

Maybe it looked different somehow?

Bigger maybe? That seemed to have meant something to him once, something bad, but he put the thought in the back of his mind.

The sun had set on the LA harbor and the cranes were turning on their lights. Ezekiel watched these hulking steel behemoths shine out across the San Pedro Channel, bringing pillars of light into the darkening waterfront. He stopped his pacing and checked his phone again. The plug had said he was on his way, but Ezekiel didn't trust that for a second. Beacon Street wasn't a good

place to be just standing around waiting.

The Mexicans out this way and the industrial neighborhoods west of Long Beach didn't like black folks much. The possibility of this being a setup still hadn't fully left his mind.

Beemer, the plug, finally made his way down 16th to the empty lot where Ezekiel was waiting. He was a hard looking guy, short and covered in tattoos, and wearing a black pro-club hoodie with the words San Pedro Original printed on the back.

He eyed Ezekiel up and down, his eyes narrowing with suspicion, his hands tucked inside the pockets of his baggy 501's.

"You the Long Beach foo?" he asked.

"Yeah bro, that's me. You got that dime then?"

Beemer pulled out a bag of shiny rocks from the front pocket of his red hoodie, not unlike the ones Ezekiel had found wrapped in tinfoil inside his mother's purse a couple months back. After the exchange, Ezekiel tried to ask for a place to spend the night, begged him even. It was a long shot, but he didn't care. It was getting dark now, and he didn't know what else to do.

"Come on bro don't do me like that. Just let me just crash at the pad for a couple hours bro, swear I'll be gone in the morning... Please man..."

Ezekiel looked up at the man with pleading eyes, hoping to see a twinge of pity, a sad smile, anything to show him that he could be seen as a human being, a being worthy of empathy. Beemer just laughed.

"What, so you can steal? Get the fuck outta here, you're tweaking if you think I'm

letting you near my pad. I don't know you, foo. Go ask one of your Long Beach homies."

Beemer turned to leave, then looked and saw Ezekiel hadn't moved.

"Look dawg, I'm only gonna tell you once, I'm gon' be back here to scope the block in 20 and when I do you better be gone. I don't need weirdos like you burning my hood out."

Beemer turned his back on him and walked west on 16th St., back towards his house. He looked back and for a second, just a second, Ezekiel thought Beemer had a change of heart.

But he just spat: "*¡Ya! Largaré pinche mayate, y que'l diablo te lleve!*" throwing up one last middle before disappearing into the night. In another life, Ezekiel would have thrown hands if someone had called him that (he wasn't stupid, he knew what mayate meant). But he was just Ezekiel now, and he didn't want any trouble; he just wanted to float away from this cruel world and to never come back down.

His old friend Jorje, who once gave him the name Zeebone, would have stood up for him... He always did. But Ezekiel couldn't think about Jorjito right now, that was a pin he didn't want to pull. His shadow grew darker and more deformed as he pedaled away on his bike. He knew that meant something bad, but he tried to ignore it, tried to push it down, tried to tell himself that it was all in his head, that he'd just smoked some bad shit. But every time he stared back at his shadow, it moved with a life of its own, flickering like a dark flame.

I'll be good once I smoke... rock, weed, shit even cigs, whatever... I'll be good once I smoke something...

Thoughts of his old life didn't last long—fading minutes after they entered his head like so many others before them. Nothing seemed to stick anymore.

Maybe that was for the best...

The Shadow followed the man as he walked his bike into an abandoned rail yard, away from prying eyes.

It followed him as he locked his bike to a nearby tree and set up camp by the old train tracks. It followed as he pulled out a glass pipe and smoked his glistening crystals in the darkness of the thicket.

When it finally came to him, pouncing upon him and penetrating his battered mind, the man screamed and cried and he begged for mercy. Begged for it to end.

Many good people heard his cries as they passed by along the nearby street.

None came to help him.

Few even looked at him.

He was just another lost soul screaming into the darkness on the abandoned waterfront. It wasn't anything too hard to look past.

In the Norse Eddas, Odin and his two brothers gave shape to the world through murder and desecration. The new world, the world of men and gods, was created through the massacre of a peaceful world-giant, Ymir. From his blood, rivers were born. From his bones, the mountains were built. And from his hair, the trees were planted. Arthur thought this a fitting metaphor for the violence of creation. Arthur's knuckles turned white as he gripped the handlebars of his bike. He steadied himself with his right foot, placing his left on the pedal. He kicked off the ground and began pedaling through his alley and down Pacific Ave, through the heart of San Pedro.

He loved riding this way. He felt pride in the fact that he could say he lived off of Pacific. Most people in his area wouldn't have. Claiming Pacific Avenue was kind of a stretch if Arthur was being honest; he lived on a hill that took up the street's southernmost stretch, close to the ocean and far from the refineries and shipyards that kept property values in these parts so low. He lived in the nice part of town, an island of prosperity within an ocean of neglect; an ocean he had recently made a habit of sailing across.

As he crested the hill and headed north, he could see smokestacks in the distance spewing ash into the early dawn, streaks of grey across a canvas of orange and blue.

He passed 26th street, which separat-

ed his little enclave of prosperity from the rest of San Pedro. This part of Pacific was lined with liquor stores, laundromats, and a bunch of boarded up buildings and empty lots. He liked to people-watch when he passed through here, all kinds of weird characters out on the Ave.

He took it all in, consuming every image that crossed his path.

He saw old Croatian men smoking cigars in front of even older liquor stores. Heard young mothers yelling at their children in Spanish from the inside of cramped apartments. And watched boys his age in baggy dickies shorts and flannels strut down the street, trying to decide if they were Cholos or just skaters.

Once he passed 22nd street, he started to see tweakers, the drug-addicts, deranged or otherwise mentally ill people that always seemed to wander streets like these. One of them, an older white lady with matted dreadlocks, her body thin as a skeleton and covered in faded tattoos, was screaming gibberish at cars and pedestrians as they passed by. She was one of the more well-known tweakers in Pedro, her tendency to stride up and down Pacific yelling unintelligible rants to anyone passing by made her easy to recognize. She probably had a name, but most people called her the Avenue Lady.

She screamed at him too as he rode by, her eyes bloodshot and wide as saucers, most of her teeth missing.

“Coubloh huhn? Hunuh?? AUUYU-MAAHooooom...!”

“Yep, whatever you say ma’am. You have a good one.”

Arthur pedaled faster, riding east into a skyline of towering harbor cranes and refinery smokestacks.

He made his way past the container yards at San Pedro’s northeastern edge, across some train tracks and into Wilmington, the next neighborhood over.

He used to be scared to go out this far when he was younger. Even now Arthur couldn’t help but notice he was wearing a sweater with San Pedro Original written on it. It was just something he’d bought at a football

game, but that could still get him pressed out here. A kid he knew from school once had his jaw broken just for wearing a hat with a P on it not too far from here. It would probably be better to take Alameda Street instead of the main roads like PCH, less people on those old industrial corridors.

Arthur thought about the Eddas as he made his way down Alameda, the great industrial artery that connected the harbor to the rail yards and warehouses of Downtown. Around him stood giant smokestacks from the nearby Tesoro Refinery. The largest of these smokestacks spat flames every minute or so, burning off residue from last night’s rain. Behind him a train horn blew, followed by the beeping of a reversing truck on the docks.

This was the ugly part of creation. This was the corpse of Ymir.

He continued onto Anaheim Street, crossing the wasteland of refineries, junkyards, and strip clubs that defined Wilmington’s easternmost edge. There were more tweakers here, not the screaming kind though. These ones preferred to stay tucked away from the world, only coming out of their tents and alleys to scrounge for cans and scrap metal to pawn off.

It almost felt like they were hiding from something. They stared him down as he passed, eyes peering from unseen places, watching the skinny white kid ride past on a fancy mountain bike, not as invisible as he liked to believe he was.

Arthur caught sight of his destination, the tall, brightly painted buildings, rushing to greet him. His destination was in sight, Cabrillo Villages, a large gated community on the far western edge of Long Beach. It was a nice looking complex full of tall, modern-looking painted buildings. The only way you could tell it was low-income housing was its proximity to the refineries, which loomed like a grey wall from the far side of the train tracks, eating up the entire western skyline.

Jorje came out to meet him as he pedaled through the gates. He was a big guy, barrel chested and muscular with a brooding face that stared with a stern authority at anything that crossed his gaze.

He was also the only person Arthur had met in his 17 years that he could say was a good friend. He spent most of his time alone these days except for classmates he sporadically hung out with, such as Pedro, who saw him as an annoyance. The weird white boy nobody fucked with, who always tagged along with too much to say.

Jorje was the only one that seemed to think of him as more than just a burden to be tolerated. With his invitation, he’d given him a place to run from that isolation.

He was the kind of person you didn’t come across a lot out here. He didn’t fear difference, he embraced it. That was enough for Arthur to consider him his best friend.

Not that he had much competition. “Damn, took you long enough.”

Jorje grinned as he strode down the road towards Arthur. He reached into the front pocket of his hoodie and pulled out a green capsule, holding it out for his friend to see before stowing it away again. “Oh shiiiiit, that’s what’s up! Your mom’s not gonna trip if we smell like weed though?” Jorje laughed at that.

“I live with my older brother, man. He’s not gonna care as long as we smoke him out.” “Oh, for sure... where’s your parents at then?” said Arthur.

“My mom passed away a couple years ago. I only live with my brother,” responded Jorje, looking away ever so slightly as he did so and his stoic expression returned.

There was a bit of a pause after that. Arthur wasn’t exactly sure what to say.

“I’m sorry” came to mind, but that didn’t really seem to be appropriate here. Jorje broke the silence.

“We’re gonna go stop by my boy Zeebone’s first though.”

“Who’s Zeebone?” asked Arthur, a puzzled look on his face.

“My best friend, I’ve known him since I moved out here.”

“Oh.”

More silence. Arthur had thought it was just going to be the two of them.

“Don’t worry, he’s cool. He’s a little

quiet, but he’s a nice dude, you’ll like him. Plus, I try to keep an eye out for him. A lot of the folks around here like to fuck with him. Kind of weird, but he’s a good guy... like you.”

Arthur resented that last comment a little bit, but he followed along anyway. He’d already come this far, right?

Zeebone turned out to be a short black guy with glasses, a flat top and a missing front tooth. He was a little bit awkward, quiet, maybe a little spacy, but he was a nice guy, just like Jorje said. A really nice guy actually. Him and Arthur ended up getting along swimmingly, especially after it was revealed he had a knack for riding bikes as well. He had a sad look to him though, like a child who had lost his mother in the supermarket, or an exile who had spent a lifetime in isolation.

He suggested they ride towards downtown to find somewhere to smoke and everyone agreed that was a fine idea.

They made an odd trio as they rode down PCH: the reject white kid in an old flannel on his flashy mountain bike, the big Mexican guy with stud earrings and bruised knuckles on a red handlebar cruiser, and the nerdy black kid in oversized hand me-downs on a semi-legally acquired BMX with a flat tire.

It was a weird match, but it worked.

Loneliness had a way of forging odd fellowships. And soon it became clear that this was one who’s impact would last a lifetime.

* * *

They rode far and wide. Every week, they would meet and they would ride. Three musketeers charging into the unknown.

They would pass blunts back and forth as they pedaled into the darkness, swerving to avoid the headlights of oncoming semi-trucks heading west into the port. Three boys on the cusp of adulthood, hurtling joyfully into the abyss.

Alone, they wouldn’t have dared brave these roads at night, but with three they feared no one. Once the streets had been a place of shadows; but in those days they were a place of freedom; an uncharted land of opportunity and possibility. Eyes watched them from

the darkness, of course they did, here in these forgotten corners at the far southern edge of LA, but none came forward.

On those nights they could go wherever they wanted, they could do whatever they wanted to, and they answered to no power but themselves and the will of the pavement.

* * *

“You guys think the boogeyman’s real?” It was getting close to midnight and the only light in Zeebone’s room was the one emanating from the TV (currently playing a Bob Marley song on YouTube as per Zeebone’s request).

Jorje looked up from the blunt he was rolling and gave Arthur a confused smile. “Dawg, you be saying the randomest shit when you’re high, man.”

“I’m for real bro, just hear me out for a sec... I’ve been doing some research for this paper I got for my English class right? And-.”

“Oh damn, I forgot you’re still in school.” “Just for one more year. I mean, y’all could be too you know... You’re only 17, you and Zee could both still go back if you wanted...” “Haha, nah bro I’m straight off that, I got enough bullshit going on. What were you saying about that paper though?”

“So, like, my English teacher was talking about how every culture has some kind of version of a boogeyman right? You know... some monster or something that hides in the dark or closets and eats people or corrupts them and steals their souls or some bullshit like that... apparently, it’s one of the most cross-cultural tropes around. And I mean, since we’ve got a white kid, a Mexican kid, and a black kid all in the same room...”

“All multicultural and shit,” interjected Jorje, laughing a little.

“I thought it’d be cool to see what you guys thought. Get your take on the boogeyman and shit you know?”

Jorje paused for a second, pondering the idea.

“I mean... I remember my grandma used to tell me stories about the Cucuy... this old guy that would go around eating people and taking kids and that kinda stuff... but I

feel like that’s just how you teach kids that there’s fucked up people in the world. You know, stranger danger, and all that shit...” Suddenly, Zeebone, who’d been silent up until now, spoke up.

“I mean I don’t know... I used to think Tracy was the boogeyman... back when she’d come back all tweaked out and shit back when I still lived with her.”

Jorje, who’d just finished sealing the swisher, put the blunt down and considered this statement for a moment. There was a look of softness and sympathy that seemed unusual on his face.

“Yeah, I don’t blame you man. Being a little kid growing up with all that bullshit. I’d’ve been scared of her ass too.”

“Who’s Tracy?” said Arthur, feeling left out of the conversation he’d started. Arthur eyed the blunt and added, “Spark that shit Jorjito, I’m tryna get high.”

“Tracy’s Zeebone’s mom” said Jorje, matter-of-factly. He picked up the swisher and sparked it, taking a deep drag as he did so. “How come you don’t just call her mom then Zee?”

“Cause she’s crazy. She was doing crack while she was pregnant with me, you know? They had to put me in a plastic box or something when I came out cause I was so messed up. Premature, I think that’s the word for it...”

There was a long silence after that.

Don’t worry... about a thing... cause every little thing... is gonna be alright! The blunt passed from Jorje to Arthur and finally to Zee. He took a drag and spoke again. “I know you think I’m weird, Arthur.

Everyone does. She’s the reason I’m like that, I’m not like this cause I want to be. She’s the reason I’m all fucked up.”

“You’re fine bro... Trust, we’re all a little fucked up man.” said Arthur, taking the blunt from him.

It seemed like the right thing to say.

Zee didn’t even look in his direction, he just stared off into space, his eyes locking onto something nobody else could see.

“I don’t know about that bro, some of us’re more fucked up than others.”

Cause every little thing... is gonna be alright...

* * *

Zee sat alone in his room after his friends went back to Jorje’s apartment for better sleeping conditions (even if that just meant a mattress on the floor and a sleeping bag, albeit ones free of the roaches that infested his house).

That made him a little sad, Jorje used to always spend the night until Arthur started showing up every weekend. Now he was alone.

It was fine though.

He always stayed up late by himself when he was a little kid. He liked meditating, liked how it helped him focus, how it took his mind somewhere else; somewhere where he felt like maybe he was in control of what went on in there, like he had a say in what was unknowable and unreliable.

He tried to focus on that calming voice coming from his phone, trying to follow it, like a beacon in the distance on a foggy night.

...Now, I want you to breathe...breathe in and out... in through your nose... out through your mouth...and again.

Thoughts still crawled through his mind, thinking a lot about what Arthur had been talking about. The boogeyman, dark things lurking in the shadows, hungry things lurking at the edges of reality, waiting to prey on those unfortunate enough to cross their path.

He knew something about that, didn’t he? More than Arthur and Jorje did anyways... Zee tried to keep his mind calm and still, but every second seemed to send ripples through his brain. It was too hard to focus, too hard to stay in control.

He gave up and let the ripples turn to waves, and allowed his mind to take him where it wanted.

...

He is 7 years old, sitting in the living room of their old house in Inglewood, back before him and grandma moved down to Long Beach to get away from her.

He is watching the George Lopez show. It’s 2 AM. Everyone else has gone to bed or left the house for the night. Everyone except her.

While watching the opening credits, George and his family jump on a trampoline in slow motion while “Low Rider” plays in the background.

**...The low... ri-der... is a little slower... * He turns up the volume on George Lopez, tries drowning out the sounds coming from the kitchen. It isn’t enough.*

“WHERE ARE YOU???” I know you’re there somewhere... WHERE ARE YOU???” A crash comes from the kitchen. Looks like she was breaking grandma’s plates again. He wonders how many they have left? Two or three maybe?

Another crash.

“STOP FUCKING WITH ME AND GET IT OVER WITH PUSSY! COME OUT! EAT ME MOTHERFUCKER! EAT ME ALREADY!”

*He turns and sees his mom coming out of the kitchen, her hands bleeding and covered in glass. She is looking around wildly, searching frantically for something. She always does that. He doesn’t know why and he doesn’t want to. He just wants to watch George’s family bounce on their trampoline. *Badada-da... Badadada... Badaaaaa**

“Ezekiel! Ezekiel come here baby.”

She finally notices him sitting there, after almost an hour of going crazy in the room next door. He can’t tell if she is going to start acting normal again or not.

She walks towards him. He looks away, tries to glue his eyes to the TV, but now she is standing right behind the couch. He can hear her panting, out of breath from all the yelling she’s been doing

“Ezekiel baby... tell me you see the shadows. I know you see them. I know you can. Tell me you see them.”

“Mom, I’m trying to watch my show...”

“YOUR SHOW?! Your mother’s being eaten alive and you care about your fuckin’ show?! Look at me Ezekiel, LOOK AT ME!”

She grabs him by his shoulders and lifts him off the couch, turning him to face her. Her dreadlocks hang over her face, only partially obscuring the wild, bloodshot eyes that he hates looking at so much.

She grabs both sides of his head, forcing him to look her in the eyes. He wants her to get away. She’s too close.

“I’m your mama and you ain’t gon-

na ignore me. NOT ME! CAN YOU SEE THE SHADOW OR NOT? You need to tell me. Please tell me..."

"I don't know what you're talking about!"
"THOSE SHADOWS! TELL ME."

She screams, shaking him. He remains still, frozen in her grip.

The light from the TV projects their silhouettes onto the drywall. "It's just our shadows mom... it's ok... Really it is."

She looks back at him, and a moment of clarity seems to dawn on her.

"You can't see them, can you?"

She gripped his shoulders again, harder this time, her nails almost like claws digging into his flesh.

"Ow mom, stop."

She doesn't stop, she stares at him intently, a look of fear and urgency on her face.

"You can't see them now... you can't see them now, but one day you will... they're always there... always watchin'... and always hungry..."

She releases him, finally noticing the silent tears streaming down his face.

"One day you'll get it... best you know now than find out like I did..."

There is a deep sadness in her voice.

He looks at their shadows again, there, projected on that cracked white drywall. And for a second, he swears he sees them wave at him. First his mother's shadow, then his smaller one. They are waving at him, with a life of their own, like old friends.

He can see them.

They can see him...

Take a deep breath... in through your nose... out through your mouth

...
The sound of the video brought him back to reality.

Back to Long Beach.

Back to grandma's apartment.

Back to sanity.

Jorje and Arthur had left the roach of the blunt in his ashtray. Zee picked it up and lit it, inhaling greedily.

Soon his mind was somewhere else, drifting through the sky on a cloud of green. And why, when Jorjito had first befriended him when they were twelve years old, he stuck by his side ever since... and even why he spent so much time with Arthur... All of it

was the same thing really:

Something to keep him from falling off the edge.

Something that would ensure he'd never understand what the hell it was Tracy had been talking about.



* * *

"The fuck is wrong with you Arthur? We had 25 for the plug and your ass comes back with a gram. Fuck is that shit?"

The sun was shining through the plastic shutters of Zeebone's window, illuminating Jorje's enraged face. Arthur leaned back into the shadows of the room, away from Jorje, fear and confusion on his face.

"He said that was an 8th bro... I wasn't trying to take out a scale and weigh it in front of him. What you want me to do then? Go back and ask for my 20 back? That foo had a gun with him man, I don't know what you want from me."

Jorje rolled his eyes in frustration.

"No, obviously I don't want you to go back. I want you to man up, admit that you took an L and run me my 12 back. I'm not paying for that bullshit. I don't got no parents spotting me, I actually need that money."

"Fuck you man," muttered Arthur, but he still reached into his pockets for the money. "Oh, you're gonna talk shit to me under your breath now? Do something about it then pussy. Say that shit with your chest or shut the fuck up." Arthur froze, fear and shame written on his expression. Then his face

hardened and he shoved his friend, doing so without even thinking about it. He shoved him hard. Too hard.

Jorge responded by giving the white boy two solid punches to the gut, almost reflexively. He tried to do them lightly, but he was so mad it was hard for him to control himself. Arthur crumpled to the floor, gasping for air. He laid there for some time, shaking, and some of the roaches began to crawl over him, searching for food.

"Damn Jorjito, you didn't have to do all that," murmured Zeebone in a hushed tone. "Nah man shut the fuck up, you're lucky I don't drop your fiend ass too. You don't even put in for shit, just stay smoking my shit like a fuckin' bum. I'm tired of being the only one who knows how to act right here... I'm fucking tired!"

Suddenly too overwhelmed to speak (without his emotions becoming visible anyways), Jorje made for the door and slammed it behind him. He stormed into the living room, heading for the door, and stopped in his tracks when he saw Zeebone's grandma sitting on one of their overstuffed couches, bible in hand. He tried giving her a quick, "Bye Miss Marcy", as he passed her, only allowing himself to see her out of the corner of his eye. He didn't like looking at Miss Marcy for too long, even if she couldn't see him, he knew he still smelled from the hotbox in the room.

She took off her glasses and looked up towards Jorje, her eyes visibly milky from the cataracts she had no money to remove. She may have liked to put on those glasses, but Miss Marcy was as good as blind at this point. The bible was just for show.

Some things were just better if you didn't look at them too closely or for too long, and Ezekiel's grandmother was one of those things. This whole apartment was like that honestly. If you didn't think about things too much, didn't think about the food rotting on the counter, or the roaches crawling over the floor, or the lack of any kind of orderly force holding the place together (Zee was too disorganized to do that) then you were fine.

Miss Marcy turned to Jorje as he opened the door to leave, her milky eyes

seeming to stare into his very soul.

"Y'all leaving already? You and white boy just got here."

"Yeah, I am."

She continued to stare at him, her eyes unseeing and unblinking.

"Thought I heard people arguing back there. You boys make sure you're being nice now... and don't be smoking that shit in my house, I can still smell you know."

"I know Miss Marcy, I know. I'm sorry." Jorje wanted to leave, wanted to walk out the door and turn his back on Miss Marcy with her blank stare and uncomfortably direct conversation, but those milky eyes stared with an intensity that seemed to demand his attention, holding him in his place.

Miss Marcy went quiet for a few seconds, seeming to contemplate something. Then she spoke again.

"You watch out for Ezekiel, Jorjito. I know he's a lot sometimes but he needs people looking out for him... his mama didn't have nobody doing that and look how she ended up... I worry about him. I try to watch that boy best I can, but I can't do much watching out for anyone these days. Sometimes I think you're all that's keeping him from ending up like Tracy. You and the other one, White Boy, he don't got no friends besides you two really. People need friends, you know?"

"Yeah, they do."

Another pause.

"Your mama, God rest her soul, she always watched out for people. I remember back in the day she'd have all the little kids in the buildings playing on her porch... she was a smart one, your mama. She knew people need folk to watch out for them, especially the young folks... I know she taught you that, I see how you watch out for people... she was a good woman your mama... it's always the good ones that go out the worst ways... guess there ain't really no clean way to go out from cancer though is there...?"

"No, there isn't."

Jorje did his best to control his voice, to control the anger and raw emotion welling up in his chest. He didn't talk about his mom as a rule.

*In and out. Jorjito. In and out. It's ok.
You're ok.*

She paused again, longer this time. Jorje thought that she might have dozed off (she had a tendency to fall asleep with her eyes open) and tried to take the opportunity to leave. As he opened the door, she focused her gaze and spoke one final time, this time with a much more grave and urgent tone. "But you boys make sure you stay with Jesus and take care of each other... and stay inside more... I don't care if you gotta smoke in here... not really... There's bad shit out there... bad things... I know you boys like being outside, I know all about those little "bike rides" y'all take. You all think you're invisible out there, but you're not. You are easy to see and there ain't nothing good out there to see you, just crazies and the demons they're running from... If you boys don't stop fucking around you could end up trapped out there with them. I seen it happen too many times. There's things out of your control in this world, forces only God can understand, and it's best not to go testing them. I've known and loved too many people that have."

Jorje didn't know what to say to that, so he turned his back on her and closed the door behind him.

* * *

They rode through the dead of night, three dark horses charging into oblivion. And from the darkness, unseen eyes followed them.

It was almost 3AM, later than they'd ever been out on the bikes.

They were pedaling down an abandoned stretch of freeway near the mouth of the LA River, one of those projects the city always said it was going to get around to finishing, but now mostly served as a smoking area and campground for West Long Beach's rejects and crazies. There was an old tagged up drainage pipe near here that stuck out over the LA River, a perfect vantage point to see the lights of the harbor.

It was a trip they'd made countless times before in their wanderings, but something felt off this time. There were no whoops

of laughter, no jokes being passed back and forth with their blunt, and empty, nothing, but the sound of three sets of wheels rolling along the cracked pavement, an ominous sound.

As always, they could feel eyes on them in the shadows, but for the first time, they didn't meet these gazes with defiance, but with fear.

But nobody said anything.

There was no communication to-night.

They arrived at the pipe and the feeling only grew. Arthur waited for one of his friends to acknowledge the situation, but nobody spoke. Jorje lit a blunt and they passed it around, as they always did, but every hit seemed to bring despair rather than comfort.

"You guys, this don't feel right..."

And then he saw it... What had been lurking in the darkness.

The moon came out from behind a cloud and now Arthur could see his shadow. But it wasn't his shadow. Not anymore.

His shadow never stretched that long, and it definitely didn't move like that, pulsing and writhing with a life of its own.

It looked like something straight out of a Lovecraft novel, a mass of writhing hands and tentacles, all seeming to reach towards him.

And everything was getting so much darker now. Unnaturally so. He could barely see Jorje now and had no idea where Zee might be. Something had severed his lines of communication; he was alone. Truly alone, even as the people he held closest to his heart stood beside him.

He opened his mouth to say something, warn his friends maybe, but nothing came out. He turned to Jorje and saw that his mouth was moving, moving as if he were yelling or screaming, but he couldn't hear the words. There was no sound in the void.

All he could do was stare at the thing that had once been his shadow.

Its writhing mass had taken a shape, a towering figure that stretched 30 feet from his feet to the edge of the river. It looked unnaturally detailed now, almost like a human being, if something that stood 30 feet tall and

seemed to be made from pure darkness could be considered human. Calling the thing that stood before Arthur's darkening field of vision a shadow would've been like calling one of the container ships in the harbor a raft.

...I see you...

A voice spoke from the darkness engulfing Arthur's mind. It echoed through his skull, like a gunshot fired in a parking structure.

It was the shadow. Given everything that had happened right now, it had to be.

...Do you see me...?

What are you?? WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU??

The thoughts felt so pointless, like screaming into a soundproof room.

...I AM...

Images began rushing into Arthur's darkening mind. Bad ones. It felt like fresh sandpaper being grated against the tender surface of his brain. He saw a man, old and shriveled, curled under a blanket on the side of the freeway (it looked like somewhere close by, maybe the 710?). He watched him pick up a cigarette that had been coated in a black, tar-like substance and light it, dragging from it greedily. He then began to cough and blood spattered from his mouth as he did so, some of it dripped from the corners of his mouth, staining his yellow-grey beard. The man seemed to take no notice as he took another drag, but Arthur saw a tear roll down the man's weathered cheek.

He saw a young boy with cuts on his arms and legs and a black eye shooting a BB gun at a mangy looking cat with a broken leg, who howled in pain with every shot. Eventually the boy stopped shooting and began to beat the poor thing with the butt of the gun, screaming as he did so, only stopping when its head was a little more than a bloody pulp. The boy then proceeded to drop his plastic weapon, curl up into a ball, and begin to wail. He saw an old woman running naked through a crowded street, screaming a tirade of words at the top of her lungs. It was the Avenue Lady. Had Arthur been in control of his own mind her words would have sounded like gibberish, that strange garbled tongue that every tweaker

seemed to be fluent in, but through the medium of the shadow, Arthur could hear every word with undeniable clarity:

"You're all blind. The worlds full of demons and you're acting like you can't see them. I know you can see them. Why can't you see them? Why won't any of you open your eyes? Why won't any of you tell me that what I'm seeing is real? Why won't any of you help me?"

As this last image passed the shadow spoke again, its cold, inhuman voice ringing through Arthur's battered mind.

...I am the scream that is silenced... the void... Eater of men ... bane of reason... I am The Unseen... the reality that is ignored... the horror that is forgotten... I am man's unhappy secret... The inevitable truth...the change that is dreaded... the darkness that lurks within... I am decay... I am the consumer of all creation...

More images flashed through Arthur's mind: light and love were an illusion and darkness and despair was an inevitable truth.

It was too much.

...I am Consumer of ALL... I will consume YOU...

He knew that if this kept up, he would be lost. His mind would give out and reality would be lost to him. There would only be pain, madness, and despair.

Go away.

Suddenly another voice rang in his head. It was Zeebone's voice. Arthur recognized it at once. It rang loud and clear, louder than Zee had ever spoken out loud.

You're not going to do what you did to her to them. LEAVE THEM ALONE.

...I am Inevitable...

And with those last words the darkness began to dissipate from his mind and Arthur was back in the real world. Jorje was huddled in a ball on the asphalt, just a couple feet from where he was standing, tears streaming down his face. He was shaking and whispering inaudibly to himself. Now Arthur saw Zeebone staggering towards them. His face was calm, peaceful even. He took both he and Jorje into his arms, an astounding feat for someone so small, and held them close in a

hug.

As he did so, Arthur saw the shadow on the ground was shrinking, slowly but surely. No, it wasn't just shrinking, it was getting sucked up. Zee was absorbing it. Taking it into his being. It was miniscule now, insignificant, consumed by Zeebone's embrace. Then it was gone.

Zeebone released his friends and sat on the concrete, his face in his hands.

All was quiet now, save the roar of the semi-trucks speeding along the freeway and the distant honking of train whistles. The three of them stood there in silence for a time, staring out at the river and the streetlights that reflected off of its dark waters.

Arthur was the first to speak.

"What the fuck was that?"

"The Unseen," responded Zeebone, almost reflexively. He didn't even look up.

"What's the Unseen? What're you talking about man?" asked Arthur.

Zeebone, still with his head in his hands, shook his head slowly.

"I don't know bro. The things we saw, the place it took us... I've never seen it do that..." "You don't know?" said Arthur, visible disbelief on his face, "You've seen it before then? Is it gone? Did you kill it?"

"I don't think you kill something like that... They aren't really alive, they just are..."

"You're not making any sense dude. What the hell are you talking about Zeebone?" No response this time, just more head shaking.

It had a weird swaying motion to it, almost like he was trying to get something lodged in his brain loose.

He had no answers for Arthur's questions. More time passed; minutes turned into

hours. Still, they sat in silence.

Eventually, the eastern horizon began to lighten with an orange hue. The sun was finally coming up. Jorje rubbed his eyes and looked around at his friends.

"Damn, how long we been here? I'm tryna get back home."

Zeebone spoke:

"Shut up, Jorjito, and look at the sunrise." At any other moment in time, saying "shut up" to Jorje would have resulted in a hard punch to the arm, but this time he stopped talking, and he watched.

The light from the east was starting to shine across to the western horizon, slowly lighting up the world in a whirlwind of orange and white; the buildings, the graffiti, the cranes, the refineries, even the inky LA River turned to gold as its rays touched the water.

Zeebone turned his head towards the sun and smiled, taking off his glasses and closing his eyes.

It was almost as if he knew this would be the last time the three would be together, truly together.

He basked there in the sun, trying his best to fill himself with its light.

And even then, the void in his mind began to grow.

* * *

"So, I talked to Zeebone the other day."

Arthur's voice was hoarse. The cigarette habit he'd picked up during the pandemic was starting to catch up to him.

"You're kidding," responded Jorje. It was hard to read his tone over the phone, always had been.

Arthur paused a second before he spoke again, wondering how he should word himself. "He was at a shelter in Crenshaw or something... and... well, he said they diagnosed him with schizophrenia, like his mom was..." "Damn... Yeah, I figured it was something like that going on.

"He said he's clean now though, and that he's doing better and that he's sorry for all the weird shit that happened."

"I'm glad to hear it. Tell him I wish him the best."

"I was thinking maybe we could go out to visit him sometime, maybe go and ride bikes out there, just like old times you know?"

Jorje paused.

"Nah bro... I'm glad he's doing better... I really am... but I'm not trying to kick it with him like that anymore. I don't want to

see him" That took Arthur by surprise.

"But he says he's better now. You're really not gonna go see him?"

"Nah."

"But, why?"

"That's between me and Zeebone. Shit's not your business man."

"Well, I mean, if the three of us aren't all gonna be friends no more I'd at least like to know why... Let's just talk about it bro..."

"There's nothing to talk about, that shit's between me and him. Stop asking, it's annoying."

"Man, fuck that. I know something happened with you two. Don't I deserve an explanation why things can't go back to the way they were? He probably doesn't even remember what he did with how fucked up he's been in the head. We both know he hasn't been the same since that night on the river."

"Yeah, you're right, he hasn't. That's why I'm not trying to see him."

"Stop acting all weird and tell me what the hell's going on."

"Homie, keep talking all hard like that and watch what happens. I'll really knock you the fuck out like I did last time."

It had been a while since Arthur had heard Jorje talk in that tone, it was the one he used right before he'd tell you to shut the fuck up, and maybe threaten an ass beating too.

But things were different now. Arthur wouldn't let anyone make him a bitch, not even Jorje.

"Do it then, if that'll make you feel better. I don't care. You can't punk me like that anymore man, we're grown now."

There was silence for a while. Then Arthur heard him take three deep breaths before he spoke again.

He's trying. He really is.

"Look man, I know you. I know how you think you're a writer. You think everything happening around you is one big story and you're entitled to its ending. You want everything in life to have closure and no loose ends. You think you're entitled to it. Homie, I got news for you, that's not how real life works. In the real world you don't get all the answers,

you don't get to tie things up with a little ribbon and write "the end" and send it off to your publisher. Real life isn't a fucking book. I love you homie, I love you like a brother, but things aren't gonna go back to the way they were and you're not entitled to an explanation to everything you want answered. This is my story, not yours, and I get to choose if I want to tell it or not,"

"...Alright then... just wanted to let you know what's up, I guess I'll talk to you later then." "For sure, later man."

Jorje hung up, leaving Arthur with a strange sinking sensation and an overwhelming sense of loss.

This is really it then. This is the end.

* * *

Once upon a time, at the edge of the world, a trinity rode through neglected streets in the dead of night. These were truly days of wonders. In those days they could go wherever they wanted, they could do whatever they wanted to, they answered to no one.

In those days, beauty could be found in the neglected and hope could shine in the darkest void. In those days it seemed like if the three were together, all of the horrors in those shadows were compelled to stay back.

In those days the refinery smokestacks watched over them like sentinels, familiar and comforting, always within sight.

In those days they were eagles and those pothole-riddled, tagged-up roads were to them a cloudless sky, one they could have soared through forever.

In those days they were a trinity, blazing a trail of light through these forgotten streets at the edge of the world, brilliant and unconquerable; three children of the pavement, bound in a brotherhood of fire and smoke.

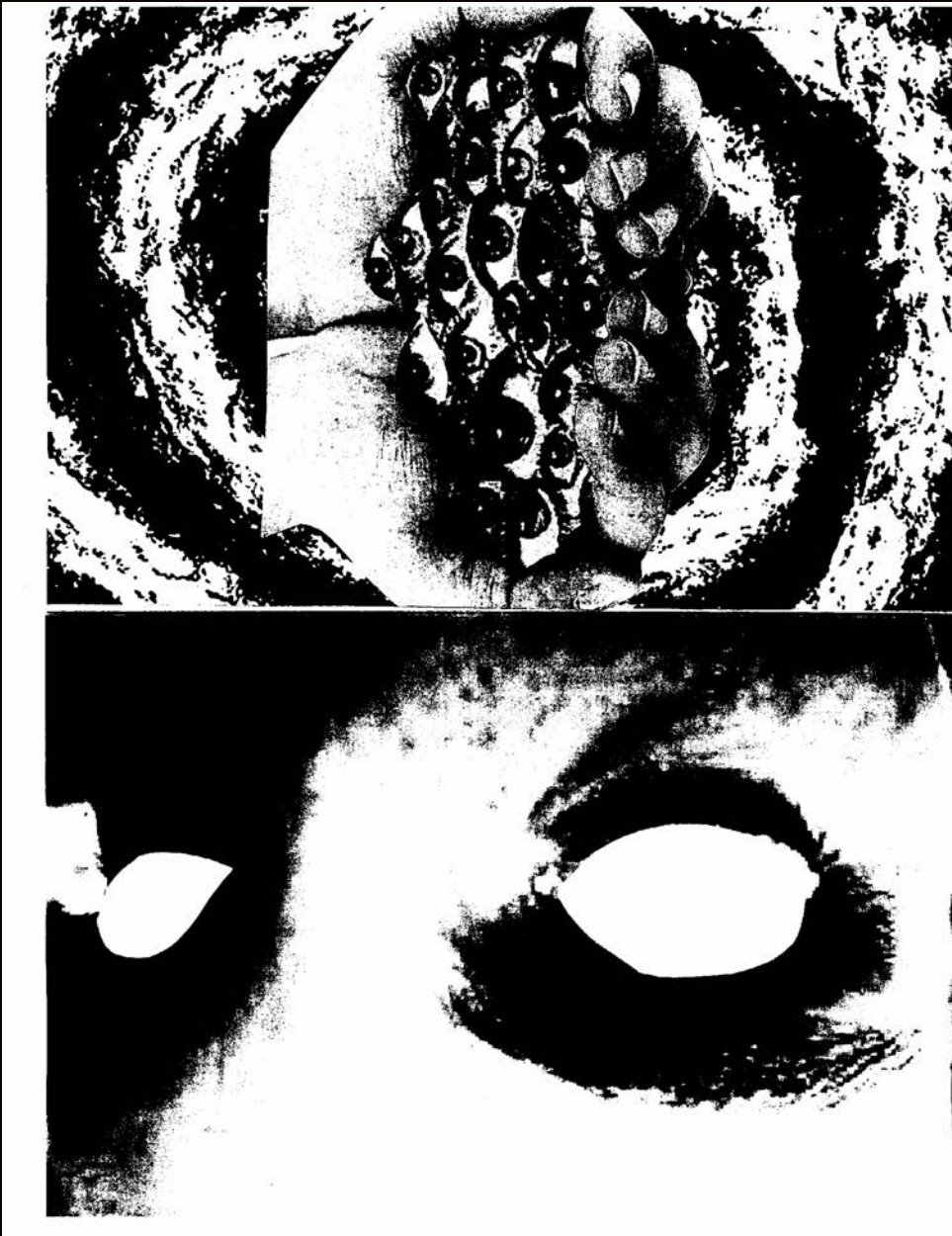
In those days, darkness couldn't have touched them if it tried.

But days come and go.

So do trinities.

And so do shadows.

It's just the way things are.



LOSS OF SIGHT

ABEL DIAZ

THE TIRE SWING

MADALYNN WIBLE

I remember the tire swing in the backyard,
A dusty tire hanging from a thick branch,
My sister and I would take turns swinging
Our dad pushing us into the sky

Our giggles bursting into laughter,
Our faces aching from the smiles,
Our hearts pumping faster and faster
We thought it would never end,

But as the days went on,
And each month bled into years,
As each season crept into the next,
The tire swing sat still.

Barely moving with the breeze
Dead leaves and musty water weighing it down,
The rope now another part of the tree
Like an extra branch, not meant to be,

But not even that will last,
The rope will snap,
The tire will fall,
Becoming a pile of rubber and rope.



CHAMBEANDO

ABEL DIAZ

MY CRAFT

SOPHIE FUDIM





THE TATTOOER

JULIA CENTENO

A LETTER FROM THE DECEASED

TANNER SALAZAR

Dear those who have a beat in their heart,

Relax, take a breath, do
Not worry so much about the future.
Control what you can now;
Everything will be fine.

It's ok to feel pain, because it
Must have meant a lot.
To never feel pain is to never love
And is that a life worth living?
No, so breathe deep and just

Relax

IS IT JUST ME? ILANI AVILA

You know that feeling you get when
You're more than just friends
But, no one wants to admit it, so instead,
Under the covers
We crawl into bed
Still, pretend we're not lovers.
Like we're just friends...
But my heart aches every time I see you
Every lingering second of us in the same room,
Intoxicating and nerve-wracking and bone-chilling
and
But there is no 'and'.
There is no 'us', just You.
Just Me.
But sometimes – sometimes I go visit
The places we once were
Hoping I catch a glimpse of what it felt like
To be there with you
Hoping secretly, you do the same

DESTINATION UNKNOWN

JOE DONNELLY



AN OPEN LETTER TO A GIRL I ONCE LOVED

MEYLINA TRAN

Do you ever think about the last days we had together, before we pointed loaded revolvers at each other and spilled blood until we had nothing left to give? On the playground of our childhood was a tower constructed simply of metal poles and faith—located where the bark dust meets the asphalt, next to the fence at the back of the kindergarten, like an afterthought. It was always unbearable in winter; the metal cold against our bare hands, the biting wind kicking up our skirts and tangling our hair; the apples of our red-flushed cheeks frozen against venomous sleet. But, in the spring, when the air was hot and sticky with an oncoming rain-forest summer, when the trees over our heads bowed reverently with the weight of laundry detergent-scented cherry blossoms, we would climb that tower and talk in the way that only fourteen-year-olds who had grown up together would. Do you remember all of the secrets we shared? Do you have old pictures of me hidden behind the people you truly do care about? If so, why am I still there—hiding? Surely you didn't forget about me.

Mom (*aware that something dramatic has happened, but blind to the details that I purposefully kept hidden from her, because how the hell am I supposed to tell her that my best friend since I was seven is no longer my best friend?*): “Do you want to invite her over?”

Me: “No.”

Mom: “Are you guys' still friends?”

Me (*hoping that she'll drop the subject because it hurts too much—actually no, it doesn't. It doesn't hurt*): “No.”

You interrupted a perfectly pleasant Sunday morning with an apology that I had

not expected you to give; though I had privately, in my grief and solitude, demanded of you. Eyes heavy with lingering sleep, breath dry, limbs in need of a long, joint-popping stretch, and safe in my bed, I could barely comprehend the long-winded, flustered text message you had sent to me through a third-party mediator.

Marissa (*the third-party mediator*): “She says she regrets losing you guys.”

Me (*still on the precipice of sleep and awake*): “Oh.”

It will not be until years later that I realize just how callous and cruel that response was. But consider this: I am almost fifteen-years-old and have successfully managed to keep that playground a distant memory in my rearview mirror. I have kept you strictly locked away in your box delicately labeled *Do Not Touch*, the cracks patched up with duct tape and a hoard of new, better friends that would never betray me the way you did. I'm trying not to do the same thing you did to me to them, but god, it's so hard, and I understand why you did it. I wish you hadn't been a kid when you did it because now, I'm an adult, mad at a kid, and that's not fair. But who cares about “fair” when you managed to punch a hole in that box and shoot me between the fifth and sixth rib, just below the heart.

You didn't kill me, but the wound left an ugly scar in its place. Before, the only marks you left on me were kind ones: braided friendship bracelets, black marker tattoos, and souvenirs from *Great Wolf Lodge and Kah-Nee-Ta Resort & Spa*. I had no car, nor any friends with cars, that could take me away from the

makeshift Chuck E. Cheese playland that was my house.

But I did have a friend that I could sequester myself with at the lopsided dining table my dad had made that summer for my mom. We were the older sisters of the nine-year-old boys trapped in a game of tag that went around and around the dining table, the kitchen island, the coffee table, and up and down the stairs into off-limit rooms where they could yell, “Time out!” the split second before capture. Despite their limitless nine-year-old energy, the square foot of space that she and I occupied was left clear of disaster. We resided within the eye of a rambunctious tornado, gossiping together in between bites of *Little Caesar's Pizza* and Doritos.

Selena: “Did you see that she blocked you?” Me: “Who?”

I didn't see or hear from you once in the summer between childhood and adolescence. My phone was curiously devoid of sleepover details, roller skating plans, and/or Caller IDs with your name plastered across the screen. Your contact ceased to have an overwhelming presence in my phone, a fact which I had been ignorant of—I hadn't noticed until it was pointed out to me, and then I wondered; *Where were you? What have you done?*

Selena: “She blocked me too. And Sara.”

Me: “How do you know?”

Selena: “Marissa told me.”

Marissa had somehow managed to escape your sudden purge of the group unscathed. As reported through the grapevine, the reason for the firing squad showing up at our door was because we had been bad friends to you. The definition of “bad friends” by middle school girl standards is completely vague and nonsensical, but an itemized list of every way that I had wronged you floated across my vision like the floating green codon of the Matrix. I ignored you, I lied to you, I preferred the company of other people over you, but even with all of that, I will never know what I did to make you shove me away.

Can I tell you something? There's a popular narrative that is forced down the throats of twelve-year-old girls up until the

day they die, characterizing them as catty, fraudulent, and fake. Female friendships are nothing, but a ruse. They are status-climbing vehicles careening towards their inevitable destruction, engulfed by the fires of petty revenge and sabotage. The notion of a successful, supportive, and nurturing female friendship is radical. It's impossible; I think petty revenge and sabotage is what happened to us. I think we fell for it.

Can I tell you something else? The moment I heard Selena say the words, “She blocked you,” I numbed myself to your entire existence. I stopped my stomach from dropping and forced my heartbeat to return to its steady, healthy rhythm, *ba-dump, ba-dump, ba-dump*. I flexed my fingers experimentally around the curve of my plastic party cup making sure that the hand you used to hold could continue to function even though it had gone cold in your absence. I flipped my hair over my shoulder—hair you used to braid and bemoan because, “It's so much nicer than mine!” Hair that has become stiff and dead from dyeing, bleaching, and heat styling—in a nonchalant manner because none of it mattered.

Me: “Well, she was a bad friend too, so fuck her.”

The rate at which you visited the movie theater increased exponentially when you and Jerry started going out.

I was supportive of the relationship. How could I not be? You were my best friend and he was a boy that I talked to in the lunch line, during recess, and after school underneath the breezeway for half an hour. Jerry and I had a relationship before your boyfriend was added to his resumé. There was nothing in the world that could get me to dislike him, except the weekends spent in the back of cold, dark movie theaters.

You: “Do you want to watch a movie with us this weekend?”

Me (*trying not to gag at the mental image of you and him eating each other alive*): “No.”

If I had said yes, and sat right next to you two—because you argued against me sitting anywhere else for some fucking reason—while you sucked face the entire time,

my respect for you and Jerry would have plummeted to rock bottom.

Me: "How was it?"

Hannah (*after having made the unfortunate mistake of accompanying the two of you to the movie theater*): "They were so fucking annoying."

But you always made up for it with invitations to dinner at your favorite Mexican restaurant and trips to Skateworld, where we would joyously lose ourselves in the whirlwind of blinking neon lights, the sharp pinch of borrowed roller skates, and the smell of sweat and hot dogs. Your mom would sit in one of the little plastic booths overlooking the skate rink, a book in one hand and a forgotten soda in front of her. If not Skateworld, then the mall, where we would run back and forth between *Forever 21* and *H&M*, gazing with wide eyes at the fashionably dressed mannequins standing in the windows of department stores, wishing that our budding teenage bodies would cooperate long enough for us to wear clothes like that, tight and slinky and sexy. What a sight we must have made; two young teenage girls in leggings and strange graphic t-shirts standing in front of stores they had no business being near.

I'm sorry that I didn't know how to handle your depression; that I didn't know how to react to the cuts on your thighs and the sight of your razor sitting innocuously on my bathroom counter the day after my birthday party. But what were you thinking bringing your loose razor in an Altoid tin to my house on my fucking birthday? Please, I want to understand.

Here's how I imagine it: everything was changing so suddenly—you found out you were adopted; you were failing school; Sara had claimed your place as my best friend, which I made painfully clear; and you felt out of control. You felt so out of control that the only way you could regain some semblance of that frail command was in that Altoid tin. Maybe my birthday was a bad day for you. Maybe you wanted to be there to support me, but couldn't stand any of it. Maybe the only way you could even face a party was to tuck that Altoid tin into your pocket. I don't know. All I know is that I had the best day of my

life, and it all came crumbling down when I opened that stupid fucking tin. I never had another birthday party again.

You: "Did you look in it?"

Me (*lying*): "No."

The part of me that is still fourteen-years-old wants to grab a fistful of your coarse blonde hair and throw you into the nearest brick wall, because how fucking dare you? But the part of me that is twenty-one-years-old will refrain for the time being. I imagine if we meet again, it'll be in some old diner, a place that neither of us know; neutral territory, where the red vinyl of the booths are cracked and glistening with body grease. We'll compare notes, take stock of what we have, and I'll make sure to leave you with a gift: the imprint of a gun against your thigh—a reminder that however many bullets you may keep in your coat pocket, I carry a dozen more.

Can you forgive me for what I've done? It's okay to lie. I'll be lying too when you ask, "Can you forgive me for what I've done?"

You: "We should kiss." Me: "No."

You: "Why not?"

Me: "We're both girls."

You: "So? Who cares?"

I loved you. I still love you, detached and removed as it is. But time, space, and a practiced nonchalance towards your continuing existence cannot erase the love that I held for you.

We kissed once in the quiet and darkness of your room, illuminated by the old box TV in the corner and the yellow street lights filtering through the cracks in your curtains, and never again. Once was enough. Your bedroom door was closed, your blankets were pushed to the floor, and your words shocked me to my core.

How did you know? How did you know that at twelve-years-old, I've been trying on different sexualities like I would try on jeans in the Old Navy dressing room, unsure of what I was seeing? How did you know? You didn't know. You still don't know, years later, because how could I have told you when our relationship has turned into a silent stand-off between two gunslinging rogues staring each-other down in the crumbling ruins of the

playground we called our childhood?

It was the most dispassionate, anti-climactic kiss of my life. We laid down side by side on your bed once the deed was done and let the TV lull us to sleep.

In third grade, we hunted Bloody Mary in the decrepit and haunted bathroom of our school gymnasium. With its single overhead light above the one sink and the window cast in shadow covered by a prison-like gate, the gym bathroom was the perfect place to capture Bloody Mary. You were buzzing with excitement, and I was trying to hide my fear by hugging myself around the middle. Nothing escapes from the gym bathroom, and I was convinced that when Bloody Mary found us, she would crawl out of the handicap stall toilet, drenched in sewer water, throat dripping with blood, a wraith ripped out of a horror film.

You sank us in darkness before I was ready and I had no choice but to whisper that damning chant with you: "Bloody Mary. Blood Mary. Bloody Mary." She didn't show up. You stormed out of the bathroom once you realized that she was a fraud. Your scuffed white tennis shoes squeaked against the linoleum, and I followed, relieved that we hadn't been slaughtered in that crusty bathroom. Still, I wish you hadn't left without me, alone for Blood Mary to capture and drag me back into the sewers. What happened to best friends forever? I didn't think leaving them behind in the bathroom to be brutally murdered was the mark of a good friend. But we stab each other in the back. It's what we do. It's what we were 'made' for.

I'll forgive you like I always do when you trade your mandarin oranges from the school lunch for my fruit snacks. Not a very fair trade in hindsight, but we still had something the other wanted. I'll laugh at you for drinking white milk, instead of chocolate milk, and you'll tease me about my fruitless crush on

James, and it'll be like the Bloody Mary fiasco never happened. We'll be okay again. We'll always be okay again.

Despite your insistence to rewrite our history in a way that was pleasing to you, we were not friends in preschool. If photographic evidence can be believed then you had another little blonde girl to play with, and I had no one. I remember running wild while you clasped her hand and dragged her from one end of the playground to the other. Whatever happened to her? Did you lose her the same way you lost me? Or is girlhood so fleeting that you don't even remember her? When will the day come where I am nothing but another girl in a fading picture that your grandchildren find tucked away in the attic, and will you be able to remember my name when they ask? I'll remember yours.

One day, I will return to that playground and cry because all I will be able to see is how everything has aged and weathered in our absence. I will move through this space as if it has been coated in varnish and left untouched, a shrine to the days when the sun was still golden and the air was still sweet. The cobalt blue paint will be peeling, the iron chains will be rusted from years of carbon dioxide exposure. The plastic will be cracked, the wood will creak, but the tower will still be standing in that far off corner, solitary and forgotten—just the way we liked it. When I return to that playground, I will climb that four-box high structure and sit on the top rung balancing precariously despite the protest of old bones and aching limbs. I will close my eyes in the way that saints do when they are speaking to God, and time will collapse in on itself. Everything, all at once, will happen again: our chasing feet will kick up bark dust again. Our hands will trade sweets and goodies and treats again. Our laughter and secrets will permeate the sweet spring air again, and you will be my best friend again.

EVERYONE I'VE LOVED

KASEY DAVIS

If you listen closely, you can hear the echo of my mother's laugh in mine
If you're paying attention, you'd notice my father's smile on my face
How my fingers mimic my friends', through my hair, looking for calm
If you asked, I'd tell you I always have a book on hand because I liked how my mother
looked pulling one out in the waiting room
You'd see it in my face when that one song plays; the one I can feel in my spine, my
grandfather's ghost
I only crack my knuckles on my cheek because my brother told me its more fun that
way
If you're curious why I didn't finish the coffee I asked for, I just wanted to know how my
father felt when he ordered one everywhere he went
If you see me stop to look at the cherry blossom trees, I would want to tell you how they
only became beautiful when a friend I no longer talked to shined when she said she
loves how they rain
Come with me to see the moon, I'll tell you of my grandmother and that she taught me
to believe in its powers

I have assumed their debts, I am their heir
I am what they made me



LA GATRINA

ABEL DIAZ

CONTRIBUTORS

ABIGAIL PADILLA is 22 years old, a Creative Writing Major, and the Managing Editor for the *Quaker Campus*.

Transformative Place: Fremont Hospital. It's where I was put in in-patient care when I couldn't guarantee my own safety from myself.

ABEL DIAZ is a senior at Whittier College, where he transferred in the Fall of 2021. He will be graduating this May with a B.A. in Business Administration. He has been doing photography for three years, and has built a portfolio that has allowed him to do two art galleries this past year.

Transformative Place: For me, my garage was the place that made me learn who I was, what I liked, and a place where I could be myself without having any distractions.

AISLINN BURLEY is a community college transfer student pursuing her Bachelor's Degree in English.

Transformative Place: The road — it's where I grew up, and I think it's where I'll always be the most meditative and vulnerable.

ALEJANDRA ORTEGA is an English Literature Major and Business Administration Minor. If you ask her, she'll claim that her hobby is reading (but she really just collects books at this point.)

Transformative Place: A place that transformed me along the way is the classroom where I was asked to prove myself several times, exceed expectations, and then cry.

ALEXANDRIA AMAYA is studying English, Theater, and Physics at Whittier. She has always had a passion for writing and acting. One of her goals before she graduates is to adapt one of her short stories into a film for her senior project.

Transformative Place: Agia Galini transformed me. It's a village on the Greek island, Crete. My grandfather immigrated to the U.S. from there, and I was able to visit for the first time last summer.

ALEXANDRA ROMERO loves to write about culture, especially her own.

Transformative Place: Mexico is a place that takes me back to my roots. Every little detail about Mexico; from colorful little straws, folk art, pyramids, colorful buildings, and celebrating death are the reasons for my happiness existing.

ANGÉLICA ESCOBAR is a fourth-year English and Political Science Major, and EIC of the *Quaker Campus*. She's from Orange County and has a love for beach town bookstores. She plans to become a journalist after finishing grad school!

Transformative Place: Chawton, England because of the goats.

ARLO TINSMAN-KONGSHAUG is a Creative Writing Major and a Junior at Whittier College. He grew up in the Los Angeles Harbor area and briefly resided in Santiago, Chile for two years. Both locations have served as settings and inspiration for many of his works of fiction and creative nonfiction.

Transformative Place: I believe that the places that have changed me the most as a person are the avenues and streets of the Harbor Area, which I spent most of my teenage years biking through with my two best friends.

DAYQUAN MOELLER is an artist in anthropologist drag.

Transformative Place: My bed.

ELI JUDD is a graduating senior, who is an English and Theater Major with an emphasis in Performing Arts, and a minor in Film Studies.+

Transformative Place: Whittier College. The College is the furthest I have been away from my home.

When I first came to Whittier, I felt incredibly scared. After a couple of weeks, I slowly, but surely, broke out of my social shell.

ELLIS B. WALKER V is a fourth-year WSP Major. When he isn't working at the OEI or being the unofficial dorm dad of Harris A, you can find him playing the Sims 4 or writing his first novel.

Transformative Place: Whittier College! It's where I began to love myself in a safe environment that challenged me academically, and where I found a support system that helped me through my toughest times.

EMILY HENDERSON is perpetually tired.

Transformative Place: Transformation happens everywhere. There is not one place where I enter and leave the same person.

HAILEY GARCIA says: "Embracing your true self and understanding that normality doesn't exist offers peace. I am constantly learning how to love all the versions of myself while teaching others how to communicate with me. Art is my favorite way of exploring my metamorphosis. Slay."

Transformative Place: Yosemite transformed me. That's all I have to say.

ILANI AVILA is a third-year English Language and Literature Major. She loves reading, hiking, traveling, and the color green.

Transformative Place: Surrounded by nature and natural life is when I feel like my most true self, and connected to my ancestors amongst the plants, trees, and grass.

INEZ LOGAN ambles through Whittier College's English and Computer Science departments with the hopes of helping out the general condition. If found, return to Vegas (or the nearest Michaels) with several hundred dollars.

Transformative Place: I was transformed in the embrace of my friends within the World Wide Web. In these places we visited together, I learned to value the person I am, and how much I wish to break free of my preassigned role in this life.

ISABELLE BROOKSHIRE is a first-year at Whittier and has been writing poetry (seriously) for about five years now. She enjoys anything that has to do with creativity. She loves music.

Place of Transformation: As for a place that changed me, I would probably have to say my high school English teacher's classroom. That place has fundamentally changed my mind about love, grief, tragedy, joy, and everything in between.

JOE DONNELLY is lecturer of English and Journalism at Whittier College.

Transformative Place: This campus, where I've encountered the smartest, funniest, coolest people I know: the students of Whittier College.

JULIA CENTENO is a second-year Graphic Design & English Literature major. She is an avid D&D player and LARP-er, and she likes to think that she'd be a bard if she existed within a fantasy realm.

Transformative Place: I had a Pinterest account in middle school that I used to search up screenshots of Tumblr posts, and through this online space I discovered an amazing artistic community. It helped me grow a lot as a young artist, despite the fact that I only made Gravity Falls fanart for a solid two years.

KAELIN FRANCISCO is a sophomore majoring in Psychology with a minor in English and Child Development. She is on the soccer team and owns her own small business called Digtortedangels on Instagram! She has always loved creative writing and uses it as a tool to spread awareness and destigmatize taboo topics.

Transformative Place: A place that transformed me is my high school, Troy High. It gave me the closest friends I could have asked for and taught me the true meaning of strength and perseverance in

the face of rock bottom.

KASEY DAVIS is a sophomore, majoring in Psychology. She has plans to focus on Neurobiology.
Transformative Place: My childhood home; the memories of it transformed me more than anything.
Whenever I dream of a place, I'm always back there.

KIRSTIN DEMARQUEZ is a fourth-year Graphic Design major with a minor in Business Administration. Art has always been a way for her to express and cope with the experiences she's had. While she studies design and painting, drawing has always been one of her favorite ways to express herself.
Transformative Place: My transformative place is my bedroom. Everything that I own and am is locked in a little comfortable square. I think best when I'm alone in my space.

MADALYNN WIBLE is a senior double majoring in Graphic Design and English.
Transformative Place: The library because it's where I grew up. From completing summer reading challenges as a child to aiming for a future career within the field, it's a place where I've found my true self and my calling.

MATTHEW ENRIQUEZ is from Downey, California and is a fourth-year at Whittier College where he studies journalism with a focus in media studies. In his free time, he enjoys playing video games, reading, and trying out new coffee spots.
Transformative Place: My backyard, which houses an oak tree my family has taken care of, and like me has undergone many changes throughout its life.

MEIMEI LIU is an English Creative Writing major. She is the winner of the 2020 National Federation of State Poetry Societies Undergraduate Poetry Competition, first-place winner of the 2019 Whittier College Annual Poetry Competition and the second-place winner of the 2017 Westchester Poetry National Conference's Haiku Award. Liu is non-verbal as a result of her Autism; however, she does not consider herself an "Autistic Poet," but rather a poet who happens to have Autism.
Transformative Place: Home, where I feel secure to be and become myself on my personal journey in a world in which I often feel a stranger.

MEYLINA TRAN is currently trying to cut down on word count. It's not working.
Transformative Place: A place that transformed me was the Deihl Modern Language Media Lab. Many schemes, plots, and therapy sessions have occurred there.

PAIGE MEYER-DRAFFEN is a first-year student.
Transformative Place: I knew I had to go to college, but a lot of my options were cut off because of weird vicarious living and social class concerns. It was hard for me to let go of controlling the first step into the rest of my life, but I did what had to be done, and now find myself in a better place.

RHE NAE LEACH is a second-year, queer, Black woman.
Transformative Place: My grandmother's room. She taught me that everyone has a soft spot and made me feel comfortable with who I am.

ROUX DAVIES is a Philosophy student from North Wales studying at the University of Southampton, here at Whittier on a year-long study abroad program.
Transformative Place: My family home. I grew up in an old farm building in the Northeast of Wales. It is extremely rural with all the faults that come along with it. When growing up as a kid, I often hated it there. But upon returning home for the summer after my second year of university, the place had a new significance.

RYAN BUYNAC was orphaned at age 12. He found his voice in the formative sprawl of the Orlando International Airport. He has managed to publish a baker's dozen books of punk-poetry, and graced

stages in NY, Montreal, and LA.
Transformative Place: New York City — its denizens and doldrums — gave me a life, and I miss it every day like an abusive lover.

SESHA HERNANDEZ-REAL is a third-year majoring in Political Science with a minor in Environmental Science. In her spare time, she likes to work for a non-profit organization that caters to help teach young people how to organize for any social moments.
Transformative Place: The non-profit organization called YMAN changed me. I have been a part of the program since I was a young girl. I was able to go to college through their hel. They provided me with a home when I didn't feel like I had one.

SHELBY ZOE LOPEZ is 21 years old, and currently a third-year English Literature Major with a Minor in Theatre and Communications.
Transformative Place: My home state, California, is such an interesting and wonderful place to be. Growing up in this environment, and being surrounded by diverse and gorgeous settings and people has allowed me to see the beauty in and of life, even through trials and tribulations.

SHELBY SILVA is a walking contradiction who adores the color of wine and the song "Amber" by 311.
Transformative Place: Laying down near a moonlit lake, gazing at the countless stars with a scent of musk lingering in the fresh breeze on a summer night.

SOPHIE FUDIM is a San Francisco-born and raised artist. They started making art in grade school, but it was in high school that it became more serious. To see more of what they make, check out @sfcollages on Instagram.
Transformative Place: My transformative place is any green space. Preferably, a park with some good sun, perhaps a notebook and some drawing utensils. And snacks, of course.

TANNER SALAZAR is a third year and is currently majoring in Mathematics and minoring in English. He is an RA for Turner Hall, and also plays for the baseball team.
Transformative Place: Whittier College because of how much I had to change once I came here. It was my first time living on my own, and I feel like I changed a lot since high school.

ZOË BERKEBILE is a writer, poet, artist, musician, cat parent, and second-year student. She writes fantasy, science fiction, dystopias, and feminist fairy tale retellings.
Transformative Place: I began working on my current novel shortly after moving to Silver Lake..

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The Greenleaf Review is edited and published by Whittier College students to reflect the wide variety of voices and experiences comprising our dynamic community.

We hope this unwavering representation of who we are can help guide us through these challenging times and contribute to the experiment of openness, inclusion, and leadership that is Whittier at its best.

“Born Again” would not have been possible without readers like you.

Thank you.



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