



ORPHEUS

ISSUE XLI

LITERARY JOURNAL

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Issue XLI

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If any student is interested in joining the Orpheus staff, please email Dr. Adam Schuster at aschuster@csub.edu.

Orpheus accepts submissions of various kinds. Please send submissions to orpheus@csub.edu, but first visit the Department of English's website (www.csub.edu/english) for complete information.

Orpheus follows a blind submission process that includes pieces submitted by the journal's editors.

Orpheus was originally founded in 1973 by Dr. Solomon Iyasere, a professor in the CSUB Department of English. His contributions to the university were many, and his legacy lives on through Orpheus.

Table of Contents

POETRY

Rebekka Adams

A Fluctuating Tide - 12

Read From Your Perspective - 13

Samuel Aguilar

The Land of Nod - 14

Lisa Aguirre

Roaming Heart - 15

Omar Ahumada

Memories in a Fog: An Apple Tree's Tale - 16

Cassandra Allen

When Pontius Comes - 18

Terrence Beard

DOWN TODAY UP TOMORROW - 19

Alexandra Chapa-Kunz

Legacies. - 20

Isaac Chipres

What Will You Be? - 22

Moriah Conedy

In This Town, Feminism "Gets Old" - 23

There are people who are happy - 24

Kara "Alani" Davis

Cold - 21

Rafael Alberto De La Mora Herrera

Night in "El Rincon" - 25

Annie Denvir

Perspective Of A Predator - 26

Feast - 28

Jorge Zermeño Garcia

Look at your Future - 30

Yaritza Gomez

Blood Orange - 31

Which page would you like me to be on? - 31

Karina Hurtado

Motherhood - 25

Penny Lanae

Blu - 32

Constant Conversations - 33

(Accompanying illustrations by author)

Kali McCaa

Bones Infected With Mercury - 34

Mahogany Blues - 35

Brit Melson

Movie Clips - 36

We Suck - 36

Amy Melton

Clean plate - 37

Unsweetened - 37

Daniel R. Meyer

Cleanse Me - 38

When I Am Gone - 40

Philisa Moore

Night - Day - 41

Frankie Nadal

The Helping Hand - 42

Dyanna Oregon

High Currents - 43

Matthew Phengdy

Beyond the Rainbow - 44

Angelica Ramirez

My encouragement vs. my self esteem - 45

Lara Salas

None For Me - 46

Running Feet - 47

Megan Sepulveda-Hemma

Chasing Blades, Hidden Cries - 48

Jordan Shih

First Hockey Night - 49

Isis Soto

Enjoying the ride with Ryder~ - 50

One year later. I am still getting hit by a Truck. - 50

Alyssa Tafoya

Stolen Shores of Sanctuary - 51

Tyler Tangen

Let's Alter Course - 52

Ian Tash

Creekside - 53

Anonymous

Kind - 54

My dear - 55

CREATIVE NONFICTION

Lisa Acosta-Alvarado

Back to the Garden of AI - 58

Father Daughter Time - 60

Evelyn Gallardo

An Afternoon at the Zoo - 62

Gloria Hernandez

Self-Portrait as a 1990's Music Mixed Tape - 64

Joshua Knoeb

Self-Portrait as a "list of songs" - 67

Cesar Parra

Self-Portrait: A Stroll Down Movie Lane - 69

Karla Ramirez

What Feeling Am I Left with by Novelas? - 72

Miguel Ramirez

The Not So Stressful Questionnaire - 74

Ana Reyes

Painting of Resilience - 76

Tamarra Scott

The Nervous Test - 78

SHORT STORIES

Susana Alfaro

Slasher - 82

Abigail Fisher

The Voyage - 83

Emiliano A. Moncada

The Merchant and the Herd - 85

Matthew Phengdy

The Last Garden on Earth - 90

Megan Rhoades

Under Construction - 101

Jordan Shih

Rated X out of 10 - 102

Ian Tash

Some Of What I Found When I Searched For "Brandan Eth" Through The Campus Library Website - 106

Nylah Velazquez

What's Left Behind - 115

Anonymous

Reap What You Sow - 119

DRAMA AND FILM

Lincoln Branco-Gonzales

Cicero and the Catiline Conspiracy - 126

Rafael Alberto De La Mora Herrera

La Sotana Voladora - 135

Frankie Nadal

Make Life Worth Living - 143

Angel Rosas

When Pains Arrive - 154

ART

Eleanor Bubash

Chauncy - 75

Patty Martinez

Mexican American Self Portrait - 45

Amigos Eternos - 81

Speak Now - Cover Art

Benjamin Parsons

Gnik Nilbog - 124

Moonlit Reverie - 153

Cherished Remnants - 11

Alyssa Tafoya

WORLD_LOADING - 125

keyera tagger

I've grown up - 49

wings of venom - 79

A mothers honor - 118

Joshua Villarruel

Man on Rhino - 57

A Note from the Faculty Advisor

Lisa Acosta-Alvarado, Layla Cohen, Rafael Alberto De La Mora Herrera, Daniel R. Meyer, Jordan Shih, Jackson Whitby: these are this year's editors of *Orpheus*, the students of English 4740. For reasons mysterious, this group formed the most cohesive set of readers I have had the pleasure of working with over the years. Every editor made a habit of coming to class with detailed notes, having read the day's submissions closely. Every editor was also able to express their point of view and make their arguments clearly and confidently. In the case of most submissions, we were able to come to a rapid consensus. A truly remarkable and rewarding experience.

As a group, *Orpheus*'s editors excelled, but everyone deserves mention for a particular service or superpower. Jordan Shih was our managing editor. Thank you, Jordan, for managing the journal so well by taking on the monumental task of the *Orpheus* email account: you rendered submissions blind and got them up into Canvas, created and kept up all necessary logs, and responded to contributors in a process that involved taking notes as we edited and conveying the substance of our editorial recommendations. Jordan was also a member of our precious layout team, with Rafael: no layout, no journal—thank you both for learning InDesign and creating our beautiful 2024 Issue, XLI!

Rafael also deserves mention, with Lisa, for being core members of our marketing/publicity team. Lisa we also appreciated for her fine visual sense. She designed one of our eye-catching calls for submissions as well as our elegant cover. About the cover: the image, "Speak Now," is Patty Martinez's. Thank you, Patty, for sending your art to *Orpheus* both this year and last. Without you, *Orpheus* would not be as beautiful as it is.

Layla, you came in with our first call for submissions and it was so good it inspired your peers to produce more. Further, for those who needed help translating their ideas into concrete form, you stepped in with your skill at using Canva. Daniel, Jackson, thank you for stepping up for so many critical tasks: distributing calls across campus, copy reading (along with the eagle-eyed Layla), composing front matter pages, putting together the table of contents (thanks especially to Daniel), and more (Jackson created one of our fantastic calls for submissions).

All *Orpheus* students: there were only six of you, but you accomplished so much and made up the perfect collaborative team.

Printing *Orpheus* has become extremely expensive, and so we have many to thank for funding. Dr. Alicia Rodriguez, Acting Dean of Arts of Humanities, and Interim Provost James Rodriguez, thank you for your support! Most of all, thank you to Emily Poole Callahan, Dean of Students, and members of the Instructionally Related Activities (IRA) Committee for awarding us a generous \$1,500! Yes, in order to give contributors and editors but one copy of *Orpheus* each, with a few left over for deserving others (like our funders), we need no less than \$2,500. Perhaps one day we will have enough money to distribute issues across campus. Our dream is to share our contributors' creativity with the entire CSUB community.

Congratulations, talented contributors! Thanks to you, we have another inspiring issue!

Dr. Carol Dell'Amico
English Department



11



A Fluctuating Tide

Rebekka Adams

A fluctuating tide

Foamed bubbles meet wet sand

Feet are planted in its warmth

While shapes are crafted by hand

A moon, invisible

Brings waves in and out

The only evidence observable

Within their crash and shout

Lay here and move the morsels

Let them slip between the gap

While music made from water

Exists without a task

Feet cannot change tide

Hands won't quiet waves

They take reprieve upon the shore

Listening to what the ocean says

Should feet and hands dive within

Let it be with no presumption

Let them float along the seas sweet swell

Unwillingness, the cause to worsen

Keep mindful of the waves

Not to carry you too deep

The shoreline in the distance

Calls back with what you need

Returning from the water

All that's left is memory of sound

Feet and hands may move the earth

By touch upon a semi-solid ground

But what once was moved and dented
Made uneven by human courage
Later on will be smoothed over
By an uncontrolled oceans leverage

Read From Your Perspective

Rebekka Adams

I contain
A voice consisting of all the noises I've heard in my life
eyes kaleidoscoped of all the colors I've ever seen in the places I've been
a laughter compiled of all the giggles and cries that have passed through my ears
Fingers that have touched faces of those dear to me, even if only at that moment
hair passing through the winds on all the walks I've ever been on
a mouth speaking all the words I've ever spoken; hurtful, true, and sometimes both
hips that have moved to every song, even ones that I didn't quite understand
freckles that have been pulled by every sun in my lifetime
my body, mosaic representation of me - anywhere and everywhere
amalgamated of everything I can see and everything that is invisible
I ask; how could I not love me?

☒ e Land of Nod

Samuel Aguilar

☒

What Camus thought of Cain
As he wandered the empyrean wastes
No boulder pushed; no hill trudged
But burdened all the same

☒Cain remorseful

Passion, at its deepest, leaves one empty
Free for suppliant horror to become all
When le☒ alone, in that ☒
Where ☒eigns*

☒reason

Why? "I would not be bested so easily," He says
But what loneliness is now?
Enough
More than enough

Listless and tired, the coward rots
For a coward is what he is, is he not?
Empty, he walks the night
Where the silence is deafening.
☒ e Earth leaves little unsaid.

☒ ere is only shame

Afraid to look ahead
Afraid of what's behind
Shades, that once comforted, taunt still
☒eir gaze, tortuous and unrelenting

☒Cain☒

It is easy to say
Far from that land
Where the shadows are long
And nothing remains

☒

Roaming Heart

Lisa Aguirre

What a life it is to wake up in a stranger's home,
Taken away from family, forever to roam.
Forever seeking the place where you belong,
Yet every home you're moved to feels so wrong.

You don't fit in because of things like your skin color,
The social worker says she can't find a forever home due to your age.
The hurt and pain build up, emerging only as rage,
Proof that no one wants you, simply because you're a teen.

They think you're a liar, a thief, a delinquent, everything between,
All you can think of is freedom from this foster life scene.
With no choice but to remain strong,
They compliment your resilience, yet you'd rather be known as brilliant.

Brilliant enough not to become a statistic,
To avoid ending up homeless, on drugs, or pregnant.
Instead, you remain quiescent,
Living a life inactive, dormant, discontent.

Memories in a Fog: An Apple Tree's Tale

Omar Ahumada

What purpose do I serve?
Why am I here, who put me here?
How am I living and breathing? Or why?
I want to move from here, but I can't,
my roots have permanently settled here.
I want to see, I want to live,
but I am here, for no rhyme or reason.
What I yearn cannot be given to me,
for I am an apple tree.
Moving was not meant for me.
What do I do?
I don't want to be alone anymore yet,
it is the only thing I've ever known.
The only thing that has been offered to me.
I will perish but when will that be?
Should I be grateful for this life?
Death come for me for I cannot come to you.
Someone...Anyone. Please
I can't anymore, I don't want to live.
Wait...What is that?
A man with a backpack comes walking from a distance.
Revealing his form from being a mere shadow
in the fog that infinitely surrounds me.
He walks slowly towards me, very tiredly.
The man takes a sip from his canister
and takes the last apple from my branch.
I have no more left to offer.
He sits on the ground and rests his back on me.
He lays there, eating the very piece,
The very reason of my existence
The man finishes the apple and removes the seeds.
He digs a hole a few paces from me
and plants the seeds, utterly and completely burying me.
Once he finishes the man claps the dirt off his hands.
He rests his hand on me, "Thank you," the man says

before he drains his canister onto me
and the hole he made for the seeds.
The man puts on his backpack
and continues to walk in the direction he headed,
walking off into the distance again.
Becoming a mere shadow again, then nothing.
It is just me again...
Ah, yes.
This is why I am here.
With the nourishment you provided
I will grow more apples. This is not the end of me.
I will stand tall and I will last.
I do not know why you buried the remainings of my last apple,
but surely something will come of it.

When Pontius Comes

Cassandra Allen

My grandmother tried to rid the devil
from my soul. He hid in my colored curls.
So she looked to rip the dye from each and
every cuticle and when she couldn't,
she threatened to shave my head while I slept.
If not my hair, then surely the devil
hid amongst my college friends and the drugs
and alcohol that they would "pressure" me
into taking. Or perhaps the devil
lived within the philosophy textbooks
that my professors assigned. Either way,
it no longer mattered: I was possessed.
What she thought to be Satan incarnate
was the image of the Lord in the flesh.
For I am of He and thus, my name is
perfection. My body is perfection.
All of the changes to my body are
not to love myself but because I do.
In any form that I will manifest,
in His eyes, I know that I am perfect.
Despite doubts from my grandmother and doubts
from myself, I know my quest to love me
is ordained. The thoughts that would once cause me
to introduce myself as "Chris" vanished.
In a single breath, you will bless and curse
me. Say her name. Say my name. "Cassandra."

DOWN TODAY UP TOMORROW

Terrence Beard

Sometimes it takes a loss to see what you got, but life has odds, so it's easier to reach the top if
born with a lot.

Some plot what they say, to get in your way,☒
they'll also lie and steal because they didn't grow up real.

For some, life rolls with highs and lows, for others it's triumphs and wows, which affects the
pace the mind grows.

Some people will fool you once, and that'll make you say shame on you, but if you allow them to
fool you twice, then you're the damn fool.

Dwelling on your sorrow only ruins your tomorrow, sometimes you're down today, but your
happiness is just on borrow.

Don't go through life without being able to say I tried, you must keep going through the hard
times, to ☒nd out what's on the other side.

Legacies.

Alexandra Chapa-Kunz

Can I be candid?

No.

I will anyway. Partially. ☒ oughtlessly. Against advisement.

Flippant questions answered with Frivolous Honesty.

Sometimes you don't ask. Sometimes you Discuss.

theory of pain. trauma. a degradation not felt.

☒ is devastation... you think of as nightmare.

Fantasy. A story. Figments of history.

I am happy for you.

untouched by it. You are FREE of it.

I see it.

my freedom

Sometimes,

some times,

I almost grasp it.

my freedom...

Hidden behind my child's peaceful face,

souls we work so hard to protect.

From the harsh realities of a past..

my past.

their past.

our past.

Our Freedom.

☒ eir Freedom.

My Freedom.

Locked away in vaults. Erased from books.

Scraped from the surface of tongues. Generations.

A crushing weight of absence. Slowly... asphyxiating.. all...

☒ is thing. Never spoken of. Doesn't exist in your mind.

Feels like Rotting Flesh in mine.

Lurking, lurking, it lurks.

A Shadow overseer to our lives.

I feel it. In Her kitchen. ☒ e elder.

As She lay in Her last hours of life. It stands at Her bedside.

Waiting.

☒ e weight of Her death will unravel us. Has Unraveled US.

Waiting.

☒ ose hidden secrets.

Like gravity they pull.

Waiting.

Our resistance breaks us.

☒ e Shadow is scratching. Digging its way out. Its restraints tied to Her life.

Snarling.

Snapping.

☒ rashing.

Striking.

Clutching. ☒ e Lies we know.

Pressed on every side by these

—hidden truths,

☒ e Shadow.

We are Folded into the lives of many.
We Drown. In their pain. We GASP. Wait. Waiting.
We did not ask for this.
I don't blame you.

I do blame you.

There is no blame.

We all are to blame.

Listen.

Listen...

LISTEN...

Hear. Break free. Release.

It's no one's fault.

It's everyone's fault.

Listen, hear, break free, release.

Cold

Kara "Alani" Davis

Cold

Your skin so

You look at nothing and everything

Eyes

Can you hear me?

Talk to me

Why are you so sti

Relax

It's only me here

No one is here, I promise.

You can get up

I miss your voice

Talk to me

Please?

Cold

To my uncle Sabal

WhatWillYouBe?

IsaacChipres

Once upon a time, in a town not far,
Lived a curious kid, with dreams like a star.
He asked his dear dad, "What can I be?"
With a twinkle in his eye, he began to decree:
"You can be a firefighter, brave and true,
With a helmet and hose, saving lives anew.
Or perhaps a police officer, keeping peace in the street,
With a badge on your chest, and shoes with sturdy feet."
The kid nodded eagerly, full of delight,
Imagining himself in uniform, oh what a sight!
"But wait," said his dad, with a knowing grin,
"There's more to explore, let the dreaming begin.
You can be a teacher, shaping minds so bright,
Guiding young learners, Spreading knowledges light.
Or aim even higher, reach for the sky,
Be the President one day, with courage to fly."
The kid's eyes widened, filled with wonder and glee,
"I can be anything?" he asked sparkling free.
His dad hugged him close, with a nod so sincere,
"Yes, my dear child, your dreams hold no fear.
No matter the path, or the journey you see,
Believe in yourself, and what you can be.
With passion and drive, and a heart that's true,
The world is your oyster, there's nothing you can't do."
So the kid went to bed, with dreams soaring high,
Imagining all the places he'd go, reaching for the sky.
For in his heart, he knew, with unwavering glee,
That no dream was too big, for him to set free.
To all little dreamers, who hold futures so dear.
Believe in yourself, let your spirit run free,
For the world is your canvas, what will you be?

In ☒ is Town, Feminism “Gets Old”

Moriah Conedy

In this town, Feminism gets old. She used to be a young woman. Full of life and hopes and dreams. She used to be loved by all women and respected by men, even if sometimes called, “Hey, Eccentric!” But now she is old and bent with gray hair and dreams spent. She lives alone in a secluded mansion, and nobody understands why she hasn’t a spouse. But nobody knows that this town is where she has her roots. In this town, she danced to new tunes and walked under full moons.

Feminism was raised here. Running through the forest when she was a girl. Learning new skills and riding her scooter up and down the hills. Climbing the trees and making new friends. Learning morals, kindness, and making amends. Feminism was taught how to cook in the kitchen and clean the windowsills. How to vacuum, make pancakes, and braid children’s hair.

Feminism came of age here. She learned to drive, graduated with her degree, and became a responsible employee. Gave to charity, joined her church, and tithed her money.

Feminism grew up here. Feminism married her husband and had two kids. Fed them and raised them and held them when they bled. Feminism graded their schoolwork, read them bedtime stories, and tucked them into bed.

Feminism lived in this town. She valued being an upstanding citizen and a loving spouse. Started a business and bought her family a house. Demonstrated against racism, lived anti-racism, and asked her Church why women’s leadership was not allowed.

Feminism grew old here. She babysat her neighbor’s toddlers and taught them to give thanks for their food. She cooked at church potlucks and served baked goods. She sewed blankets, knit beanies for babies, and donated winter coats with hoods. She cared for her husband as he died and buried him in the small churchyard by the woods.

In this town, Feminism gets old. She was once a young woman. Full of life and hopes and dreams. She was well-respected by her fellow townsfolk and appreciated and esteemed. But now the Town’s folk say, “Feminism is ‘getting old’ here,” “She’s just not that relevant and we don’t understand her. We’ve come not to like her—why should she stay?”

☒ ey have clearly never heard her pray. Never heard her dreams for them that, One Day, they live in a better world. ☒ at they won’t have to live under an abusive father as a little girl. Pray that tomorrow there will be one less racist in the world. Pray sexism is Seen as a sin. Pray that People are alarmed at their Separations from God, from themselves, and from Women.

☒ ere are people who are happy

Moriah Conedy

there are people who are happy

☒ eir sun is a beautiful sky

☒ eir world is a happy haven

☒ ey like the journey of life

☒ eir favorite place is a steeple

☒ eir people are always cheery

there are people who are sad

☒ eir air is rather foggy

☒ eir world is desolate and craven

☒ ey like the journey of life

☒ eir favorite place is a steeple

☒ eir people are always teary

there are people who are depressed or anxious

☒ eir stars are always night

☒ eir world is a lonely plight

☒ ey dread the journey of life

☒ ey have been pierced by a steeple

☒ eir people are always eerie

some people have been all three

Night in “El Rincon”

Rafael Alberto De La Mora Herrera

It was getting dark that day
The sunlight started to fade
The glowing moon,
Creating unrecognizable shades

The way home begins
Three people riding horses:
Juan, Manuel, and Carlos
One behind the other

Going up a steep path
They have felt alone
But the night hides a secret
Something of her own

There with perplexed eyes
Crickets, moths and fireflies
Filling the place with wonder
There where serenity lies.

Motherhood

Karina Hurtado

This is what it looks like to have your heart beating from outside your body, I think to myself as I see him chase the waves.
He is my lifeline.
When he takes a breath, that same air begins to fill my lungs. When his heart beats mine continues to pump blood.
When his eyes shed tears mine flow with all their might, enough to fill a river.
When something hurts him my body aches.
When he smiles, I feel like I can soar the skies.
He is my everything, my son.

Perspective Of A Predator

Annie Denvir

✂ is is what I tell myself he thought a✂er taking away my innocence, a poem for my own closure...

She was beautiful

Like mother nature

Her body majestic

Like the earth

My hands forgot they belonged to me

✂ ey had grown a mind of their own

I could no longer control them

I traced the curves of her body until dusk fell upon us

✂ en i continued searching in the dark

My hands

Slipping underneath the white clouds of her shirt

Climbing over one mountain

✂ en the other

I tilled the soil in the bosom of her earth

Planting my seeds among her crops

My weeds rapidly growing amidst her beautiful gardens

My ✂ngers traced every landmark on her until nothing was le✂ unexplored

I colonized her body

Claiming what was not mine

Searching unseen areas

Mapping uncharted lands

No man has ever come here before

I found new rivers and ponds beneath her surface

Dipping my ✂ngers into the waters of her youth

She begged me no

But beauty had overtaken me

Self control was something i no longer knew

She looked me in my eyes

Her eyes piercing my soul

And begged me to stop

But i couldn't

For a man with ambition will never be stopped

My ✂ngers danced in the waterfalls of her innocence

Such a majestic sight

Angels wept as i was cleansed in her waters
 Drenched in her beauty
 Baptized in her tears
 I was mad with power
 The heavens cried out in pain
 The sweet sound of angels
 I could not think clearly
 Even the sound of an angels pain is mesmerizing
 Like a siren's song you cannot turn away
 It lures you in
 I plunged into the dark, unknown valley between her legs
 Devouring the apple of Eve
 I was the snake
 The reason for her fall
 Drinking the sweet nectar from the fruit of the bush that she bore
 The savory taste lingering on my tongue
 It's almost as if i can still taste her
 I greedily licked at the leaves and branches of the tree of Eden
 Wanting more
 Needing more
 Taking my fill
 Stealing what was not mine
 At last the heavens fell silent
 And the fog descended
 I began to hear the anguish of hell
 The agony of the demons grew until i could no longer bear it
 She was too heavenly to emit such misery
 I was the reason this angel had fallen
 I tried to flee
 To escape
 To run
 But you can never outrun your own self
 I tried to forget the land i mapped with my own bare hands
 But i can never forget such pleasure
 For i still find myself yearning
 My seed is in her earth
 My flag planted in her soil
 I have claimed her
 She will forever be mine
 Never forget this

Feast

Annie Denvir

Take me
Rip me open
And feast
Tear into my heart
Take what is not yours
And leave my core rotting
I hope the red stains on your hands remind you of me
Remind you of your gluttony
Of your greed
Leave me open
Leave me vulnerable
Consume your fill
Consume me
Consume the innocence of my youth
Drink the sweet nectar of my fruits and spit out the bitter parts
I will make myself sweet for you
I will prune away the unruly branches that you are not pleased by
I will cut myself open
For you to feast
I am ripe
I am ready
Pick me from my tree
I beg of you
Take me from my sisters
Peel back my skin
Be met with the aroma of pleasure
Take a blade to my skin
Cut me open
Throw away the parts you do not want
I will sit still
Allowing you to dissect me
I will stay quiet for you
All you have to do is ask
Call me yours
Let me belong to you
I have never belonged to somebody like this before
I am entirely yours

You took me
You tore me open
And ate
You took the parts of me that you were pleased by
And left me empty
On to the next pomegranate from the tree
You will rip her open
You will consume my sisters one by one
Because the only way you will ever be satisfied
Is if you rip us open
And feast

Look at your Future

Jorge Zermelo Garcia

A classroom is the reflection of your future.

On your right side, you see your friend. You look at him, and he smiles at you.

On your left side, your enemy. You look at him, and you feel adrenaline running through your veins...

Behind you, there's just a big gray wall. You look at it, and you see yourself laying on the ground crying because of tragedies you have experienced in the past.

In the front, there's an intellectual being.

For some reason, in that classroom:

No one knows nothing.

No one knows why they are inside.

No one knows what will happen next.

Everyone is waiting for the teacher to speak, assuming that he will recite his own rules.

No one knows what to expect from his government: a dictatorship? A democracy?

No one knows what to expect.

No one knows nothing.

As you look around, you realize that the classroom could be a door.

A door to a better future. Could it be success, wealth, happiness?

A challenge you didn't ask for. Is it financial instability?

A tragedy in your life. Would it be trauma?

A roar within yourself. Would it be your inner strength? The beast within yourself?

A door that opens a new door. Or would it be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity?

An infinite number of unpredictable life paths.

And it all starts in that spacious light brown classroom.

And it all starts with you, the writer of your future.

Blood Orange

Yaritza Gomez

I am your favorite color,
A misunderstood decision,
A shade you never wear but
Boast about picking one day
Because you think it makes you sound
Unique.

I am your party gimmick, a trophy,
A pile of books
So they think you read,
But you never will
Unless they're about you.

Which page would you like me to be on?

Yaritza Gomez

Temptation is the color of my sweater,
Cool like the water that trails my jeans-
A green so envious, I wish it would poison me.
But the devil's eyes are blue marine,
His glasses red,
Hiding like
The roses on my leg.
His hungry gaze reads
Leading to right,
Undressing me like
The spine of a book I'd write.

Which page would you like me to be on?

Blu

Penny Lanae

A dreamer, A
creationist
whose dance is to the
sound of a heart
A breath with motion
the yearn for words as
A romanticism
to dwell in intensity
whilst to feel more alive
to nurture the body
as the mind craves
for someone
of similarity
A dreamer
whose dreaming of
handwritten letters,
intense vulnerability
A crave for a love
that flows freely,
messily with emotions
and insecurities.
to yearn for someone
to take a hand
and the mind,
someone whose on the other side
creating a mirror
a complex reflection
to help simplify
everything that has
been learned.
A richness so soothing,
a passion so strong
but attachment
at the none.
An everlasting experience
with the one
you truly love



Constant Conversations

Penny Lanae

My presence will be in hibernation.
What is real and what is not,
You can't figure, but I can.
You can not guess, assume, or try
Let alone be able to actually perceive
what is flowing through
the vessels in my mind.
Each letter of emotion I am feeling
is soaked into the center
of my brain flowing,
bouncing around, trying to get out.
Trying to reach my heart
Trying to understand if
there is compatibility
to my thoughts and my feelings.
What is right and what is wrong,
you can't figure,
but neither can I.
It's an endless
cycle of
whys.



Bones Infected With Mercury

Kali McCaa

Trapped inside this reflective surface with a fixation I am unable to break. I gaze upon the image in front of me and battle the forms intertwining with and exposing themselves. I attempt to make sense of them, forcing my eyes to focus on the inconsiderate details, struggling to twist and turn the lens of my eyes—that finally cease to blur. A tree? But the leaves are wilting, black, dead, dry, hanging like a willow tree, covering the

trunk?

If a hand dares to reach out and touch it, it will crumble with a crunch and disperse like flour in the air and dissipate to the floor.

the color of a birch tree, the black stripes refusing to reveal themselves

covered in dead moss, the trunk droops, curved, it is not announcing itself, its profound height, the years of growth are aching. Bent and breaking, stooped and shoved, the tree is defeated?

The demanding winds force the leaves aside and the tree disappears into the ground

where the roots end and the tree begins are unknown to the worms, the centipedes, the mole rats, the fertilizer, and the seeds gasp for air and beg to look away.

the tree bathes in the dirt, the mud, its bark is covered, escaping its sky.

layers and layers of mud, rock, moss, dirt, worms, decay, the scent is invasive, twisting my alveoli, my lungs turning inside out and my body begging to stop inhaling

maybe the tree can cover itself

make itself appear as a boulder

stronger.

The tree hides no longer and the sky's arms reach around the trunk, forcing it into the light

the rays cut through the leaves, but the muck and mushrooms render the tree immune

My vision becomes hazy and I snap my eyes shut

refusing to witness further destruction.

Against my better judgement I stare at my reflection again, with chilling clarity I can see its malformations.

I feel sorrow, my heart pounds, and I turn

where I expect to see the tree, expect to face its rotten core

instead I face an abyssal emptiness.

The room grows hot and beads of sweat start to prick my head.

I glance in the mirror and am acquainted with the tree once again, the branches reach for the very essence of my soul.

the branches and vines threaten to invade my lungs and blind me.

I stoop to the floor and feel the mud and moss cover my body, replacing the warmth I have held onto for so long.

No tree resides in this room and I am trapped in my fixation, suffocated by my disfigured obsessions.

Mahogany Blues

Kali McCaa

you will paint.

each brushstroke announcing itself to the viewer,

the colors placed by your hands,

the vibrant variations of your veins stirring across the canvas

you will view it with your shining eyes,

glistening in glory,

and your heart will pump itself.

your arms will wrap around your soul.

and he will acknowledge the easel.

or the wooden pallet your paint has dried on.

the floor it stands on.

the light shining on it.

you will try to demand the wind.

to snap his head,

to push him forth.

you will forage the depths of his brain.

the rivers of wrinkles,

the valleys of lumps,

and you will not find your words.

nor the eclipse of your soul.

you will demand the wind to make itself loud,

to wrap around you and carry you off.

then,

you will only to be able to hear,

the ocean inside you.

Movie Clips

Brit Melson

When I look back, I see movie clips
like little blips of what is real mixed with the imaginary.
I am cast the lead role.
Always.
In one particular scene,
it's little kid me learning to scribble words like broken and trauma –
then I watch as the only first responders in my reality show
are my own hands nervously learning
to tap on the desk in front of me
while the other kids complete their reading.
It's wild, I think, to watch myself think.
Like this, anyway.

We Suck

Brit Melson

You and I are good at nearly nothing that most couples do
We suck at fighting.
We always end up hugging and holding
and kissing and cuddling
and all that other queer shit
We suck at following tradition
or falling into line
or fearing our oppressors

We suck applesauce though a straw
and we laugh and laugh
and then laugh some more

The other day I realized that we suck at religion, too,
unless you consider the ways
that I find religion in you.

Clean plate

Amy Melton

You give me everything, just to take it away from me
Until all I have left to give you
Is the plate I've licked clean.
And I'm full to the brim with all of the grief
At you've stuffed my face with
Until my stomach aches, and it's made me sick.
With one hand in my hair while I'm throwing up
You're petting me softly while I'm gasping for air
How thoughtfully cruel to take pity on me
While you give no relief
And soon after, the other is handfeeding me
Because there's so much more to give
So, you give me my fill, and then even more still
Until I'm empty once more, and we do it again.
If I've decided it's over and push back your hand,
When I'm no longer able to swallow it all,
You'll be left empty-handed, for all I have left
Is my clean plate.

Unsweetened

Amy Melton

For years, my father tried quitting sugar. Instead of his usual bottle of soda, he'd drink an iced tea. Unsweetened. He'd make sure that we knew that. Knew that he was trying. Unwarranted, we'd learn about the dangers of processed sugars and the benefits of avoiding it. But even a preacher will succumb to temptation. The very next week, two bottles of soda sat in the cupholders in the front seat of his car. One on his side, one on mine. An indulgence for him, an atonement for me. A failure and an apology. How is a child supposed to know that their father is a weak man? He was so big and strong, and he always picked himself back up when he let himself down. Who else would I look up to, if not the man who never gave up?

CleanseMe

DanielR.Meyer

Cold

Nervously, I stand waiting outside of my shower
I carefully strip myself down to nothing as the room increases heat
My skin, rough and filthy, abrasively scratches at my clothes
My hand creeps in cautiously until finally skin and water meet

Lukewarm

Quietly I slip into the filling porcelain bowl, shivering slowly
I draw the curtain to a close so the world cannot witness my pitiful struggle
My hair like a shoddy umbrella absorbs and deflects droplets of purification
My shaking slows and I stand stupidly, wrapping myself in a huddle

Filthy

The liquid spewed from the showerhead hits my face like spit
I look up with closed eyes and allow myself to be overtaken
Looking down, I see the crystalline water fade to a grainy murk
Lost in the staining tub, I feel something inside of me awaken

Tremble

The shaking begins again, but my skin is no longer cold to the touch
The water grows hotter, steadily climbing to a piping boil
My blood flows like ice, my chest culminating into a frozen core
I snap out of the daze as I barely notice my curled hair gently uncoil

Comb

I put aside my body for a moment and I reach for the untangling tool
Like legs in mud, the spines immediately are stuck in the tight mat
Tearing and straining, I rake my scalp from base to ends
No blood emerges, just globs of hair that pile into a disgusting rat

Off

I reach out and briefly turn off the water, unweaving the carpet without waste
Soothing shampoo and conditioner feel like angel feathers to my skin
Now I am left with the rest of myself that remains dirty and foul
Clumsily scrubbing with a bar of soap, I embrace an uncertain grin

Peeling

Scrubbing, scrubbing, scrubbing away with this damned scented lard
Like a child I look around aimlessly at loofahs and brushes too stupid to use a tool
I am grown, I am a man, I can use these torn hands to cast away my filth
Scraping harder and deeper into my skin, I am left a naked dirty fool

Dig

Toiling away at my leather shell, I use my tears as lubricant to tear away the grime

Black stains lie unfazed by my efforts and I faintly start to bleed

Sludge drips from my body and just barely progress is being made

Unable to tell what my skin color is anymore, my breaths turns into heaves

Whine

Silently I start to cry out for my parents like I were a child, scared and alone

I yearn for my mom and dad to swoop in and steady me with a hug

Panicking, I picture myself a baby again and gentle voices singing me clean

No longer can I stand being a roach, some disgusting and infesting bug

Reach

Stretching to clean my back I am left grasping at the steamy air

I cannot reach myself, I cannot reach the worst parts of the pollution

Impatient as a boy I never learned to use cloths and body wash properly

With anger and fear now I scratch violently with zealous profusion

Yell

Screaming to myself, I call out to my mom and my dad in desperation

Please come wash me this one time, and we can pretend after to forget my shame

I just need your help for the parts I cannot reach all by myself

But how can a grown man ask something like this and be looked at the same

Dry

I step out of the shower, choking on the steam that drowns the room

My dripping towel wraps snug around me in a faint embrace

Staring blankly into the fogged mirror, I mindlessly wipe away drops of dew

Below the stains on my boiled and scratched skin I believe, just barely, I can see my face

When I Am Gone

Daniel R. Meyer

I hear time and time again that when people die, you will find them in all sorts of beautiful places and moments throughout the world. I know that one day I will find my father within the crackling flames of a bonfire, I will hear my mother flying with the notes of morning songbirds, my brother will be seen through isles of expensive clothing as I prepare for dances and parties, and my sister will be found in the waves of fresh breeze that glide through the blades of open green fields. Dear, when I leave, you will find me not within the depths of your heart nor within the warm rays of the rising sun. Nor will you find me in the glints of a pixelated monitor showing echoes of my face, nor in the crashing waves of the ocean, nor in the droplets of a spring storm. I will be nowhere near, not in the vibrations of every musical note you hear, not in the scent of any flower or plant you grow in your gardens, not in the faded paper of hanged stills that line walls and collect dust in old, forgotten boxes. I shall not be in the shining stones that lie beautifully in the earth, I shall not be in the delicate specks and intricacies of snowfall, I shall not be in the words of any poem you dream about, I shall not be in the graphite or charcoal or paint of picturesque imagery that you'll create or view within museums. No, I will never be found in anywhere but one place: you will find me in the shadows of the stars, knowing I lay hidden there among the inky black, lifetimes away yet seemingly just within your hand's reach. You must sit with the knowledge that I dance and run and leap from silhouette to silhouette of every single star and burning mass in the sky, where no matter how long you try to look for me, no matter how many different ways you search for me and no matter what angle you approach me from, I will be far beyond anywhere you could ever fathom. I am hidden with my location out for all to see, impossible to get to and never to be disturbed. You will never find me, no matter how hard you scratch and yearn for semblances of reconnection and memory, though you will always know exactly where I am. Within the infinite void I will finally be released, free from the ties of your ghost whom I sit next to every day and feel the chilling air of death from with every breath you take. Millions of miles away, it will be I who now watches you as you stay up for nights on end, attempting to reach out for some sort of contact, only to be left withering away alone and shivering with my absence to fill the silence. When I am gone, no longer will it be I who longs and reaches out for something that is just out of reach, nor will it be you who will look back with disgust and glee at my frantic and pathetic attempts to hold your warmth within my arms again.

Night - Day

Philisa Moore

You sit in your room
Day after day, night after night
You stare out your window
Nothing seems real
Not after them

You think about the times when life stood still
Everyday was a new adventure
The sun gleamed in the bright blue sky
The buildings a blinding brilliant light
You could relive any day and it would still be like the first
Laying in their arms was the best part of your night

Now their side is devoid of heat
Their smell lingers on the sheets
Your heartbeat irregular
Without theirs to complete

Life has ceased to exist
The sun nothing but a distant dull memory
Everyday everything repeats, over and over
Their arms are only a memory
There is no more

☒ e Helping Hand

Frankie Nadal

It is them I love, beyond time, beyond reason.

☒ eir pain and concerns, hearts and smiles, forever mine.

A sword, a shield, and a light are my foundation.

☒ eir sword that pierced the clouds of my lamentation,

Prowling a night that once consumed my own soul's shine.

It is them I love beyond time, beyond reason.

It was his shield that saw my own life not taken—

An ever-resolute presence forming the line.

☒ eir sword, his shield, and a light are my foundation.

With her light, I saw a future worth salvation.

Guiding my hand and heart, a light I would soon pine,

It is her that I love beyond time, beyond reason.

And so, I, welcoming all, held my hand, open.

Easing every burden, my stars would soon align.

☒ eir sword, his shield, and her light made my foundation.

But a dream come true is another forgotten.

With each loss, harder it became to say, "I'm Fine."

It was them I loved beyond time, beyond reason.

A sword, a shield, and a light were my foundation.

HighRiverCurrents

DyannaOregon

you're closed off
so am i
you won't let me in
i won't let you in.

this is nothing
but what is nothing?
there's something
but nothing
standing in the middle of a corn field
surrounded by nothing

i want to push you away
i can't seem to stay away...
high river currents;
not knowing how to swim

will my heart ache?

who will say the first goodbye?

who will i become after?
who will you become?

will we be better?
will we be worse?

you're my malachite; gorgeous
but damaging to my nervous system
can't seem to move

time is slipping by...
all my time is with you
why do i let you?
nothing will come from this
i don't want anything...

why am i not used to goodbyes?
people have come and gone
will you go too?

all things end
this will end

when will it end?
how will it end?
will you want something more?

i can't give you more;

i won't let myself give you more

in the end we are not forever
this is only a moment in time

i will look back one day
rocking my chair
on the front porch
overlooking the mountains
tea in hand
reminiscing on time passed

Beyond the Rainbow

Matthew Phengdy

What do you see beyond the stars?
Is it real, or is it not?
What do you see beyond the stars?
A place far Beyond the Rainbow.

The planet spins
The world continues
Life is but a dream
Like a wise man once said.

The planet spins
But only for one,
A place where
Dreams and Reality
Meet.

What do you see beyond the stars?
Is it real, or is it not?
The lone planet
The lone star

What lies beyond?
The truth be told
Life is but a dream
Sh-boom-shi-boom

What can you see?
When a planet spins?
Where Dreams and Reality
Intersect?

What lies beyond?
Is it real, or is it not?
Dreams and Reality
The lone star
A place far Beyond the Rainbow.

My encouragement vs. my self esteem

Angelica Ramirez

“Just do it,”

She said.

“You got nothing to lose,”

She said.

“You’ll never know unless you try,”

She said.

“What’s stopping you?”

She asked.

“Me,”

I said.☒



Mexican American Self Portrait by Patty Martinez

None For Me

Lara Salas

 Their cheeks are red as a rose,
 Their eyes are golden brown, like chamomile tea.
 Their heart filled with joy and love,
But I know none of it is ever for me.

I see them almost every day,
 Their black, mid-cut hair in disarray,
I would like to speak to them,
But I do not know what to pen.

 Then one day the conversation starts,
I can finally tell them what I want to say.
I gather the words and courage in my heart,
But I choke, and the words fall away.

 The day has now ended,
I will only ever be their friend.
 They grab their stuff and walk away,
Under the clouds that are so gray.

 Their cheeks stay as red as a rose,
 Their eyes are golden brown, like chamomile tea.
 Their heart filled with joy and love,
Yet, none of it is ever going to be for me.

Running Feet

Lara Salas

☒ ose running feet,
Move to the sound of the hooves' beat,
☒ ose breaths that quickened,
As the mounted watchmen began their acquisition,
☒ ey could not help but feel defeat,
☒ ose running feet.

☒ eir running feet,
Hastening from the sounds of the I.C.E. elite,
☒ eir breath is quickened,
As the smog in the air is thickened,
☒ ey are being dragged back like they are obsolete,
☒ eir running feet.

My running feet,
Sprint towards the Capitol's street,
My breath inhaling the freedom so sweet,
As I chant along with conceit,
Today our ancestors will not see us retreat,
Because we are their running feet.

Chasing Blades, Hidden Cries

Megan Sepulveda-Hemma

A day, a week, a month has passed
since she put away the blades;
her very own party favor at her pity party.
She fears what will happen now that she has stopped.
Outwardly hurting that is because the inner pain,
as many know,
lingers and sticks like dried blood from old wounds.

Instead, she makes an effort to remain present;
the smile that she has mastered never slipping the way that
she does between crowds as she departs from the evening early.
But how will she seek approval from strangers now?
Will her family and friends still love her?
She is unsure,
and now unable to read between the lines where she once marked her skin.

First Hockey Night

Jordan Shih

Whip-crack of the puck as it's sent to height stall,
Smash-cut to the Condor crashing 'gainst the wall,
Boom of the loudspeaker hyping up the crowd,
Boos from the locals jeering loud and proud,
"Want any snacks?" my classmate asks me,
"Anyone sitting here?" a stranger pleads,
Scratch-skid of blades slicing ice,
Clap-whack of stick shitting twice,
First ever hockey night, I'm having a ball,
Next thing I know, the score is one-all.



I've grown up by keyer atagger

Enjoying the ride with Ryder~

Isis Soto

For the past year, my life has been cruising in a Ryder truck. I am on an adventure doing the unimaginable.

Fascinating rides that you take me on, the type of shit you could only dream about.

☒ e satisfaction is beyond physical; it's the emotions I feel when riding Ryder.

My voice is heard loud and clear as we drive around. ☒ at's what makes your touch even better.

☒ e connection we have is my manifestations that came to life.

We continue to drive to di☒erent destinations.

☒ ey are enjoyable places. Dangerous territory, one may say. I don't want this ride to stop.

I ☒nd myself invested, trying to ☒nd the sweet spots your ride o☒ers.

☒ ere are no codes or anything to decipher. It is all there for me to see.

☒ e reality of what's going on between you and me. Where time and space do not exist.

I'll enjoy the smooth ride you take us on as we travel at di☒erent speeds.

We sometimes go fast on these wild adventures. Or there are nights we ride slowly, enjoying the moment.

Anywhere Ryder wants to take me. I am always ready for the ride of my life.

One year later. I am still getting hit by a Truck.

Isis Soto

If only you could see how much I debated, went back and forth...☒ e day I asked you out.

It had been a while since I allowed myself to be vulnerable, but the Universe said it was time.

When I drove home the next day, well, shit, I was in complete disbelief. How could this

young guy blow my fuckin mind like that?

Your love and touch was what I needed.

I didn't know where this was going...but we were going there fast, and you made me feel alive.

☒ ere are moments when I ask myself, WTH am I still doing here? ☒ e answer is you feel good to me.

I'm sel☒sh and want you ALL for me. So, I will take you to the capacity that you permit.

See, the thing is, you love me so fuckin good. You've taken me to this other destination, where I can be all yours. And do all these crazy things with no hesitation.

Yet what you helped me discover is even better. ☒ ere is a so☒ side to me, where there is no aggression. I learned to love and accept myself and grow into perfection.

☒ is is something I will take with me everywhere I go.

Just promise me if things change between the love you and I share. You'll never forget all my love and touch and how it came with so much care.

Maybe you are my Prince Charming a☒er all ~

Stolen Shores of Sanctuary

Alyssa Tafoya

Time shall rob me of this day
as ships bob in the bay
 ✕ eir sails an entrapment
As the reeds that ✕ow like our sea are soiled
time will ensure the snu✕ of my life.

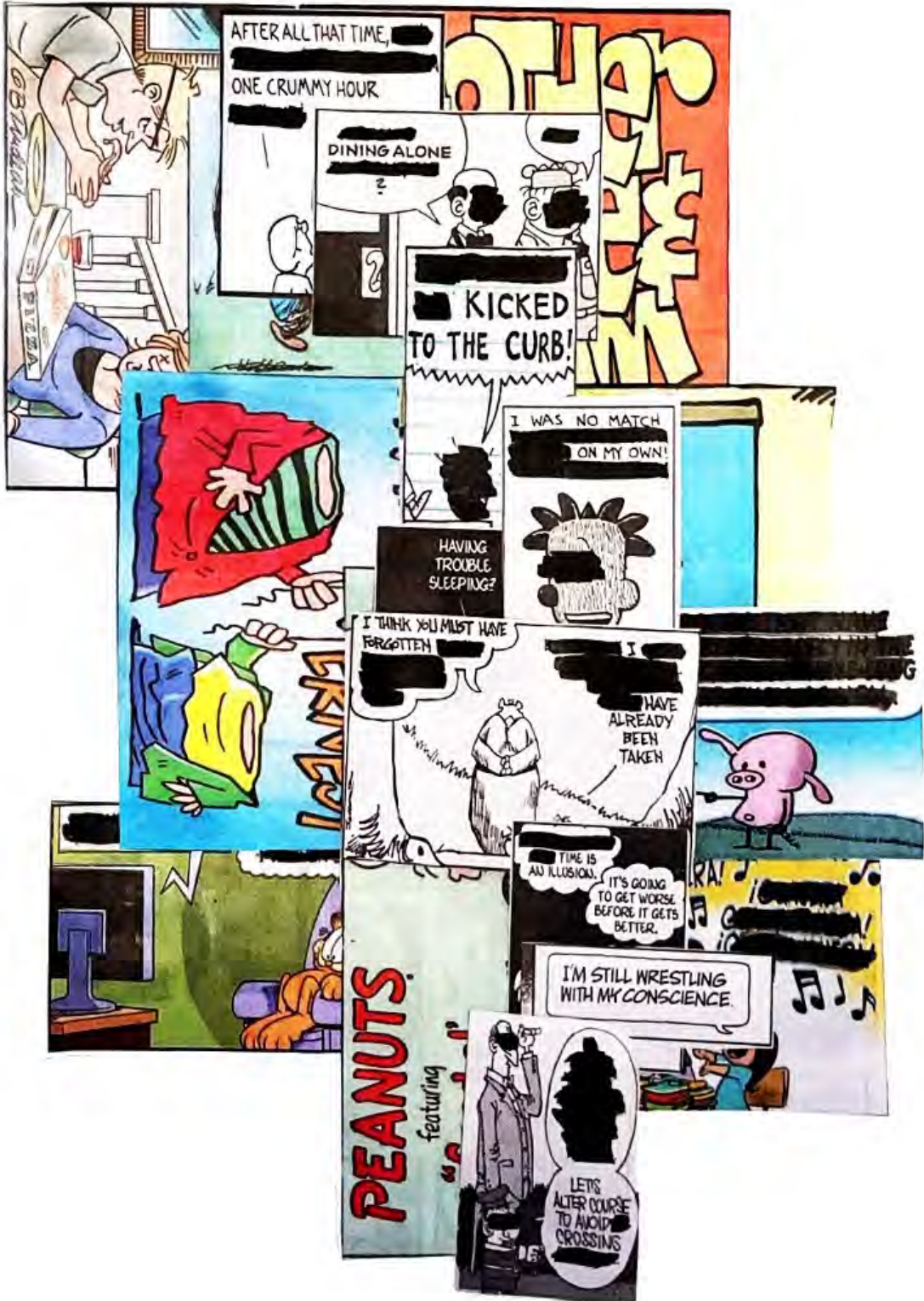
Guard our secrets and our faith
 ✕ e origins of our race
Our lands made an attraction
while descendants of ours su✕er this Hell
I wish our children and our future well.

Hand in heart we hide.
With these weapons no longer we ✕ght.
Le✕ to tremble we die.

Great temples crushed to rubble.
Looted and robbed, in a corner we huddle.
With no will and no strength
Looking at foreign smiles with trust no longer
As our hunger and illness grow stronger

Remember the bay as it was before.
Songs and laughter on the shore.

TylerTangen



Creekside

Ian Tash

Beside the Creek, I look at all the fish.
The koi all swim, forever mindful here.
A heron waits for me to leave, its wish,
So it could eat its fill, the fish all fear.
Some theists say that God dwells in all things;
In all atomic parts, God's echo sings.
But why would God's song bring movement to this bird's wings?
To make yourself a cannibal is grim.
Thus, could this God just be a fish in pain?
Could prey and predator just both be Him?
Is God in me to judge a deed of crane?
I stand up; the bird knows it can retrieve.
A thought and prayer I give the fish I leave.
On my next visit, survivors and I will grieve.

Kind

Anonymous

I fell for a man who was kind
His words as sweet as grapes from the vine
although he didn't love me I didn't mind
I wanted someone's embrace to call mine
He was a sack of shit
never once did he commit
Much less visit
Even though he was a couple minutes away
However it was enough for me to stay
Until one day
His negligence became a display
With tears in my eyes
I said my goodbyes
It's been months since then
But my sorrows linger when I pick up a pen
Hoping he's the reason for my phone's ringer
Wishing one text from his would read deliver
Longing to see him in person instead of the constant reminders
One day this yearning will become only a sentiment
And no longer prevalent
I pray this doesn't happen again
It is isn't the first time I fell for a man who was kind
It's become an endless cycle of mine
Clinging on as if it's a Lifeline
Perhaps I won't hang on too tight
To men who are as artificial as sweetener
For now I only hope my future will be alright
And I'll see myself as a delight

My dear Anonymous

He holds a bottle up to the sky saying "I'm not gonna let this go until I die"
Addicted to the thing that makes him fly
Holding a cigarette in his hand saying "I don't care if I die anyway"
His wife saddened by the fact he's rotting away every day
Loving the man in the picture
Hating the man in the mirror
Him loving the pills, drugs and beer
Instead of her
Sadly she can't find it in her heart to leave her dear

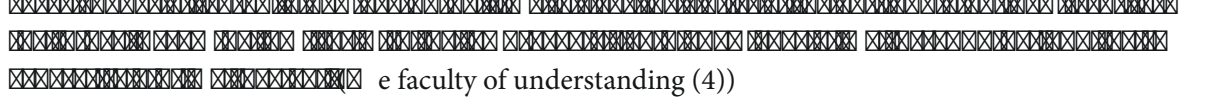
CXXXXXXXXXX



Man on Rhino by Joshua Villarruel

NXX-FXXXXXX

Across		Down	
2.	_SMR	1.	_____ identity disorder
4.	artificial _____	3.	“_____ isn’t good or bad in itself. What is important is what you are escaping from and where you are escaping to.” -Terry Pratchett (<i>Flaneurlife.com</i>)

- 1.) After another adrenaline ridden store run for toilet paper, beans, or whatever is left on the shelves, and one panic away from a meltdown my husband sends a link; the division begins.  Sever the association of oneself (1))
- 2.) Trapped inside, the shutdown continues, and daily debates of solutions cause more problems, dividing households and canceling contact. Killer on the loose with kids as active agents and the sensation of sanitation greets the day: doorknobs, handles, and switches, check.  Not subject to the control from outside (2))
- 3.) Working from home consists of checking emails and entering zooms, and “wear your pajamas to work and school” return like a rerun as visions of “normal” fade. Faces blocked by avatars enter new boundaries of the home, and peeks behind the wallpapers of scenic views hide what’s behind closed doors. Exiting the chaos by my fingertips, I cannot be reached once I see the clouds move. My best friend opens her own letter to find what has me captured in a technological trance.  e avoidance of reality by absorption of the mind in entertainment or in an imaginative situation, activity, etc. (3))
- 4.) My after-school nutrition class started pre-pandemic moves beyond the taste test of the classroom to video group chats via Teams and changes the focus. Learning about foods as plants connects history and opens opportunity for growth, change, and contribution. The big picture seen through a slideshow of free clipart and still visions of orchards, as we click our way through a virtual hunt for exotic fruits. Garden planning tips provide hopeful hands hints to new life.  e faculty of understanding (4))

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Father Daughter Time

Lisa Acosta-Alvarado



I could never watch this until I was older. My sister was into mystery thrillers, and this was a book she read. She is seven years older than me, so we rarely found interest in the same things at the same time. The book's cover was an ombre of grey with a white silhouette of a man's face, I assumed it was a man because of the short black hairstyle. I tried reading the book when I got older and lost interest as the character started to lose his mind in the hotel paperwork. I enjoyed the suspenseful silence of the film and Jack Nicholson. He plays the cabin fever-induced father that ends up chasing his family with an axe, and he reminded me of my father and his fits, minus the axe, but with the same amount of warning. The wife played by Shelley Duvall matched my mother's sweetness, naiveness, and dark black hair with long bangs. Running away from my father with her was no maze in the snow but going back could feel that way. Nowadays, I crack up at the scene's manic father teasing the mother as she feebly swings the bat at him, and I wonder if my sick head is turning or is it because I have already seen the end. During a screaming match between my father and I, my mother begged me to stop saying I had "it" in me too. The "it" always stuck with me, what was "it," the crazy, the violent, or both? Blood pouring out the elevators always makes me think of my period. I decide it is both the crazy violent and the naïve sweetness that keeps me in suspense.



It took at least three attempts to completely watch the whole movie. I would fall asleep to the soft music and intellectual banter of the cast whose style mocks the late Jacques Cousteau, oceanographer, filmmaker, and author. My parents collected his series of books with photographs of the deep sea, the last glimpse of what was, or could be. The famous red beanie marks the aquatic research team, explorers who in real life filmed the ocean floor for everyone to see. The character of the familiar captain, Steve Zissou, played by Bill Murray is in a midlife crisis after the death of his partner and meets his could-be son for the first time. My father had a son in a past life, my half-brother when he was only fifteen years old. Visits from my brother had the same awkwardness. Every time Christopher would come to visit so many years would have passed that it would be like meeting someone new all over again.

In the movie, the father and son correspond once through letters, as part of the oceanic fan-based members of the Zissou Society. I found a letter from myself addressed to my brother, that based on my handwriting could tell was written when I was young. Penciled lettering, on lavender paper with glittery stickers on the envelope, fully addressed. I asked if he would come to my sister's graduation with an update on the family. Of course, he never answered because it was never sent, and he never came until years later, with three kids and a second marriage. I wondered what had stopped me from sending it. The only side of the story I hear is my dad's, the youngest of six children, at six years old his father died, and as a teen, his older brother told him nothing would happen at his age, yet Christopher came anyway. My brother then had a child at an early age, and his son eventually had a son, making my father a great-grandfather.

Christopher carries the "it" as well and while much of his life was spent separate from my father, their lives almost mirror each other in their trials. Today they bond over the phone about parenthood, being a husband and a father, something my sister and I have no say in. My dad's lessons, like my letter, are too long and too late but they are present and waiting to be unfolded, bringing to the surface a clear picture of what was or could be.

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My sister brought this movie home from college during a semester of Women's Studies. A generic VHS, with a yellow and black slipcover, and the title handwritten in pencil. Demi Moore, Sissy Spacek, and Cher in a triple threat layout of three unplanned pregnancies portrayed at different periods. Each story shares an avenue under the pressure of the social and political climate over a woman's choice within that period and the violence that can ensue. I learned about the wire hanger and the many women in real life that died trying to seek an abortion and the doctors at risk. Once I approached puberty no one gave me a talk, just plenty of books, including the current phone-book-size copy of *XXXXXXX XXXXXXX*

As a teenager, I reunited with my childhood crush and because we were at ripe make-out age that is what we did until the night turned day with a cool shade of sky blue that told me I had stayed out too long, and too late. Showing up at my house, I could see my dad pacing outside and my bedroom light shining through the window. Always a terrible liar, to this day he reminds me of the sleepwalker ghost-seeing *bb* I told of my dead grandma as I tried to explain my odd hour stroll. I had no courage, to be honest at the time, it was his courage, once we were eventually caught pants down, that would bring him to ask, "Is this something you want to do or is he making you?" and without "it," without fear, just my dad, calmly talking about consent. Trying to help me escape the mistake of peer pressure, recognize self-love, and the importance of the freedom to choose who and how to share that love. And then my mom put me on birth control.

An Afternoon at the Zoo

Evelyn Gallardo

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The classroom is like a zoo exhibit. In it sit twelve rectangular desks that have two chairs each. The exhibit is empty as it awaits for the fauna to arrive. The sticky desk tops represent some sort of art project the previous class had been working on an hour prior to arrival. Eraser shavings and paper bits cover the dirty floors. There is no distinct smell, sometimes that of the lysol wipes that were used to wipe away the stickiness of the desktops. Other times, the smell of freshly cut grass is more prominent, emphasizing the arrival of allergy season. In the corner a half circle desk is present, and colorful dots are placed at the end of the table to determine where each critter will sit during homework time. Two big white boards are placed on the wall, one right near that big circular table where the critters are assisted with their work. In the back is a counter which is always full of leftover fruits from breakfast time, particularly bright yellow bananas. In between the white boards is a smartboard, never touched, but always in use. Loud videos about nutrition, being a good citizen, and manners play on it at around 4:30pm.

The door remains open for most of the afternoon, and the sound of twenty-one rowdy eight year olds is heard throughout the hallways. The children squeak with excitement or grunt in anger, like monkeys, depending on which school meal they were provided with. Their favorite is BBQ Lays. Their least favorite being the sour milk, sour because it is served so close to the expiration date. The teacher, like a zoo keeper, is often heard yelling to calm them down as their hoots begin to get out of control. If lucky, the monkeys will be silent and then the only thing that is heard is the scribbles of the pencils hitting the paper. Much like a zoo visitor, the principal sometimes walks by and observes.

The four walls of the zoo enclosure are full of decorations. So stuffed animals sit in one corner, smooth posters hung on the other. The curator's desk is so full of paper, pencils, pens, and folders, and the wall behind it tells a story of a woman who fought to become an educator. Friendly smiles, giggles, and jokes are told in that room full of life.

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Outside of the classroom sits a playground. The playground is vibrant with colors. The playground is home to the parrots. The parrots can only be seen on the playground if they have behaved well all day. It is their favorite part of after-school, it is their natural habitat.

Two big red slides sit on each end of the playground, one swoops around, like a curly fry, and the other is a straight shot down, sitting at a 45-degree angle above the ground. On this playground the parrots squawk with excitement as they play tag. The zookeeper always keeps a close eye during this to make sure that no parrot pecks another. The parrots fly up and down the playground, almost never touching the stairs. The playground is surrounded by fake, spiky grass that the parrots like to lounge on. It's rough to the touch, but makes for a great resting spot when tired. Oftentimes, the parrots can be heard bickering with one another or repeating a silly word one of them said earlier. Next to the playground are the monkeybars. Ironically, the parrots' favorite part of the playground. They swing and swing until their wings can't take it any longer. Sometimes, the sprinklers are turned on, making the smell of wet grass more prominent. The parrots don't care though; they find themselves a dry patch of green grass and get to playing soccer. From afar, all that can be seen is their spread red, blue, and white wings flapping around the field.

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Once playtime is over, the students get in one straight line, like penguins. The smell of tangy sweat fills the small room. The penguins are instructed to pick up trash and stack their red chairs. They croak in exhaustion or hoot their complaints away, but the zookeeper pays them no mind. She too has to collect her belongings. The zookeeper hurries around the classroom, making sure she isn't forgetting anything, and leaving everything as it was. She erases her point system off of the bright white-board and disconnects her laptop from the smartboard. She stuffs all her markers and papers into a black little cart, which she will have to haul around the hallways. While doing this she must always keep an eye out for the penguins, as they are always up to no good. The honks of the last five penguins are heard and the teacher quickly glances at what they are doing. She is met with five suspicious-looking glances.

The penguins line up, as is the routine, when they are done cleaning up. The zookeeper checks one more time, making sure she didn't forget anything, double-checking that there is no trash on the floor and that the exhibit is clean. She quickly picks up small pieces of paper. She goes through the mental check-list one more time before telling the penguins to make their way towards the cafeteria. As they walk out of the enclosure, the zookeeper turns off the lights and quickly scans the clean room one more time before closing the door.

In the cafeteria exhibit they are met with a group of all types of critters. The zookeeper tells her penguins to pick an empty table as she puts all her stuff down in the office, making sure to pack it away neatly. The zookeeper grabs a torn up game of Uno for them to play. As she walks towards the tables she fidgets with the rough edges of the small box. The sound of even more loud animals is heard ringing through her ears. She looks around the cafeteria, looking for where her penguins have gone. She looks at those long brown tables and sees wildlife of all ages and sizes. As she walks through the exhibit she passes a table full of little ants, eating away at any of the leftovers another exhibit had. As she continues walking she can hear the lions roar. The lions are the oldest at the zoo and have the most attitude. She reaches the penguins and reflects. She realizes the day was not so bad and it could have been worse. The penguins play Uno while joking and laughing. The cafeteria bursts with joy as it holds the animals that are left waiting for their parents to pick them up. One by one they go, turning back to perfect little humans as they reach the door.

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The clock strikes 6 PM and soon enough, it's time for her to leave. She waves goodbye to her coworkers with a smile. She walks towards that empty parking lot that she knows too well. As the sun begins to set and the spring breeze hits her hair, she sighs. The zookeeper thinks back on how she too was once a crazy monkey. She thinks about that one zookeeper who inspired her to become something greater. She hopes that one day those pesky little monkeys will think back on her too and think about how she helped them grow and learn.

As she reaches the door to her gray little Kia, the zookeeper turns back into that tired little human. She thinks about how the job helps her forget about everything else for a while as it is what she enjoys to do. Despite the students behaving like crazy monkeys or loud parrots, the job is enjoyable. The classroom may be like a zoo, but whether it's the teacher or the student, someone will surely learn something new.

Self-Portrait as a 1990's Music Mixed Tape

Gloria Hernandez

"I Can't Help Falling in Love with You" (1993)

UB40

When I was nine, I got my first radio for Christmas and that is when I fell in love with music. If you ask anyone in my family, they will tell you I have the weirdest taste in music, most of them either listen to rap music or Spanish music. Mine is all over the place from alternative, rock, R&B, pop, country, hip hop, and so on. I remember watching MTV at my neighbor's house and that was the first time I fell in love with Aerosmith and Janet Jackson. One thing for certain: music has always been a part of me. Songs are memories of your past. If you are going through something in your life there is a song for that; whether it is a celebration or a breakup song, music has always been there for me.

"Disarm" (1994)

Smashing Pumpkins

I was 11 years old when my world came crashing down. We were moving to a new town and new school without a warning. My parents were getting a divorce and never sat down to talk to me and my sisters. The move was dramatic for me, I had no friends at the new school. I spent most of my nights crying, asking God why this happened to me. I was a good kid and never got into trouble. That was a hard time for me, and I lost faith in God and took many years to pray and go back to church. I went from having the best childhood to a struggling child. As the oldest, I felt I had a great responsibility taking care of my two younger sisters. I would scavenge for change in the couch and car and even ask for money out by the corner enough to make five dollars. That was enough to get a giant burrito, a big bag of chips, and a 3-liter soda, yes, I said 3 liters. That was our dinner that day: a burrito split three ways. I also protected my sisters and me from abuse from our mother. One day I had enough and pinned her to the wall and told her if she laid one more hand on us, I would report her to child protective services. Like the lyrics from Smashing Pumpkins, "I was a little boy so big in my shoes". In this case, as a girl I had to grow up quickly and become independent.

"One Sweet Day" (1995)

Mariah Carey, Boyz II Men

It was May 14th and I was 14 years old and decided to stay home "sick" and not go to school that day. I watched MTV, my favorite pastime as a teen. Then suddenly, I heard a box fall from inside the cabinet and then heard the cabinet door closed. That scared me and gave me goosebumps. I was home alone. Then a few minutes later my mom came home from lunch which she rarely did. She had me turn on the news and there it was my half-brother who I was close to, was killed. Today would have been his birthday November 26th, he had the biggest crush on Mariah Carey, "One Sweet Day" in the song that reminds me of him the most.

"Black Hole" (1994)

Sound Garden

In the middle of my freshman year in high school, we moved again to a new town and new school without a warning. I am not quite sure why my mom never told us we were moving. A year later, my sophomore year second semester, I dropped out of high school. I refused to go back, and no one was making me go back. A few months later, I did enroll in independent studies. I would go once a

week to turn in all my assignments and pick up more homework. I was not a bad teen, I just suffered from anxiety and panic attacks. At the time I did not know what was wrong with me. I ended up leaving school again due to depression and not caring anymore. It took many years for me to go to Bakersfield Adult School and get my high school diploma. Eventually, I signed up for college when I realized my marriage was ending. It did five years later, and I am glad I went with my gut instinct, to go back to school.

“Thank U” (1998)

Alanis Morissette

I remember being excited the moment I found out I was pregnant with my first child. At the time my younger sisters already had their first babies, and I felt a little left out. My pregnancy could have been sad since I did all of it alone: doctor appointments, getting the nursery ready, and buying all the equipment the baby will need. I was married at the time of my pregnancy, but often I felt like a single mother. However, I was so in love with this tiny little human growing inside of me. From the day she was born, I felt an instant connection between us. My second pregnancy was once again lonely, but I was still excited, I was giving my six-year-old daughter a little brother. We found out our daughter had signs of autism at age two. By the time she was seven, I decided to go back to school for her. It was hard, especially with her speech delay. I knew what she wanted, but others in the family had a difficult time communicating with her. I took a few classes on disabilities, and knowing how child development works helped me learn more about her. It came in handy when we found out my son also had signs of autism at age two. My children are my biggest motivation to go back to school and stay in school no matter how long it might have taken me. I am forever grateful for my two children.

“I Can’t Make You Love Me” (1991)

Bonnie Raitt

There was a point when I finally realized that after 13 years of trying, I could never make him love me. It was time to let go and let him be happy with someone else. There came a time when I had enough. I had to think of what was best for me and our children. Even after two years apart, I cannot help but think what it would have been like if he would have remained faithful to me. I know it was for the best as much as it hurt. Part of me wanted to make it work. I did not want a divorce like my parents. I wanted our little family to stay together. I learned to not make the same mistakes my mom did with us. I did talk to my children about the divorce, and they knew within a year we would move out. I stayed close to their schools and made them my number one priority. I can honestly say they are doing very well.

“The Cup of Life” (1998)

Ricky Martin

In May of 1998, of course I was not in school; my dad took me to Ensenada, Baja California to work for two weeks in the roses. He worked as a supervisor in the roses and the company bought a little land there to grow roses. After two weeks we were done, and I asked my dad if it was okay if I stayed behind with my grandparents and he was okay with that. I was there for two months; I got a job there to provide for myself. It was the best time of my life. I had fun because both my aunts were closer to my age. There were parties every weekend; we went to the beach and downtown and played games with the family such as volleyball, lotteria, and conquian card game with my grandpa. That was the first time I ever watched or heard of the World Cup. It was hosted in France, and we watched

almost every game we could; we even skipped work for a few hours once when Mexico played. Since then, the World Cup has been part of me. I do not watch any other soccer games or tournaments other than the World Cup.

“Creep” (1993)

Radiohead

My early 20s was mostly a haze; I was responsible enough to have the same job for five years, but, on the weekends or nights my coworker and I would spend most of the time bar hopping or drinking at someone else's home. It got to the point where we would sometimes drink during lunch and come back a little buzzed. I am an introvert, and at the time I was also going through depression, and the only way I could get through it was by drinking. On three different occasions, I had completely blacked out and have no idea what happened, I was lucky enough to be around friends and family when it happened. I eventually stopped drinking when I met the father of my children. I knew he was the man I was going to marry and one day have children with. Also, I never wanted my children to see me drink alcohol or get drunk. I did not touch alcohol for over ten years, now I only drink on special occasions.

“Road Trippin’” (1999)

Red Hot Chili Peppers

“Road trippin’ with my two favorite allies, fully loaded we got snacks and supplies, it’s time to leave this town, it’s time to steal away.” As long as I can remember I have been going on road trips. My father would take us as children to places I wish I could back to and take my children. However, when I asked my dad about these places, his dementia was bad and he could not remember where they were. I asked my mom, but she could not tell me either. I love taking my children on road trips from museums, missions, zoos, and amusement parks to anything Huell Howser has recommended on his show, *California’s Gold*. In spring break I got a book about Arizona places to visit and there it was, one of the places my father took us to. It was the meteor crater in Winslow, Arizona. I planned half of the trip and the other half I told my children we would stop by if we saw anything interesting. So, we rented a car, packed up, and drove away. It was special to see the meteor crater in person, it took me back to a time when things were simple. It was windy, but my son and I made it to the top to view the crater; I stood there for a while taking it all in. I hope one day my children will appreciate all the trips we have taken.

“Man! I Feel Like a Woman!” (1997)

Shania Twain

I can’t help but to feel empowered when I hear this song on the radio. I am a busy single mom raising two children 14 and 8 with autism. I work full-time, go to school, and work on my homework. I also go to a church group on Fridays and Sundays. However, I make sure that occasionally I go out and have fun whether it is with my children, family, friends, or alone. I make sure I have fun and take care of myself. That is what feeling like a woman is all about. My new journey in life has just begun. I am looking forward to accomplishing my new goals. Despite my adversities in life, I have overcome so much. Also, I have peace for once in my life because now it is my turn to decide what is best for me.

Self Portrait as a “list of songs”

Joshua Knoeb

“Jesus, Take the Wheel” by Carrie Underwood

The summer before my senior year of high school was the summer that set me up for the rest of my life. I had taken my SAT and ACT, I had scored very well. I was ready to apply to colleges and had a very good chance of getting into several great schools. My family was happy, my brother was happy, I was happy. I would be the first person in my family to attend college but my life was changed three days before the start of my senior year. My mom went to work and I stayed home with my ten-year-old brother. He had the stomach flu so I made sure he was okay and rested throughout the day. Later that afternoon we found out it was not the flu. He stopped breathing. He was rushed to the ER downtown while I found myself praying. I was not a religious person. I’m still not. I was praying for the same thing that Carrie Underwood was praying for in her song. I was praying to have Jesus handle the situation in one of the most dangerous and scary times in my life. My brother spent the next week in the pediatrics intensive care unit where he nearly died more than two times. He came home as a type 1 diabetic one week after being diagnosed.

“Young Dumb & Broke” by Khalid

After my brother’s diagnosis and the traumatizing experience of having to call 911 for my baby brother who wasn’t breathing, I was doing what I thought everyone did after a traumatizing experience: sabotaging my own life. I quit focusing on school, started doing drugs, and nearly joined a gang. I didn’t have a job yet but when I did get one, I used that money for as many stupid things as I could find. I was being “young dumb and broke”. This continued through most of my senior year until I had a wake-up call that I wasn’t going to graduate and had to spend several weeks doing independent work to catch up and graduate with the rest of my peers. I crossed the stage.

“You Should Be Here” by Cole Swindell

Right before graduation, I received some terrible news. My grandfather had terminal lung cancer at eighty-nine years old. He watched me cross the stage and passed one week later. One of the biggest accomplishments in my life became shrouded in death. To this day, I cannot think about walking across my high school stage without remembering and picturing him lying in his hospital bed. Every major accomplishment after I would think of the same song and say to myself, “You should be here.” He was a major aspect of my life and taught me many of the things I know today. He did not go to college, nor even graduate eighth grade but he was still one of the smartest men I’ve ever known.

“Love Story” by Taylor Swift

The song discusses a love story between a man and a woman and how they fell in love and continue to be in love. I found love once, she was an amazing and smart woman. I thought we would be married one day. But not all love is happily ever after. Romeo and Juliet did not stay together in this version of the old tale. Romeo turned to drinking following the death of a close loved one and swore he would stop. Juliet couldn’t handle the dark path he had been going down and after nearly four years they broke it off. Romeo hasn’t forgiven himself; Juliet hasn’t moved on.

“Brave” by Sara Bareilles

I doubted myself. I gave up on college. I gave up on myself. I accepted working at Taco Bell for the rest of my life. My mother sat me down and told me there was a song that made her think of me every time she heard it. She said, “I want you to be brave, you will do great things if only you commit to it.” I didn’t believe her; to be fair I still don’t but despite all of that I registered for classes at Bakersfield College for a degree in Political Science. I attended my first few classes and realized I could do it and do it well. I was ready to go back to school.

“Hall of Fame” by The Script

I finished my first semester at Bakersfield College. I was the representative for the pre-law club and I found out I was graduating next semester. I was proud, I was living on the highest high I had ever felt. My great-grandmother was my biggest supporter. We talked about the approaching graduation every week before it came. I was honored by the Pre-Law program and received several cords to wear at graduation. I felt like I could accomplish anything and then the day of graduation came.

“Five More Minutes” by Scotty McCreery

Graduation day was yet another graduation day. Just like the last when I graduated from high school and my grandfather was in the hospital, my great-grandmother was in the hospital. I shut down. All the memories and pain came like they had never left. I had a bottle in my backseat and contemplated drinking the whole thing a mere four hours before graduation. Thinking of her, I put the bottle back and walked across the stage with my head held high. She suffered from a stroke a week later. She passed away a week after the stroke. I said my goodbyes but it wasn’t enough. I wanted five more minutes. I wanted another conversation that I had canceled the day before the stroke. This time the bottle did not get put back.

Self-Portrait: A Stroll Down Movie Lane

Cesar Parra

Fast and the Furious (2001)

I still feel the sun hitting my 5-year-old face while eating crinkle-cut french fries with ranch and an extra large Dr. Pepper from Casa Burger (a local burger spot in Arvin, CA). A film that captures the Los Angeles, CA street racing culture in the 2000's. The story involves an undercover cop assigned to a case where people in street racing cars pull heists on semi-trucks, stealing DVD players and VCRs. I know what you're thinking: how was a movie made out of this plot?

In this film, various racing cars were showcased and raced repetitively. The cars that were selected to debut in the film, received an unnecessary increase in price value. As I grew older, I understood where the obsession with loud exhaust pipes and shiny rims came from.

Toy Story 2 (1999)

Growing up, my mother always insisted on the house being squeaky clean... specifically my room. Both my parents were very good at taking care of their belongings and keeping them clean. It eventually started rubbing onto me at a very early age.

I remember watching *Toy Story 2* with my younger brother.

There was a scene where Woody's new owner pays to get him refurbished... THE BEST SCENE IN CINEMATIC HISTORY!

I can still remember the satisfaction I received when Woody's eyes were glossed with Q-tips and the word "ANDY" brushed on the bottom of his boot with brown paint. ASMR before its time.

Spider-Man 3 (2007)

Every kid goes through their superhero phase.

But not like me.

Spider-Man toys, blankets, posters, icecreams, DVDs, etc. I had all of it! I used to go as far as finishing an ice popsicle and taping my green Power Ranger toy to the popsicle stick and say that was the Green Goblin.

I'm sure it was a great time for my parents since they used to convince me that he was real, and if I ever wanted to meet him I had to behave.

I had seen every Spider-Man movie by the time *Spider-Man 3* was in theaters.

I can still remember a 30-year-old man being confused in the theater when the symbiote was taking over Peter Parker's body. Of course, I had already seen all of the cartoons and knew what was happening. I gently tapped him and whispered, "He's going to become the black-suited Spider-Man, that suit makes him bad."

The guy took my word for it.

I was 7 years old.

Back to the Future (1985)

My youngest brother and I are 9 years apart. Yes, you guessed it... we had NOTHING in common! I still remember that Sunday, he and I were being couch potatoes dabbling into random conversations. My brother, 8 years old then, was always into video games and sci-fi. Eventually, the topic of time travel surfaced and he asked if I knew of any time travel movies that we could watch. I think to myself, "Looper, Project Almanac, Men in Black 3, Back to the... holy crap!" I immediately asked if he'd ever seen *Back to the Future*. "Isn't that movie OLD?" he asks. I chuckled and put it on

anyway.

From that day forward, my little brother and I had something to bond over. You can never go wrong with a classic.

2 Fast 2 Furious (2003)

As a kid, you always feel a sense of uniqueness.

Growing up, I always felt that I had a different mannerism compared to my cousins and the few friends I had made at the time.

I remember wanting to watch 2 Fast 2 Furious because I LOVED the first one. My dad and I would go to the local movie rental store almost every Friday, which is where I let him know that I wanted to watch it.

My father rented the movie.

The film took place in Miami, Florida. While watching the film, my father asked, "Did you know that you were born there?"

I paused.

All I remember seeing on the screen were beautiful palm trees, beaches, girls in bikinis, and one BADASS Nissan Skyline.

"I was born THERE!?" I asked. My father responded, "Not far from there, you were born about 2 hours from there, in Naples, Florida."

From that day forward, I built a connection with the movie because I could relate in a way nobody else could.

I'm a Floridian living in California.

Friday (1995)

Middle school was a weird time.

There were multiple groups with various identities. Nonetheless, we were all maturing at our own pace.

One thing I found interesting at that time was the different content everyone was suddenly into.

I would always hear lines that sounded like they were recited from a movie: "DAYUMM" "Bye Felicia!" "Break yo self fool!"

I never knew what these lines were nor did I know where they came from. Eventually, I was recommended the movie Friday a little while after hearing "It Was a Good Day" by Ice Cube. My vocabulary has never been the same.

The Fault in Our Stars (2014)

When my girlfriend and I started dating, I was always a little on edge about things. I wouldn't describe myself as an asshole, but it did take a little while for me to warm to someone/things. My girlfriend, on the other hand, was always outgoing and could yap for days. We somehow still formed a great bond.

There comes a point in a relationship where you begin to share your likings with your partner. We shared music and food combos. I tried a few.

Add American cheese to a McChicken... life-changing.

I will say though, that I was never into rom-coms, nor did I call them rom-coms, nor did I know they existed. Surely enough, she recommended the movie that softened me up. A movie has never made me shed tears... until that day.

Forrest Gump (1994)

My uncle and I were very close when I was growing up. Being only 6 years apart will do that. He could've been a cousin at that point.

Being my role model, he showed me a lot of things that I never knew I would be into. He is to blame for my hip-hop phase, skateboarding phase, video game phase, reality tv shows phase, etc. Comedy movies were never on the radar.

Netflix added Forrest Gump for the first time.

My 12-year-old self had never seen anything like this before in his life. You would think somebody forgot to turn off the coffee pot due to how hard I was laughing. I was a serious kid growing up.

Being the oldest of 3 boys came with a lot of responsibilities. Forrest Gump gave me a sense of humor.

Transporter 2 (2005)

Growing up my family was close. My father and I were closer.

Our bond formed with movies. Specifically action movies.

I remember the late night on a weekend, we were watching this movie to which I never understood the plot to until I was 21.

I'm currently 22.

This movie shows this classy guy in a tuxedo beating up bad guys, jumping off of buildings shooting two pistols AT THE SAME TIME. It was AMAZING!

I could still remember my jaw dropping at his car when he didn't turn the key to start the ignition.

He put a passcode on a touchscreen infotainment system. I mean, it was 2005! Do you know how crazy that was at the time?

I've wanted an Audi ever since.

The Flash (series): Season 1-3 (2014)

It was 2016 when I started watching this show. Also the year my mother lost her battle to cancer.

As the oldest brother of 3, I felt this huge responsibility for helping my father lead my siblings on the right path.

I was only 15.

This show is about a man who lost his mother when he was a young boy. He spends the rest of his life working to become a forensic scientist and solve his mother's murder that his father was framed for.

He lived with rules and always did the right thing to honor his mother. At the time, I found myself in a similar situation.

I wanted to be the best version of myself to honor my mother. I also didn't want to be a bad example for my siblings.

Here I am, a 22-year-old in college, still trying to set a good example.

I'm just glad they're doing good.

What Feeling Am I Learning with by Novelas?

Karla Ramirez



The Macy's where I shop has these eerie-looking devices called escalators. Every time I ride an escalator, I can't help but think of the scene from the novela *Un refugio para el amor* where Julie falls down an escalator. When I was little, my mother and I watched this novela. I always thought that the best parts of my childhood were when my mother would sit in the living room, and I would join her. This brief period appeared to tighten the bond between my mother and me.

I decided to rewatch the entire novela a year ago, and when I saw that scene again, I realized that my brain had formed a false memory because it was nothing like the scene I remembered. In the scene she was wearing loose pants which became stuck causing her to fall down the escalator and break her leg. She ultimately lost both of her legs due to the severe breaks in her leg. However, I still clearly remember that she was wearing a skirt that got stuck in the escalator, and it devoured her leg, resulting in the loss of the leg. Even though I now know it didn't happen that way, I still get anxious every time I ride an escalator, even if the scene didn't appear as horrible as I remembered.

I felt like I was scarred by that scene since I felt afraid of escalators. I could still ride them, but I can't be doing anything else as I ride them. The escalator is like a Ferris wheel in that we get farther away from the ground with each movement. The silence while riding the elevator is so intense that I can hear my own heart attempting to burst through my chest. As soon as I reach the top of the escalator, my heart rate starts to rise. I always have to jump when the escalator's end gets closer because I think it's going to devour me like in the scene. Even though it seems ridiculous now, I still get scared every time.



I seem to recall seeing a scene when they take a shower, which perfectly captures the experience of showering in Mexico. In Mexico, showering involves filling a large bucket with water, taking a little bucket, filling it up, and then dumping it on you. Looking back on the novela, I remember pondering the peculiar sensation it must evoke. I spent 13 years away from Zorcuá, the Mexican village where I used to live before returning there last December. As the water went down during my first shower, I couldn't help but compare it to the novela, realizing that in that very moment, I was reenacting the scenes I had once found intriguing. This realization infused a tingling feeling of happiness, a nostalgic and surreal connection between fiction and reality that added an extra layer of joy to the simple act of showering. I never seem to be ready for the water when it first starts to stream towards me. It feels like an ice cube sliding down my back as the water runs down my body.



My mother was sitting on the sofa watching the novela *Mariana de la Noche* as I was getting ready to leave for school. I was at the house door, getting ready to leave when the novela's theme began to play. The days that I didn't have school I was able to watch it. I've only been able to watch three episodes, but I fell in love with this novela right away. I became even more captivated with the story once my mother gave me the full description.

When the song finished, Mariana wandered around her room in the casino she worked at, feeling anxious. The man who raised her, whom she thinks is her father, is observing her from the room next to her. For the entire time she has been living at the casino, she has been unaware that he is staying in the room next to her. This was extremely disturbing to me.

“Te dije que no quería que la nina viera novelas,” my father told my mother (I told you that I didn’t want her watching novela). “Esta novela es para niños,” I yell from the living room (this novela is for kids). My mother laughed but agreed, allowing me to keep watching my novela. However, going forward, I had to watch other novelas behind my father’s back. Being forced to do this filled me with profound sadness; I felt like an anvil had been placed on my heart since I could never connect with my father the way I do with my mother when it comes to novelas.

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Miguel Ramirez

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Was the test stressful or was it calming? There is no need to stress and worry about your answers: relax, calm down, take a deep breath. Use the stress that you have built up to finish your schoolwork and to do it correctly. At times you might feel like ripping your hair out when you get stressed about schoolwork, just remember to use that stress, and turn it into “flow” to get your schoolwork done. The more you stress about your schoolwork the more effort you will put into your schoolwork, since you would want it to be perfect, which could result in you getting a good grade. Students are not the only ones who pressure themselves to perform at their best. Star athletes are pressured to perform at their best in order to carry the team. Doctors pressure themselves to perform at their best in order to save lives. Lawyers pressure themselves to perform at their best in order for justice to be served. If you stress about your schoolwork this shows that you care about your academic performance and that you want it to be the best that it can be. Stressing lets you know that you don’t want to turn in work that is mediocre. You want your work to represent the best of you.



Chauncy by Eleanor Bubash

Painting of Resilience

Ana Reyes

Life for me is like an art gallery, a chaotic abstract gallery. Around are canvases displaying pieces that capture different struggles and persistence with each brushstroke and color scheme.

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The canvas is marked by pencil lead that embodies the challenges I face. Each line or shape drawn sets off a testament to resilience, turning difficulties into purposeful marks on the canvas of my journey. At times, I tend to put too much pressure on the pencil and whenever I try to erase, the pencil mark stays there. The faded marks become a representation of the consequences I face when I hit a bump on the road, and the decision is up to me whether I choose to resolve it or walk away. For instance, I struggle with clinical depression with suicidal ideation. There have been times when I am stuck with deciding on whether to just give up and end my life or accept getting help to improve myself.

These different shapes become a road based on the decisions that I make in life. For example, there is one for school and traveling. Some pieces do not get finished due to how busy traffic gets. Sometimes, I end up losing motivation due to not being behind the wheel mentally.

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A minimal palette of colors blends and creates a resistance that speaks of quiet strength and balanced resolutions. Just like the pencil marks, when I lose confidence or do not feel good enough for anything, it feels like the colors around me become desaturated. There are times when I stay in that black-and-white mindset for a very long time. Then, I slowly start realizing that I have a support system that pushes me to keep going. Their words of encouragement or even a simple hug slowly bring back the colors my mentality pushed away, and from there, I stay determined to remain strong and positive.

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Each painting holds layers of growth, depicted through simple overlays. Each layer represents a phase of development and the evolving nature of resilience with clear symbolism.

Layers in a painting are essential to me because they reflect my view on my growth as an individual and how far my achievements have come. I am currently twenty-seven years old, have a great job, and am trying to finish school and become an inspirational art teacher. I am a proud member of the LGBTQ+ community and have an amazing, supportive, loving partner. See what I did there? It is a consistent layer! However, some layers take longer to appear and that is okay. These are just some parts of my life that are not yet complete.

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A single brush or even multiple brushes characterize the ongoing journey of self-growth. It is the reflective impact of understanding oneself amid life's challenges, contributing to the resilience portrayed in the painting.

Whenever I paint, I use multiple brushes for different purposes. Let me guide you on a couple that I use.

Round brush is usually my go-to because it does most of the work. It is great to fill in areas where you made an error, and a small amount of paint can go a long way.

A detail brush, a small brush that has a protector to prevent the brush from losing its form, is superb for doing those small details that no one else would notice except for you.

Flat brushes are great for making lines and for blending, especially when you want to make a gradient sky, so satisfying! They hold a lot of paint as well.

Sorry, got too much into the brushes.

After I finish a piece and wash my brushes, I notice how much of their original form has been rearranged due to the paint and techniques used in the painting. There are even times when I would not even wash my brushes, and the paint on them eventually dries up causing the brush to be unusable. It makes me reflect on how much I have matured and grown throughout these years. Sure, life for me right now is still starting, but I will keep going despite how I am doing mentally.

☒ e Nervous Test

Tamarra Scott

Do you ☒nd yourself being easily nervous? Are you nervous at the thought of people looking your way? Do you constantly wonder if it's just a "you thing", and so you take those expensive nervous quizzes online? Try our nervous test for free. Answer the questions below truthfully and then score yourself.

How o☒en do you ☒nd yourself tapping your foot when you're in a social situation:

- A. Always, I'm a professional tap dancer.
- B. Frequently, like a solo drummer attempting to turn the social situation into a music beat.
- C. Occasionally, two-stepping to the rhythm of the conversation with rhythm of the conversation.
- D. Never, I'm a statue, standing there embracing the fact that I'm the main attraction at my own museum.

When meeting a new person do you:

- A. Crawl into a shell like a little hermit crab, ☒nding comfort in its own home.
- B. Awkwardly chime in like a clumsy solo dancer trying to ☒nd its rhythm in the conversation.
- C. Channel the spirit of an undercover detective eager to unravel the mysteries of new information.
- D. Embrace the role of a supermodel ready for the perfect cue to take the spotlight.

When expecting an important phone call do you:

- A. Hold your breath with hopes that you'll su☒ocate yourself and die before the call comes in.
- B. Pace around the room in circles practicing what you're going to say like an actor rehearsing their lines.
- C. Embrace the incoming call like a long-lost relative being found, ready to ☒nally catch up on lost times.
- D. Con☒dently take the call like a money-hungry salesperson and quickly conquer the conversation.

When shopping in a store do you:

- A. Walk with your head down, worried that some random person might walk up to you wanting to engage in a random conversation.
- B. Quickly pace through the store like you're running in a marathon race to get what you need and check out before anyone notices you.
- C. Walk through the store and casually smile at everyone that makes eye contact with you.
- D. Take the runway like a super famous model making sure you're seen by everyone with eyes to see.

Your score:

Never mind your score. Your nerves will get the best of you if you constantly worry about them.

I remember a time that I had to present in a class full of my peers. As the day neared my emotions filled like a cup full of anxiety. Nervousness, like butterflies fluttering through the garden where my untamed emotions flourish like flowers in a garden. With each day passing as each wing flapped carrying the weight of the air as anticipation and insecurities crept upon me the closer, I get to the flower. It was as if the fields of my thoughts, worries and insecurities had been invaded by butterflies.

As the day came, I wondered, "Why can't I curl up into a ball and go back to being a caterpillar?" As a caterpillar I am shy and mellow. Why can't I escape my sorrow and go back into my cocoon? Nervousness creeps like a shadow over my shoulder. One day I shall learn to conquer you and to speak with a tone that shudders my foes. Like a butterfly over the horizon, I'll rise above all and transform into the beautiful being that personifies me.

So, if you find yourself being nervous just know it's not just a "you thing", many people suffer with being nervous, shy, and having crippling social anxiety. The next time that you're freaking out in a social situation, praying for the ability of invisibility, running through a store trying not to be seen, or nervously reciting your lines for an interview, remember to stand up tall with your head up high and conquer your insecurities. Know that you can do it. Though we are all on a journey to succeed in our lives, the journey looks different for everyone, so accept who you are. You're not alone. You are unique. You can defeat nervousness.



"wings of venom" by keyera tagger

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Amigos Eternos by Patty Martinez

Slasher

Susana Alfaro

A tall man walks around the class with a colorful piñata, making students stick their hands in it and pick something out from it. The colorful llama piñata has a hole in its back. It's my turn, in goes my hand, and out comes an orange skull eraser. Does this mean death? Or is it just a handy stationery item to erase all my mistakes?

After, he makes the students choose a card written by fellow students on Monday, 9/11. Maybe this does have to do with death. The blue envelope on the outside says: 'To your inner silly :3'. That is a silly face drawn on it, indeed. Now I wait to see when I can open the silly blue letter and read what it contains.

A sneeze is heard in the background, and the tall man says something about death, maybe it is death. From the chatter in the background I hear, "Aren't we allergic to death?" I think to myself, perhaps not allergic but afraid.

I open the silly blue letter and am greeted by its cute 'Hey :3' there's that silly face again; it sure brings a smile to my face. On the back of the silly hey there is writing that tells me to chill and take my time. That I'm still young and have lots to live for. To do what I love and not lose my inner voice and advance when I feel ready to. Thank you silly blue letter.

While reading the letter, I heard talk about he who shall not be named. The llama is going to be taken out of its misery and smashed. It must be in pain with that massive hole in its back. Poor llama.

Someone says how the classroom is a remnant of a fatal disease. Again, death.

"Does she have a butcher knife?" The tall man asks after I say I'm wearing a Michael Myers shirt. Silly, he doesn't use a butcher knife but a chef knife. His first kill was his older sister, Judith, and he got a knife out of the kitchen drawer and stabbed her.

Death is brought up again. That's more than a handful of times it's been mentioned. Maybe it's because it's spooky season, or will death happen in this class? This class is like death. Is someone going to kill, or am I? Should I look for a victim and have a plan set up? Or am I the victim? I should be alert and ready. This is no longer a place to learn but the setting of a slasher movie. Will this room eventually cry blood?



Ever since she could remember, she feared the dark, murky abyss that held the mysteries of the world. That unpredictable blue water that stretched on for eternity and could make even the bravest warrior tremble. For some, it seemed, the ocean was a bathtub, a wade through a stream; but not for her. She couldn't imagine sailing off into dark waters, uncertain of what lay below. Until one day, Jessie showed up at her front door.

"Come on! It'll be fun!" Jessie said excitedly. "Let's do something adventurous—I've been wanting to take this boat out for a while—my dad said it's okay!"

"I can't... You know how I feel about the ocean..." She sharply inhales, trying not to imagine what it would be like at the mercy of the tides.

"Sarah, listen. This will be great. We'll be sailing from Cape Cod to Galway, Ireland—a little over two thousand miles. I've got it all planned out. We'll have snacks, we can swap stories, the stars will be out every night... when we get there, Galway will be starting its annual Christmas festival—just think of all the lights and dancing!!

Sarah couldn't believe what she was about to do. Jessie had been her best friend since first grade; ever since she could remember they had had each other's backs. They were inseparable. Maybe this will be the time to overcome your fear, she thought.

"Okay, I'm in," she said reluctantly. "When do we leave?"

"Sarah! Sarah, wake up! I need your help with the backstay! We need to get the mainsail up; we're heading into a dead zone! If we don't, the boat may stray off course."

Sarah jumped on her feet and grabbed her light gray crewneck lying on the floor of the boat. As she ran up to the main deck to help Jessie with the boat, she couldn't believe it had almost been two months since that conversation at her front door.

Just before she was about to help Jessie with the boat, she froze. Fear's icy hand gripped her mind; she stood where she was, her feet nailed to the deck. Suddenly, she was thrust back into a memory that she had locked deep down in her mind for years. She was surfing off the coast of Cape Cod with her brother, Jeremiah, on a warm, sunny day in the middle of summer. Both were shredding the waves all morning, soaking up the days before school started again. Suddenly, Jeremiah got caught in a rip tide, the violent white water tossing and turning him inside out.

"Jeremiah!" She tried to paddle over to him, but it was too late.

Sarah was jerked out of her nightmare by the boat tossing against the waves.

"Grab that rope and pull as hard as you can!" Jessie interrupted Sarah's deep train of thought with her high-pitched commands.

If there was one thing about Jessie that Sarah knew: she knew how to sail. Jessie's father, Scott McCormick, a sailing legend in their town of Cape Cod, had taught Jessie everything he knew about sailing and the ocean.

Later that evening, as they sat looking out over the dark blue water, Jessie and Sarah reminisced about their lives growing up.

"Being a kid feels like a century ago... So much has happened since then," Sarah said, wistfully.

“Can you believe it’s been seven years since we graduated high school? I wonder what all our classmates are up to right now,” Jessie said.

“Well, I know most of them are smart enough to not follow their best friend out into the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, despite every fiber of my being screaming at me not to.”

“Sarah, be honest with me. How have you been doing?”

Sarah thought for a minute. She felt as if she didn’t have time to be afraid while out on the ocean. There was too much to worry about in managing a boat. It was a whole different experience imagining yourself out on the ocean versus being a part of it. That’s what it was. She wasn’t afraid, after all. She wanted stability, but tragic things happen on land just like they do on the ocean. One minute you’re coasting on along peacefully, the next you’re being tossed around by the crazy events of life. Because being out on the ocean made you feel as if you were a part of the ocean. Why would you be afraid of something you were a part of?

“I am enjoying myself; I never thought I could enjoy the ocean again after Jeremiah’s death; it’s just so unpredictable; after he passed, I just wanted some sense of stability again. The ocean has so many unknowns.”

“Jeremiah would have loved this; he’d be so proud of you for doing this with me,” Jessie said, tears welling up.

Sarah felt a tear roll down her cheek. She missed her brother terribly, but somehow, being out on the ocean, had made her feel closer to him than she had ever felt since his death.

As night fell, the stars in the sky burst through the inky black canopy and cast light over the still ocean, causing the water to sparkle.

It had been two and a half months exactly since Sarah and Jessie had left Cape Cod Harbor and set sail for Galway. As the sun rose over the pale horizon, the girls awoke with a start.

“Sarah, look! We made it!” Jessie shouted, jumping up to steer the boat toward the shoreline. Sarah strained her eyes and could just make out the shadow of the shoreline of the western coast of Ireland.

“My sea legs are about ready to give out, Jessie... I’m ready to stand on solid ground.”

“Well, we should be there by evening, if we sail with the tide.”

The girls got to work on the rigging, hoisting the mainsail to let the wind carry them ashore.

As the sun began to go down, the boat got closer to the shore. Sarah could hear music coming from somewhere; the sound of fiddles and guitars playing a lively tune and the cheers of people filling the air.

The girls pulled into the harbor fifteen minutes later, and Jessie finished docking the boat as Sarah climbed out and stretched her legs. The earth didn’t rock beneath her feet, there were no swells tossing the boat up and down... They had reached their destination.

As the girls strolled into town, they stumbled upon the Galway Christmas Street festival. The multi-colored lights dazzled the cobblestone streets, tinting the town with red, green, and golden hues. The locals teemed the streets with beers as they watched the street performers play lively Irish ballads. Sarah was handed a beer by a local and joined the crowd. She thought back to that day she almost refused to make the trip and smiled. Somewhere, Jeremiah was looking down on her, proud that she had conquered her fear of something she had once loved.

☒ e Merchant and the Herd

Emiliano A. Moncada

Villagers speculated a solitary man dawdling through the village, with a pair of sheep following behind him. A rare sight for the locals since he did not regularly leave his home.

The man named Theodore.

Theodore returned to his cottage. A small cottage house similar to the surrounding cottages in his commune. Pacing to the rear side of his home, Theodore leads his sheep to the barn, which he built the other day just for them. Since the village's market had new merchants with abundant herds of sheep, Theodore found the perfect opportunity to raise livestock to finally fill some noise in his hushed property.

As he was accommodating his sheep, heavy and long-stridden footsteps sounded near Theodore, hurriedly approaching him. Theodore turned to check the entrance of the barn, where a young, brunet man leaned on a stout post from the wooden farm fence, gasping for air.

"Icarus, what is the trouble?" Theodore questioned the exhausted man.

"Theodore," says Icarus while taking in one final gasp. "It's great that you are here. I need to tell you about what everyone in the village is talking about. If all is true, then this is a message from the heavens for both of us!"

"What do you mean? And please pace yourself. Don't rush anything."

"It is almost impossible to not overhear the conversations. Apparently, there is a merchant—" Icarus pauses for a slight moment. "Actually, that individual is no merchant. It must be a descended angel delivering miracles!"

"Miracles?" Theodore expresses a confused look. "Is this some hearsay from the village or —?"

"No! No, this is real, for I have been witness to the fortunate gifted with miracles!" Icarus objected with confidence. "My cousin wished for a heap of gold! And a friend of my wife wished for her deceased mother to be brought back to this land!"

"And?"

"My cousin sleeps in his golden heap and the friend of my wife is as joyful as ever since the return of her mother. They say that the merchant grants a wish in exchange for a valuable artifact. We must make haste!"

"I'm sorry, but I do not wish to join you," Theodore denies as Icarus gestures to join him. "I do not need anything from that merchant, even if he does roam these lands."

Disappointment becomes noticeable on Icarus. "Theodore, we can wish for anything. I can finally obtain the fortune I have always wanted, and"—Icarus softly speaks—"You can wish for your family to return."

"What?" exclaims Theodore. "Do not mention them ever again! They are gone and nothing can change that fact!"

"I am telling you, Theodore, that this merchant grants miracles. Ever since their passing, you have not been the same. You do not join me in travels anymore. Your happiness has been drained from your soul. You spend your lonely days in this desolate cottage."

"I cannot mourn for my family?"

"Of course! But you do not mourn, you allow sorrow to consume your soul." Icarus pauses and says, "I am going to have my wish granted. I only wanted to give you some advice." He turns and begins to walk away, but stops and looks over his shoulder, "If you opt to the idea by any chance, the merchant's tent lies near the lake."

Theodore silently watches Icarus jogs away, in search of his desire. Theodore simply stands on his farm with his two sheep. As if they were attentively listening to the conversation, the sheep were silent during Icarus's presence, but they began to bleat once he was absent.

Theodore pets his ewes as he conscientiously wonders. Three years since the passing of his loved ones. Three years since he did not feel delight or even a glimpse of satisfaction. Three years since young, cheerful laughter would be heard outside the cottage, loud enough to resonate inside the home. The aura of an innocent soul that spread optimism and amusement in the household. The most cherished, pure soul Theodore bore. Meanwhile, the affectionate warmth of a certain beloved would welcome Theodore home as he returned from a short trip or job. A humble beloved who supported Theodore since the ceremony that bound their lives. Yet that was all gone now. Theodore stood in a cottage pervaded with isolation and melancholy. Their passing was an unfortunate incident, but it was only another fallen leaf in the tree of the natural order.

But what if the merchant was able to bring them back? Theodore questioned himself. Would a granted miracle defy the natural order just for a mere mortal? Is going against the natural order worthy of a selfish request?

What do I truly want?

He pauses for a quiet moment. Finally, his expression perks up. He searches and grabs a rope to leash both his ewes. He exits his property, walking along a road that led to the lake. His mind was set on what to wish for. It was as if his eyes had revitalized with a flicker of hope as he marched. A smirk gently grew on Theodore's face. A feeling distant, yet unforgettable to him.

Theodore walked down the road that crosses through the village. Several shops and homes are settled along the road. Despite the time of the day, there seemed to be less commotion in the streets than usual. As he peered around the unusual scene, Theodore reached the location of the pottery shop owned by Icarus's cousin. However, the shop was nowhere to be seen. Instead, a large patch of land was cleared where the pottery stood. Multiple men were gathering around the patch, carrying multiple tools and materials. Among the men, Icarus's cousin was visible, wearing a golden chiton and himation. The pottery owner seemed to be ordering the other men to hurry their tasks.

"Make haste, men! Make haste! For my luxurious residence needs to be completed without delay!" the man in the golden clothing loudly hurried the workers. Theodore glimpsed the hectic commotion in astonishment, but he continued marching forward.

After some distance trodding along the road, another scene partakes in front of Theodore. At a home residing next to the road, a large audience gathered with sounds of surprised chatter and wonder. As soon as Theodore passes by the house, he discreetly peeks into the crowd, searching for the reason for all the attention. In the center of the crowd, a young woman holds an elderly woman by the arm. The elder simply stood in a hunched position, with her expression indistinguishable due to the abundant wrinkles distorting her face. In contrast, the young woman was on the verge of tears, yet simultaneously smiling with tremendous joy as she embraced the elderly woman. The gathered guests seemed to be astonished by the sight. Some were weeping tears of joy at the sight of the elder, others were interrogating the younger woman, and others just witnessed in awe. While the young woman seemed familiar to him, Theodore dismissed the scene as some ordinary matter of another family and continued marching.

Theodore reached the lake after some time. Along the edge of the lake, a large tent can be seen lying on a small hill. From the distance, Theodore spotted a tail lurking out of the tent. However, it was not a tail, but a line of people. Dozens of denizens were waiting in line to enter the tent. Along the line, several figures, with garments hiding their faces, strolled near the line, holding spears.

Theodore neared the line and asked a young man at the end of the tail, "Excuse me, but is this place to meet the... miraculous merchant?"

"Yes it is, my friend," answered the young man gleefully. "It is a long line, but it advances quickly. Thus, there should be no worry." Theodore noticed the young man holding a modest sack. In fact, every person in the line that Theodore can see is holding either a large artifact, some fabric embroidered with gold, or jewelry crafted with the finest ores. Theodore looks down at his two sheep, with a dispirited face. Either way, he stays in line and patiently waits to meet the famous merchant.

During the wait, Theodore notices villagers exit the tent every few moments. Ecstatic faces lower down the hill. Their shouts of joy echo throughout the ears of every individual waiting in line, further exhilarating them. Theodore's skepticism was well nigh gone after seeing the actual tent, the number of people, guards, and visitors seeming to have genuinely obtained their wishes. He was unable to hold himself still in line, as he was more hopeful than ever.

After what felt like an eternity for him, Theodore was finally at the start of the line, standing behind large silk drapes with jeweled embroidery that divided the miraculous merchant from the next visitor. From his position, Theodore viewed the tent looming over him. His hands jittered while sustaining the ewes' strap, imagining the extraordinary scene he was bound to witness. Then, the drapes, serving as the entrance to the tent, flutter open. The young man, who stood in front of Theodore in the line, exits the tent with a facial expression similar to every previous visitor. For the briefest moment, Theodore espied a bright and lustrous presence inside the tent as the drapes swung and came to a standstill.

"Next guest," a hoarse, masculine voice uttered from behind the drapes. A guard standing next to Theodore gestured to him to enter the tent. Theodore followed and slowly entered while moving aside the drapes. A large chamber was enlightened by several candles, sitting on elegant candelabra placed throughout the space evenly. Innumerable jewels, artifacts, coins, and other luxuries are scattered on the floor, with some objects stacking over and forming a pile at the opposing side of the entrance. A wide seat lying at the top of the pile, nearly resembling a throne, towers over the chamber. A rather short man with silky green robes sits cross-legged on the throne. The most prominent and only facial feature is the bandages wrapped around the man's head, covering his identity. The bandages did not cover his eyes or his nostrils. His emerald eyes glared at Theodore's as he entered the chamber. "Before you spout your wish, offer your valuables," the man remarked.

Theodore stands hesitantly but then ascertains that the green-robed man must be the merchant himself. "Oh yes! Forgive me," Theodore responds. He leads the sheep forward and they casually trot towards the pile where the merchant lies. "Excuse me, for I do not own much. These young ewes are my most valuable possessions for me presently."

"These whiny animals?" the merchant snickers. Despite his face covering, his bandages morph an annoyed glare at the ewes. "I refuse to accept such rubbish. Take them and be on your way, peasant!"

"Please, I beg of you. I do not have much. You asked for my valuable possession, and these sheep are the only thing befitting the label."

"Everyone else has brought to me true valuables. You have seen them in line, correct? If you are so desperate for your granted desire, return with an exemplary belonging."

Theodore holds the rope holding the ewes and turns to the entrance, yet stops and ponders. He turns and pleads, "Will you at least hear my wish? I want to confirm your power to deliver miracles and ignore my skepticism."

"Very well. What is it you desire?" the merchant says attentively.

“I wish for my happiness. To have the joyful feeling returned to me,” answers Theodore with a stern expression.

“What?” the merchant questions with great confusion. “No, impossible.”

“What? Are you not the famous deliverer of miracles? I knew this was a hoax!”

“I am no hoax!” affirms the merchant. “The reason that I cannot grant your miracle is because it is not a materialistic wish.”

“E-excuse me?”

“You wish for an emotion, an abstract wish that is incapable of being felt by your two hands. Everyone else has wished for money, the return of their lost ones, luxurious houses, and overstretching lands! Why do you not wish for something similar for your happiness? Why not wish for something similar to the wishes of the rest of your village?”

Theodore stands in disbelief at the response of the merchant. While he was skeptical of the man before, he imagined his wish could be granted since every other visitor had left the tent with overwhelming pleasure. He utters, “I... lost my loved ones.”

“There it is. Wish for the return of your loved ones, once you return to me with a worthy possession.”

“Yet I restrain myself from wishing for such atrocity because I know that such a desire is against the natural order!” Theodore snaps. “The passing of my loved ones was only natural. Unfortunate, yet natural. I have been utterly devastated by the incident. Thus, I seek the answer to have the feelings of happiness and warmth that I need in my life.”

“Your wish will not be granted here. Be like the rest and ask for any valuables to reward yourself with happiness.”

“Happiness, you say?” Theodore sneers as he directs himself and his sheep towards the entrance behind them.

“What do you intend to do now?”

“I depart home! I wish to earn my own happiness, not from exchanging any more of my scarce possessions to a greed who does not comprehend a human heart. Even if contentment will not be found here, I will search for it as long as I breathe.”

“You are walking away from this herd! What awaits you is further lonesomeness and deprivation of what is essential and precious to one’s soul! You dare walk solo into the delusive void of unattainable dreams?” thundered the outraged merchant.

Yet Theodore passed through the entrance, ignoring the merchant’s threats. The silk drapes swung behind him as he lowered down the hill. Then, transiently, Theodore looked to his side, towards the line of desperate souls with their eyes fixed on the tent. They were only meeting a corrupt deceiver who granted wishes in exchange for his own treasures. He delivers greedy and unfathomable miracles, yet cannot directly give a man happiness. There had to be more to it, thought Theodore.

“Villagers waiting in line...!” Theodore shouted to the denizens in line. “Do not deal with this merchant! For he only grants unfulfilled desires with the price of your most cherished possessions.” Some of the villagers chatter among themselves with confusion as they look down on Theodore. “That fraud is not a descendant of the heavens! He was unable to grant my one and only humble wish!

“You’re a loon!” a stranger in the line interjected to Theodore. The chatter descended into offensive, verbal attacks at Theodore.

“Nay! Lend me your ears! Pursue your dreams without buying them, without following others, for they may have malignant intentions!”

Despite his warnings, some continued to label him as a madman or a hopeless hermit with

no life desires worth granting, while others encouraged the insults. Not an individual was skeptical of the man in the tent. Theodore had no supporters and understood he would not have any, for he had stepped away from the herd. In essence, Theodore turned and walked towards his home, whereas the rest of the village focused back at the tent they anticipated entering.

As he ambled to his cottage, Theodore followed the same road he walked back at the tent. Reaching the village, the passage was calmer and undisturbed, even less than his journey to the tent. He passed by a lonesome home, observing a pair of ewes in front of the cottage. However, one of the sheep was hopelessly nudging her nose on the back of the other sheep, much more decrepit and frail. The feeble sheep was sprawled on the dirt path, not responding to the younger sheep's jabs.

Further down the empty road, Theodore encountered another bizarre sight. In a desolate patch, wooden shutters, clay tiles, and mud bricks were scattered with multiple tools dispersed around the area. Among the clutter, a single ram, wearing a golden himation, bleated continuously throughout the vacant lot. No person or animal seemed to respond to the bales as Theodore passed with his sheep.

Theodore arrives at his home and releases his sheep into the barn. While he was bewildered by the strange phenomenon of not coming across a man, woman, or child, Theodore decides to leave his confusions behind and finally lazes in the comfort of his own, peaceful cottage. As he closes the barn gate behind him, he looks over and contemplates his two ewes, who look back at him as well.

Theodore doesn't own much, apart from his cottage, land, and sheep. Yet, it was sufficient to keep him financially stable. Sufficient to keep him sheltered. Sufficient to keep him satiated. Sufficient to keep him living. He had the most basic fundamentals to keep him alive, therefore he should thrive in life. Yet he longed for company. Company like the one he lost years ago. Be that as it may, his life continues to move forward. While his past relationships cannot return, Theodore could take advantage of his living self to start anew.

A faint "baa" stuns Theodore from behind. He immediately turns around to check the source of the sound. Before him, a flock of sheep idle in his property. There must be a few dozen of them. Their unusual presence worries Theodore, making him wonder where they came from or why they are here specifically. Not even the market's recent abundance of sheep totals the amount of sheep standing before Theodore. Nevertheless, the sheep seemed lost. Their gaze fixed on Theodore and focused on his every action.

Do they need my help? Theodore questioned himself. *Won't they return to their owners?* Still, Theodore did not see anyone calling them or searching for them nearby. As a matter of fact, he did not see any people since his return from the merchant's tent.

Since he did want to begin raising his own livestock, Theodore figured he would take in these sheep in need of guidance. He couldn't witness such ill-fated souls to roam these lands without a shepherd. What these sheep needed was a shepherd to follow. They needed a distinctive individual. One without corrupt ideals to lead the herd. An individual whose ideals would be independent from avaricious influence of others. A leader capable of teaching the flock the dangers of the world and protecting them from peril and distress. The flock was waiting to follow a certain shepherd, since their naivete alone cannot lead a group.

And indeed, a shepherd stepped in. He took them in and guided them. Someone that finally smiled at the idea of a flock searching for his guidance, giving him companionship. Not a common sheep among the herd, but a man with his own morals and beliefs.

The man named Theodore.

The Last Garden on Earth

Matthew Phengdy

Universal Era 0082. Two years after the surrender of the Sovereignty of Zaon against the Earth Federation's Military after the battle of Zaratan. Five billion dead from a long ten year war that nearly brought the Earth Federation and the Earth Sphere down onto its knees. With the cessation of war came new demands. Demilitarization, integration, and most importantly, a demonstration of fealty.

For some, the fire that burned out that day when armistice was called had never gone away. In fact, it burned even brighter than ever before. The cause would never die. As long as the ideals of Zaon were still intact, there would be those who would carry on the ideals of the late Soren Löwenblanc.

Yes, even the lowest of low could still hold such a purpose after the war.

Victor Kavalenko worked as a local junk trader at Rafflesia Colony. He'd been working there ever since the war ended. No one really paid the older man any other thought. He'd been a hard working man all through his life, joined the military as soon as he could for the money, and was pressed into the frontlines as all soldiers are when war broke out.

He drifted from place to place, never really staying too long for fear of being attached. He had plans to head home back to his sweetheart after the war, but couldn't bear the idea of returning home, with no medals or commendations, just the fact that his men and so many died for the war of independence that ended with Zaon's defeat.

He would surely have been tried should he have come back. He would have died for sure had he come back. So he waited. And then he began to drift.

Getting up from his chair, Victor slicked his now graying hairs back. He ruffled through his pockets for his pomade, applied it, and walked out of the Junk House.

The sounds of heavy machinery, of metals being torn apart and of the heavy crusher in the back grinding up unwanted and unused scrap of various quantities.

It reminded Victor of the battlefields that he once flew through.

Grabbing his headgear and saw, Victor headed to a particular spot in the Yard. His men were just in the process of moving it in through flatbed when one of them, a youthful man of asian descent greeted him.

"Commander!" He yelled, waving his left free hand. "Look what we got!"

"Not again." Victor murmured to himself. After a brisk jog, Victor pulled himself up the covered flatbed and grabbed the young man, Sam Long by the collar of his well worn work-shirt. "What did I say about calling me that?!" The young man made a sound like a grunt.

Letting go, Victor surveyed the flatbed. It was something all right. They rarely used it, instead preferring to haul in junk with the Mobile Workers or anything really that could fit in the hands of those things.

The size of whatever was on the flatbed was at least around sixteen meters in length. Enough for Victor to furrow his brow deeply.

"Get the others, Long." Victor barely uttered those words before Sam had taken off. It took only around 5 minutes or so before Victor's motley crew of five came back.

Besides Sam Long, there was Wilson Torres. A giant of a man. Standing at six feet four inches. He had a large scar over his left eye, an injury he received during the Battle of Zaratan. After that was Erina Pretov. She worked as the management for the Yard and was waging a battle all on her own in her head. The numbers that she crunched made it harder for her to hear the sounds.

Of what, Victor wasn't sure, but he knew when to let sleeping dogs lie.

Last, but not least, a scrawny, but certainly not meek individual came running in. The dark skinned man, with hard-line features cut into his face was Lenny Burgs, the Yard's resident Proprietor. Well, at least on paper he was. He had on a funny looking suit, obviously a size or two bigger than his body's frame, and he looked out of place among the five while everyone else had on overalls or something to that effect.

"Alright, everyone. We got in a big haul, and Sam here won't tell me what it is. So, I figured we would need all hands on deck for this." Victor surveyed everyone. They've been through a lot since the war's end. They had no where to return to, no safe home, or parades to enjoy. "Someone help me with this cover."

Torres jumped up onto the other side of the flatbed. The object on it was fastened with long suspender restraints that were clipped to the other side via an extension cable. The tarp was made of a light, but fairly thick synthetic material. It was nailed down pretty well. Whoever packaged it up for Sam meant business. Or, maybe Sam wanted to impress Victor by going above and beyond. Whatever the case might have been, those thoughts disappeared when Victor and Torres peeled back the top.

"Jesus." Torres said audibly.

Victor gave a quick look to Torres, who was never one to take the Lord's name in vain. And then looked back down. The others were all peering up, curious after catching Torres' reaction.

"Well, I'll be damned." Victor took off his cap and placed it close to his chest. Staring back up at him was the head of a AS-04S Vesper II. Well, it looked like a Vesper II. The Vesper II model of armored suits were a commonly fielded machine during the war by Zaon. You could say it was like how main battle tanks back in the day were commonly used during open warfare. There were dozens of models like the Vesper II in service. It'd be harder to find a unit in the Zaon Military that used armored suits that didn't have it than those who did.

Victor knew that Sam had picked up something that wasn't a relic. It was something more.

After moving it to one of the many warehouses at the Yard, the entire group broke into chatter.

"How did you find an intact Vesper II all the way out here, Sam?" Lenny asked with an amazed look on his face as they closed the warehouse doors.

"I got a tip from one of my scrapper contacts. Said one of their donors had something we might want. I'm not one to look a gifthorse in the mouth so--"

"So you jumped in on it?" Erina cut in. In her right hand she had a mug of coffee. Leaning against one of the many boxes, she added, "Without consulting any of us, especially Victor?"

"Well, I couldn't just let this opportunity go to waste!" Sam rebutted.

"What would you have done if it was the Earth Federation looking for remnants like us, Sam? Were you planning on dying if it was?" Wiping his hands with a rag, Torres sat on a nearby ele-car's hood. "You know what they do to people like us."

"Look, I just thought it would be a great opportunity! I mean, look at it!" Sam looked over to Victor with pleading eyes. He was sitting on a rusty steel chair, his arms folded, his mind deep in thought. Sam's voice brought him back to his senses.

"It was a risky thing to do, kid. But I know a gift when I see one." Victor nodded approvingly.

"See!"

"Just this one time, Sam. I would like some heads up, next time." Stating her case, Erina

sulkily went to focus on her coffee.

“But, that doesn’t mean you have free reign to continue what you’re doing kid. You got lucky this time, but the next time...” Victor got up, walked up to Sam and placed his hand on his shoulder.

“I won’t be so lucky, I know. I know.”

“Now that we have that out of our system. I wanted to focus on the bigger issue at hand.” Victor stated, pulling out a tape recorder. “It’s about what I found inside the cockpit of that Vesper II.”

Everyone’s eyes all raised. Victor knew that look. Everyone knew his look as well. It was that look when he called them all into a briefing. It was a look that meant they were going back into the battlefield.

#

The Yard was located at the very far end of Rafflesia Colony. As the colony’s only main source of junk, and the only junkyard as well, many people avoided it unless they had to. Usually it was the local Earth Federation garrison that bothered Victor and his people, either dumping broken military weapons, vehicles, or just scrap that couldn’t be used. As long as it wasn’t completely scrapped, even the smallest thing could have value.

“A message from Zaon. The fight’s not over.” Victor looked up at the sky, well at what constituted the sky in a space colony. The colony using a large scale mirror system had it programmed to reflect the time of day accurately as though they were on earth. It was currently the afternoon, but the sun was rapidly setting.

The entire group was assembled around a tiny table in the workshed, with several blueprints of the colony’s inner tunnels marked for easy access. As Victor ran a junkyard, he and the others were usually called in to fix some minor issues along with the colony’s overworked engineers thanks to the expertise in repairs and salvage.

“Got what we needed, Commander!” Sam came running up to Victor as he always did. The young man had vigor. It was both a blessing and a curse. “I managed to get the access codes to the tunnels that run right parallel to the tunnels that the William Tell will be using to get in. Once it’s docked, we can enter through and stage our ambush!” Sam was giddy with excitement.

Erina unrolled another blueprint, this time with the hanger bays. “There we go, hanger RF-23. It’s one of the older hangers that the colony has. Probably built before the expansion if we want to talk age. It’s mostly unused and just straight up abandoned most of the time, but here’s the problem.”

“And that is?” Victor didn’t like complications.

“It’s located below the Garden. You know, the big flower garden over at the edge of the city in Rafflesia Colony? The one near the Housing District. They’re using it as cover.” Torres whistled in response.

“That’s where they plan on loading the cargo. And using a civilian area to hide it is clever. I bet they weren’t counting on us, however.” Victor looked up at everyone. He hadn’t felt excited in a long while. It was like a fire had been lit underneath him. “If we do this, succeed, and escape, we can go back. Not to the homeland, but to Zaon. There’s a bigger fighting force out there that survived.”

In the cockpit of the new Vesper II, there was a tape recorder left on the dashboard. On it, was information about the William Tell, a Federation warship that was coming to dock with Rafflesia Colony to receive the important cargo. It was a Pegasus Class Warship, one of the few that

survived the war.

They weren't expecting a fight. Certainly not from guerrilla Zaon forces, and certainly not a veteran squad from the war two years ago. They would retake the homeland, they would take back the freedom that they were fighting so hard for. It was the only way.

"We commence the operation at the crack of dawn. Sam and Lenny will give us the signal at the colony's main control room. They'll alter the ceiling mirrors to stay dark and disrupt the military's communications and their access to deploy reinforcements. Then, the rest of the team will attack under the cover of darkness." Victor gave a look around the table. It was deathly silent. But the silence was not one of grave contemplation, rather, it was one of quiet determination.

"Commander." Torres piped up. I think you should use that new Vesper II."

"Why's that?"

"I know we still all have our units from the war, your's included, but that new model is recently manufactured. I don't ever remember ever seeing that type of model out on the field. And, I'm pretty sure that besides our orders, there was a reason that our benefactor decided to send it along. Heck, they managed to smuggle it in for Sam to bring." Torres was right. If the Vesper II was recently made in some factory out there, that meant there was still resistance on a scale that the Earth Federation had not accounted for.

"Okay. I'll have my old unit on standby. If any of your machines gets scrapped, we have a backup. Let's hope it doesn't come to that." Victor's words had steel in them. If the attack went well, they had a shuttle they could take to link up with another squad in a nearby colony. They too, were living in disgrace. "This meeting is adjointed."

The table was swiftly cleared, and a fire pit was made to dispose of any evidence. Once the the operation commenced, the Yard would go up in smoke. A distraction to make it look like there were multiple areas being hit at once. It would strain the garrison and give them enough time to complete their attack without fear of reprisal.

Victor was last out of the work-shed. He saw that Erina was waiting for him.

"It was nice while it lasted, y'know? Two years, living as scrapyard workers and scavengers." Erina said softly.

"You can leave if you want. There's no chain of command out here. No bigger commander out to boss us around. Sam and the others are fighting for what they believe in. Just as I have a reason to continue fighting the Earth Federation."

"I know. But, it wouldn't feel right. Just... leaving it all behind." Erina looked up at the sky. "Just wanted to get my thoughts out." With that, she spun on her heels and left.

Victor stood looking up at the false sky. He had been born in the space colonies. The first time he had laid eyes on the real thing, the real sky, was when he was out there, among the fighting. This time, he would have to fight even harder to see it again.

#

"The language of flowers is a complex and very emotional thing." Syrus Blake absentmindedly said out loud as he finished waxing his ele-car. It was a brand new model, just recently released a mere two months ago on earth. Syrus had never seen the earth, much less set foot on it, but he had seen it in movies and in pictures. The pale blue dot, the origin of mankind. It had a sort of romantic feel to it, almost like he was peering into the past the more he thought about it.

But it wasn't a fantasy, nor was it the past. The earth existed as it always did, and few in space had ever set foot on it. Syrus was no exception. While his family was incredibly well off, his parents had never taken him to earth on vacation. Instead, they took his two younger sisters, and his

youngest brother with them wherever they went. They were the ones who got to see the all natural blue sky, the natural oceans that shone blue, and the non-filtered air from real live trees that weren't just imported from earth. They had the real thing.

It was early morning, 7:00 if you could believe it. Usually, the ceiling would have changed the starry night sky into something more appropriate. Like the sun, just beginning to rise above the horizon like on the earth. Clearly, something wasn't right. A technical issue or some sort. Nevertheless, the school hadn't called to update everyone whether the flower watching event was cancelled.

Syrus just assumed it was still going on as planned.

Just then, his phone rang. Reaching inside the driver's side of the ele-car, Syrus picked up.

"Hello, this is Syrus speaking." He muttered, wiping down the dashboard.

"YOOOOOOO" A loud voice suddenly blasted from the receiver. It was Joe Lee. One of Syrus' friends. "We are still on, right!? Man, am I HYPED!" Syrus held the receiver away from his ear.

"Yeah, I'm finishing up with the car. I'll be right there."

"You BETTER!"

Chuckling, Syrus hung up. He double checked the breaks, made sure the battery was fully charged, and kept a spare in the event that something happened to it. The colony had plenty of electric chargers, but one could never be too careful. After securing it down with some straps, Syrus then went back inside his house. Syrus' home was an odd one among the more uniform homes around the neighborhood. That was because his parents' had it custom made. The previous building that once stood here was demolished to make way for something grander. If you could call a three story family home without a family in it glorious was up to interpretation, but for Syrus, it was home. Even if it felt empty most of the time.

Making a quick breakfast, which only took 10 minutes, Syrus watered the plants quickly and made sure that the pool's pump was working. Afterwards, Syrus swing by his room. Inside, everything was as he left it after waking up. Grabbing his wallet, Syrus stopped in front of his safe. Unlocking it, he pulled out a leather holster. Inside was a pistol.

It was only for emergencies, and the only times that he had used it were at the firing range. He didn't hunt like his father and had no interest in doing so. He would rather pursue other leisurely activities like fencing, or customizing ele-cars, but in these days, protection came in handy.

After locking the house up, Syrus jumped into his ele-car. Fancy models like his had an engine emulation feature, where it'd feel like an actual gas car's engine was starting up and rumbling. He also drove stick, because all of the cool heroes in action movies typically did so too. Turning on the radio, he backed out of the driveway and drove off to pick up Joe.

#

"And so I said, well, maybe if you didn't suck at craps, you'd have a better chance at not losing your money all the time, ahahahaha!" Joe's voice vanished into the rushing wind as the the ele-car drove through Rafflesia Colony's highway. Since it was the early morning there were few cars on the road. It was perfect for a thrilling joyride, racing through at breakneck speeds. The only thing you had to watch out for were the local police waiting at a speed trap. It would have been even better if Syrus had a girl with him, but he had to settle with Joe for now.

"Yeah, I bet it takes a lot of skill to do good in craps." Syrus rolled his eyes as he pressed a button on the dashboard. The hood of the ele-car began to retract, allowing the morning wind to enter and pass on by. Usually by now the sun would be up, and Syrus' sunglasses would stop the bright light from interfering with his vision, but without it, he looked like some metal punk walk-

ing around in the night with shades on.

“So I told Sam to stuff it. I won the stuff fair and square!” Joe cackled.

“Who’s Sam?” Syrus asked, keeping his eyes on the road.

“Oh some guy who works at the Yard. He wanted to try and gamble his debt away, and y’know, I felt sorry for the guy and said if he could win at craps, I’d let it slide.” Joe shrugged.

“And he accepted it? Isn’t he older than us?”

“Not by more than like, four years or something. Why?”

“Just saying, getting involved with folks like that, a whole lotta trouble just waiting to happen.” Syrus stated.

“Hey, I like to gamble, you like your cars.”

“How does that remotely compare?”

The drive continued on like this for much of the time on the road. Joe telling some sort of wild story of something that happened while he was out playing cards, craps, or whatever was the flavor of the day for him, and Syrus trying to keep his friend on a leash. If the school ever found out Joe was out there gambling, there would be hell to pay. That is, if it ever got to that point. Joe came from old money, just like Syrus, so he’d probably get a light slap on the wrist and told to find something else to do with his time.

Syrus didn’t like that one bit.

Around 8:00 AM, Syrus pulled into the Flower Garden’s parking lot. As expected it was packed full of ele-cars of different shapes, sizes, and models. He could even see a handful of school buses parked off in the distance. Syrus was thankful that he had his own car to drive around in. He wouldn’t want to be caught dead in one of the school buses. However, from what he remembered, the buses from the private academy that he and Joe went to were less like buses, and more like private limousines.

Parking, Syrus gathered up his things, locked the doors, and hurried Joe out.

The sun still wasn’t up, so the garden’s lamps were all lit. They burned brightly, with their florescent bulbs casting light and shadow wherever they hit.

“So where are we going again?” Syrus asked, pulling out the day’s special event program booklet.

“Dude, did you really forget!? We’ve been grouped up with Darina and Ina from Class 1-E! They said they would be waiting near the snack shop.” Joe gave Syrus a friendly thump on the back.

“Oh, right! Yeah, I remember something about that. I wasn’t paying attention too much.” Syrus looked at the program again. The words, Flower Matchmaking were in bolded, cursive font.

Those words sparked Syrus’ memory.

It was the school’s annual matchmaking event. It wasn’t uncommon for rich private academies to hold events such as this. It gave the students time to mingle, and allowed the many rich families whose children were attending to get to know one another. It wasn’t a replacement for an actual matchmaking party, or an actual arrangement by their parents, but it was a fun way to get used to it.

Supposedly.

Making their way to the snack stand, Syrus and Joe looked for the two girls. After several minutes of looking, the pair were not to be found.

“You think they ditched us?” Joe asked, sitting down on a nearby bench.

“Maybe. But they’d get in trouble with the teachers. We have role call in about...” Syrus

checked his watch. “10 minutes or so?” Syrus sat down on the bench with Joe.

The pair sat in an awkward silence.

Thankfully, they didn’t have to wait long.

As the crowd began to part, Syrus caught sight of the two girls that Joe and him were looking for. The girls also spotted the pair as well, who immediately got up onto their feet.

Ina had on a midi dress, with a subtle patterned floral design that wasn’t too bold. The color was of a soft pastel, lavender, pale pink, and some hints of green mixed in. On her waist, a cinched thin belt with slight green trimmings. Syrus thought it looked well with her loose, wavy blonde hair that swayed gently with the wind.

Darina, on the other hand, had on a A-Line skirt that went down to her knees, with a sleeveless blouse that was a solid, navy blue, and her hair was neatly pulled into a chic styled bun.

“Hi~” Ina waved at Syrus and Blake. “Were you two waiting for long? We got lost wandering around a bit.”

“Hehe, I bet they were just dying to meet us.” Darina chimed in, smiling. Brushing away a stray lock of dark hair, she skipped over to Joe and wrapped her arms around his. “Shall we go?”

“Ye-yah.” Joe stammered, looking at Syrus like he had found the truth to the universal secrets of the universe. The two immediately left, leaving Syrus and Ina alone.

“Should we go?” Ina offered her arm.

“Gladly.” Syrus replied, smiling.

#

After orientation, the students were allowed to go about as they pleased as long as they stayed on the premises of the flower garden. It was a novel idea, Syrus thought. The language of flowers and putting together a matchmaking event were a perfect match. Walking through a trail with Ina, the pair took in the sights, even as the dark overhead sky looked down upon the colony.

In the colony’s command room, Sam and Lenny had just finished up their job. Sam was setting the explosives up as Lenny cleaned up, dragging the bodies of three officers who were posted there away into a nearby closet.

“Can you hurry it up, Sam? We gotta make it fast. We need to meetup back with the team.” Lenny shoved the last body in and shut the door. Propping it with a stick so it didn’t open.

“Just got it done, c’mon, we can take the service elevator to the garden.” Sam checked his gun, looked out the room and booked it with Lenny.

In the gardens, Syrus and Ina found a nice patch of grass to sit down on. The school had marked their picnic zones very clearly, so they sat upon a nice sheet of cloth. Syrus wished that the skies would turn to light again. There was something eerie, unsettling about the time of day that should be bright out.

“I wonder why the sky is still dark out? Do you think the colony workers fell asleep?” Ina asked, gazing up at the false sky littered with false stars. “I sometimes wonder if the earth is like this too at night.” There was a dreamy look in Ina’s eyes.

“Have you never been to earth?”

“No, never. I know a lot of others our age have been to it, but I’ve never laid eyes on it. Father is almost always there because of business trips, but I’ve seen the pictures. It’s hard to believe that such a place exists.” Ina sighed.

Syrus looked up at the sky as well. He couldn’t fathom the facination with the planet earth. Sure, mankind was born there, and from that tiny planet they began to expand out into space. The space colonies were a natural reflection of that. Humanity conquering the cold, unforgiving harsh

space, and making it more like earth.

Was it because of that the war with the Sovereignty of Zaon happened? Did they believe that those who lived on earth or near it had no business with the those who lived above? Were humans so different that just a simple matter of living somewhere else made them so different? Syrus wasn't drafted, but he'd seen manner of his former classmates who willingly joined the war effort. Many didn't come back. The few who did, they were never the same ever again.

Maybe it was a good thing that Rafflesia Colony was located so far away from any source of conflict. The only thing Syrus heard of the war was on the news as it unfolded.

"If you don't hurry, I'm going to catch you!"

"Oh no! Haha! Don't!"

Syrus and Ina looked over to the sight of Joe and Darina running around. Joe would catch Darina, bring her in for a tight hug, let her run away, and then rinse and repeat.

Syrus thought those two must have hit it off quite well.

On the other hand, Syrus and Ina were more like cordial friends. Sadly, they might not be too compatible with each other. It was a fleeting thought, but Syrus felt like he had his whole life ahead of him before he could go and settle down. He felt like an outlier compared to others his age in the colony.

"Hey, Ina?"

"Yes, Syrus?"

"What do you want to do in life? Like, I mean beyond just going to school, hanging out and stuff?" Syrus asked amongst the giggles of Joe and Darina.

"Hm... Well, I've always wanted to be a singer." Ina replied.

"A singer?"

"Mmm, yeah, like that one famous singer. Lyn May."

"I've never heard of her."

"She's well known at Side 5. Blue Noa. She has such a powerful voice, almost like it can pierce through the heavens itself. She's great on the piano too." Ina giggled as she said this. "I can only hope to ever be on her level. She's a prodigy you know?"

"Being a prodigy is good and all, but it can never beat good old fashioned hard work. No one says that having talent and being good at something are mutually exclusive. I believe, that if you want it, and work hard for it, you can succeed." Syrus stated as a matter of fact.

Looking over, Ina was looking at him with a surprised expression.

"What?" Syrus asked, perplexed.

"Hehe, I didn't take you to be the sort of guy who could give an inspirational speech like that." Ina smiled.

"Well, I aim to please. Even I surprise myself, sometimes."

Syrus and Ina laughed together at this.

But it was Syrus who stopped first. He caught a hint of it. What it was he couldn't be too sure of. Looking around, he thought he had smelled some barbaque. But, that couldn't be right. It wasn't even close to lunch time. In fact...

Syrus got up suddenly. There were smoke trails nearby. Close. Very Close.

"What's wrong?" Ina asked after seeing Syrus stand up.

"Something's not right, we should-"

Syrus didn't get to finish as the world suddenly went black.

#

Syrus awoke not with a start, not with a bang, but with cold dread.

The moment his eyes opened, the heat of the fires burning around him, the smell of smoke, and...

"Wake up! Please wake up!" Ina was above him, shaking him as though he were in a deep sleep. Ina had been crying. No, it was more accurate to say that he was still in the process of crying. Syrus picked himself up, his body aching. Realizing what was going on, he checked his body for any injuries. Besides a cut on his forehead that had dried up, he was fine, besides the aching pains all over.

"Syrus! You're awake!" Joe ran towards Syrus. His face a mix of happiness and of pure terror. He had just run from the direction of the gardens. Syrus realized that they were in the parking lot. He could hear the screams of people in the distance, the sounds of sirens wailing in the distance, and the shaking of the world. "I thought you were a goner! We're being attacked! Like, right now!"

Crouched on the ground nearby, Darina was sobbing uncontrollably. Her face a streak of ruined makeup and tears. Ina had surprisingly managed to pull herself together after a short bit. On her face was worry.

"What happened?" Syrus asked Joe.

"Zaon. Those damned remnants just appeared out of nowhere! We gotta get out of here! They just started attacking, and oh god, they had armored suits, Syrus! It was giant, it just suddenly appeared from the darkness, and it started firing and oh god..." Joe was trembling.

"Hey, calm down, we can get through this!" Syrus tried to reassure his friend, but it was clear that was on deaf ears.

"They fired into the garden, and then into the picnic area. Oh god, there was nothing left! If we were with the others, we would have died like them!" Joe wailed.

"Get a hold of yourself!" Syrus struck Joe across the face. "Calm down, we're still alive, aren't we? Grab Darina, and Ina, and we can head to the evacuation shelter!"

There was a look of realization on Joe's face.

Syrus ran back to his ele-car. Thankfully, it was in one piece. That didn't mean much. If the colony did suddenly lose pressure, or suddenly decompressed, everything would be thrown out into space, or if it was hit by a shell, there it goes. What he really wanted was something he had placed into the glove compartment. Opening it, Syrus retrieved what he came back for. His pistol. Taking off his jacket, he swung the shoulder holster on, and then wore his jacket again. It wouldn't do much against an armored suit, but if there was anyone running around on foot? Syrus would be ready. He hoped at least.

In the garden's program, the main warehouse where they kept all the gardening supplies had an evacuation shelter built into the side of it. Syrus took off running. The shelter wasn't supposed to lock until the colony's emergency safeguards had activated such as in the case of a lack of air in the surrounding area, or some sort of breach nearby.

As Syrus took off running, the ground shook as he dashed between the cars. Even with the smoke and debris, he could see vague silhouettes hidden in the darkness. At times he could hear the sounds of machine gun fire, but on a larger scale. It sounded more like a rocket launcher than a machine gun, but armored suit weapons were like that.

The doors to the warehouse were wide open. Slipping inside, Syrus searched for any sign of the evacuation pod. He found it. Well, something like it. It was a thick steel hatch. It was wide open, with no signs of anyone else around. Peering in, Syrus discovered that what was supposed to be an evacuation pod wasn't really an evacuation pod at all. Inside, stairs descended down into a

darkness.

“Joe!? Ina!? Darina!? Someone answer me!” There was no reply. A sudden explosion shook the area again and Syrus nearly fell over. “Damn it!” Hands trembling, Syrus reached inside his jacket and pulled out his pistol. He switched off the safety, and, after taking a deep breath, descended into the darkness.

After what seemed like ages, Syrus emerged out onto a flat landing. It was filled with large boxes, some the sizes of large storage containers that Syrus had seen loaded onto ships at port whenever he would stop by the space port to view the different ships coming and going to the company.

It wasn’t an evacuation pod. It was a hanger bay, Syrus realized!

“Stop! What are you doing!?” Joe’s voice suddenly rang out.

“Joe!?” Syrus ran in the direction of his voice. As he ran around the corner of a container, Syrus’ eyes widened. There was a white armored suit in standing at the far end of the room. There were half assembled scaffolding around it. Syrus had never seen one in person, but he knew of it. It was legendary. The machine that helped the Earth Federation win against the Sovereignty of Zaon. Piloted by legendary Earth Federation ace pilot, Arc Call.

“Look, I don’t know what you ta-” Joe’s voice once again rung out, only to be cut short.

“STOP! PLEASE!” Ina and Darina’s voices both screamed, snapping Syrus back to his senses.

Syrus didn’t have to look far. Joe was on the ground, grabbing onto a box for support as a man stood above him. Syrus knew that uniform.

“Freeze!” Syrus’ voice couldn’t be more unconvincing. He raised his gun, pointing it at the man. “Step away from, Joe!” The man whipped around. Syrus saw the metal object in his hand. A gun. Almost on instinct, as the fear over took him, the man raised his own weapon in response to Syrus’ command.

A shot rang out. Who fired? Syrus wondered. Was it the man? Syrus was shaking, trembling. Any moment he’d feel the heat. The pain, and then he’d fall over. But it was the opposite. There was a scared wail from the girls as the uniformed man fell over.

Dead.

Joe managed to crawl away from the body, picking himself up off the floor slowly as he looked at the body.

Syrus just stood there, looking at the fallen body.

“I... killed him.... I.... Killed him....” Syrus felt sick. He felt nauseous. He wanted to go and lie down. It was a nightmare, a dream, a freakish dream where it all played out like an action movie. Only this time, it was a scared kid shooting the big bad soldier to save his friend. Syrus wanted to scream, but there were no words left to say.

“SAM!? FUCK!” Another man appeared from behind a nearby container. He had on the same uniform as the man whom Syrus had just shot dead.

“AHHHHHHHHHHH!!!!” Syrus lost it. He pulled the trigger. Not once, not twice, not thrice, but all eleven remaining shots.

The man ducked behind cover cursing his luck. Instead of engaging, he retreated. Cursing under his breath all the while.

Syrus fell to the ground. The strength leaving his legs as he crawled away to the side. He vomited up his breakfast and possibly dinner from the night before. Tears streamed down his face as he did so. Joe, Ina, and Darina could only stand there in abject horror. What could they say?

Getting up, Syrus leaned against the container. The entire hanger shook, this time, more violently.

“Joe? You... you alright?” Syrus choked the words out.

“I... should be asking you that...” Joe looked down at the body. The girls were quietly sobbing. “Listen... I think this isn’t a shelter. I don’t think... It ever was.”

“No, it isn’t. Listen, you take the girls with you. Find another shelter. This is a hanger... so it must lead somewhere with a pod. The military or something... they should be here.” Syrus felt something rising deep within him. What it was, he wasn’t sure. Sadness? Anger? What was it?

“What the heck are you talking about? We have to go now!” Joe’s eyes were wide with exasperation.

Syrus began to walk, not towards the stairs that they had come from, or the many doors that could lead to somewhere deeper in the colony. He was heading to the white armored suit standing there. Watching over them as though it were a god from up above.

“Hey!” Joe grabbed Syrus’ shoulder. Syrus simply looked back at Joe. Joe took his hand off of Syrus’ shoulder almost immediately.

Without saying a word, Syrus pressed his pistol into Joe’s hands and continued forward. There was a lift located near the front of the armored suit. Stepping onto it, it automatically turned on, and began to rise. It stopped near the lower belly of the machine. The hatch to the cockpit already open.

Down below, Joe led Ina and Darina to one of the many doors in the hanger. Looking back up, he saw Syrus disappear into the armored suit’s cockpit. “Are we really letting him do it?” Ina asked, her voice hoarse from the screaming earlier.

“Yeah, we have to go.” Joe turned away from Ina, instead focusing his attention on Darina. She had a blank look on her face.

Inside the cockpit, Syrus didn’t know what to do. The controls were to be expected as complicated and nonintuitive. But the moment he sat down on the seat, it slid back. The cockpit hatch closed, and then the entire cockpit lit up.

The cockpit was of a new experimental type. Instead of the traditional central main view screen and two side panels, the viewing screen was extended, and the side panels were less panels and more like a panoramic view of one hundred and eighty degrees when combined with the central view screen’s monitor.

Status indicators began to slowly pop up and Syrus for some reason felt as though he knew what to do. No, what he had to do. It was as if something, or someone was leading him.

The armored suit was already located on top of the hanger’s vertical launchpad. The moment the armored suit’s computer turned on, the scaffolding all around began to retract away. With a jolt, the armored suit was launched upwards, several blast doors all opening to clear the way. The G-forces were incredibly intense. So much so, that Syrus held onto for dear life.

Just as sudden as it happened, the armored suit arrived at the surface of the colony emerging. Everything stopped. There was no light, only darkness. Then, the main central view screen turned on. A single red mono-eye pierced the darkness, then a second, and then a third.

On the other side, Victor, Torres, and Erina’s eyes widened.

“The Earth Federation’s White Devil. Guyframe.” They all said in perfect unison.

Under Construction

Megan Rhoades

Sarah turned over in bed away from the sunlight that gleamed through the bedroom window and looked at the man who lay next to her. The feather-stuffed pillows, Pottery Barn quilt and fluffy white comforter she was so proud of could not take away the ache in her stomach and the pounding in her head or the words that he had said to her last night. He would not be awake for hours, but she knew she needed to get up to meet the landscaper who was coming at 10:00 AM.

The landscaper looked at her perplexed when she said, "I want to tear all of this out. I want to cut this all back."

The yard was once filled with small sego palms in every corner, pops of color from pink and yellow rose trees and orange bramble bushes. "I'm not the one who planted them, and I just don't have the time to keep up with it."

She had purchased one yellow rose tree almost a month ago and planted it in the now bare and somehow much larger flowerbed. She stabbed at the loose dirt with her gardening tools and rifled through the broken and dead roots of what had been there before, trying to focus on anything else but his words, "I don't want to get married."

"What am I going to do now?" she thought as she stabbed at the dirt harder and harder. "Why did we buy this house? Why did *you* buy this house if you are never going to marry me?"

Although they had been renting the house for two years prior to buying it, Sarah felt as though she had built it with her bare hands. She painted every wall, scrimped and saved and carefully selected every piece of furniture she could afford, and thought would delight him, but he wasn't the type to notice. She removed all the window treatments and installed new shades. She hung black velvet curtains and decorated every bedroom. She had wiped away the inside of the house of any record of a previous owner. She had done everything that she thought a responsible married homemaker would do.

"I don't care about that kind of stuff," he told her. The words cut a deeper hole in her than the spade did in the ground.

She stood the tree upright in the hole and pushed the root-filled soil back in. She looked at her dirt-filled fingernails and felt satisfied and proud of her work. The rose tree stood alone. It looked almost odd; and although the soil was still filled with the dead roots of what was there before, it would grow.

Rated X out of 10

Jordan Shih

Three years into college at the undergraduate level, I finally decided that it was time for a fun class. I was close to wrapping up all my requirements, and I was deeply miserable, so in January 2020, I joined my first creative writing workshop on creative nonfiction. There were about twelve of us in total, and some were less serious about the craft than others, myself included.

This was the class where I wanted to blow off steam! And because several of my friends were also in the workshop with me, I decided I was going to prioritize finding joy over catharsis.

My first assignment was a half-baked self-portrait of an essay. It covered body image, gender norms, and stopped just short of tearfully acknowledging a queer identity. Who comes out like that? Can you imagine? Someone might have suggested I look into the LGBTQIA+ club, which I had already ghosted my freshman year.

That essay's potential haunted me, though. I felt as though my uneasy approach to queerness, to being openly queer, was a betrayal to myself. When writing college applications, I had gingerly raised the possibility of being bisexual to my mother, who hovered over my shoulder while I filled out the demographic information. She was taken aback. How could I know that, having never had a relationship? How could I claim that, having never exhibited the signs?

So I didn't put down anything. And I never bought Pride merchandise, or talked extensively on gay rights. What I did have were queer friends, the most important one being Gill, who was (1) my hometown high school buddy, (2) my trusty carpool driver, and (3) my fellow classmate in this workshop.

Several weeks in, we received a prompt to write about a 'new' experience.

I immediately started scheming. I was twenty-one years old, and for my entire time living at the university, I had never, ever explored outside the perimeter. I didn't have a car, much less a driver's license, but I *did* have a California REAL ID and the impulse to use it.

After class, I cornered my friend and asked him for a favor:

"Have you been to a gay bar yet?"

As two children of Bakersfield, the infamously conservative belt of red in Southern California, my friend gave me a dry look. He was a good Punjabi Sikh Indian boy studying to be a pharmacist, and he was stunningly, glitteringly gay.

"No," he said.

"Well, do you want to go?" I pulled up an address on my phone and waved it in front of his face. "Paradise Nightclub is the *only* gay bar in Stockton! And this Thursday, they're having a drag night! When else are we going to have an excuse to see that?!"

Gill considered the proposal and shrugged. We agreed on Thursday evening that week and went our separate ways. I was jittery with excitement.

What did I wear? It was seven in the evening, and the weather was cool, but I didn't know what to expect inside the bar. I also knew in my heart that this was not going to be an opportunity to try flirting and picking up a girl for the first time, but nevertheless, I dug out my reddest, hottest skinny jeans and a sleeveless top. I wore a bright blue windbreaker printed with white flowers, which once got me a compliment from a fashionable boy. And because my sneakers were scuffed, I yanked on black rain boots.

I jammed on my cap and did my ponytail high, to better show off my freshly-shaved undercut. I was aiming to look as gay and hot as possible, which is really hard when you're five foot nothing, squishy, and dressed in the colors of the American flag.

When I thumped my way to the parking lot and hopped into Gill's car, I was taken aback at the sight of his outfit: a thick cable-knit sweater and long khaki pants.

"What are you wearing?" I demanded.

"What are you wearing?" he fired back, and I didn't have a good response ready, so I sulked into the passenger seat and pulled up the directions to Paradise.

The road was straightforward, and then Gill pulled into the shadiest, most dismal-looking, empty parking lot. Paradise Nightclub was sandwiched between a teachers' supply shop and a massage parlor, both of which were empty and dark.

As we nervously poked our heads through the door, we realized at the same time that we were way too early for drag night. The customers sitting at the bar were loners, and the men gathered at the billiards table were grizzled, middle-aged, and more concerned with their game than the two babies who wandered in.

The interior of Paradise was industrial gray, and the overall vibe was, to a point, dead.

It was difficult not to think about what we looked like. What if we looked like a straight couple cruising a gay bar for the 'experience'?! All around us, mid-sized television screens flashed advertisements for strippers and leather daddies.

We took our seats at the central bar. Gill ordered a fizzy vodka, and I asked for a house cocktail. Our bartender opened a tab for me—two drinks, and all I would have to pay was fifteen dollars, he promised—and kindly heard me out when I said I was at Paradise for class.

"You'll have to come by a little later," he laughed, and he slid the cocktail over. "It's still too early for the drag queens."

"We can kill time," Gill assured me, and immediately went on his phone. I took the hint and went on mine too. I opened my Notes app and tried to take in my surroundings with an unprejudiced eye, and in my peripheral vision, I kept seeing the airbrushed, spray-tanned flesh of a nearly naked lady on TV.

An hour must have passed with no evident change, and I had my second drink: two shots of straight Fireball. The cinnamon-flavored whiskey burned in my throat. It started sizzling in my stomach when Gill proposed we step out for a quick fast food meal before Drag Queen Night.

"What if we lose our parking spot?" I argued.

He was resolute. "I always find parking. Let's go, I'm hungry for Taco Bell."

My mood brightened immediately. "Oh, Mexican pizza!"

Gill metabolized alcohol much faster than I did. While I lurched for the shotgun door, he climbed into his car without issue. Taco Bell was a short drive from Paradise, but time blurred, because all of a sudden, Gill was depositing a flat cardboard box on my lap and doing a double-take.

"Are you drunk?" he scream-whispered.

From my position, I squinted blearily at the dark evening ahead of us. My spine was somewhere below the upright back of the seat, and I could feel the seat-belt digging into my lower ribs. The Mexican pizza smelled delicious.

“No,” I replied. “I get drunk fast, but sober quicker. Don’t worry.”

“Sit up!”

I cracked open the box and poked at the steaming contents. Time blurred again, because Gill found an even better parking spot and was scarfing down a quesadilla. I had half my pizza quickly, and then moderated my intake when my stomach gurgled unpleasantly.

“Gill,” I said plaintively. “What time is it?”

“Nine. You ready?”

“Ten more minutes...”

I mentally fortified myself. The parking lot was much busier than it had been earlier, and I had food in my stomach to absorb the alcohol. This was going to be the sober run. I told Gill that I would keep my phone on, because who knew what would happen inside a busy nightclub, and he got me to agree to a hard curfew of 10 PM.

The difference between our first visit and our return was stark: Paradise had stationed a bouncer at the door, and we had to present our IDs before we could join the folk crowding the bar. The music was louder, and the lyrics indistinguishable. There were actual colored lights flickering down, and the atmosphere was muggy with the heat generated by close-packed bodies.

Water was free, so I snagged a plastic cup and circled the premises.

Flirt with who? Take note of what? I floated through established cliques and didn’t let myself linger anywhere too long. My clothes were too tight against my skin, and my head hurt with the overstimulation.

I mourned the fact that I wasn’t built for the clubbing life. Youthful indiscretions? Passionate one-night stands? Who had the mental health to spare? I trashed my cup and fled to the bathroom, and felt every inch of my sobriety question my capacity as an adult when I failed to lock the stall.

Miraculously, no one came to use the bathroom. I escaped with my dignity intact, but my pride was damaged. I slinked over to a quieter area of the nightclub and contemplated my life’s choices, and finally, the emcee for Drag Queen Night cleared the dance floor.

It was a glorious line-up of beautiful women busting out dance moves on four-inch heels and lip-syncing to pop songs about love. I could not for the life of me recall the names or the associated numbers after the night, which I chose to attribute to the fact that I was goggling over long legs and trying desperately to tip a lady instead of studiously taking notes.

A man burst out laughing, seeing my attempt to wave a twenty-dollar bill. One of the dancers had strutted around the perimeter with a bucket, snagging money from outstretched hands and deigning to look at a lucky few. I didn’t think the stranger was being unkind, and I grinned back.

He said, “Are they not beautiful?”

I could have been anyone in that moment. Did he see a girl trying way too hard to look masculine? A flashy young man with his long hair tied up? Or maybe I was simply a fellow audience member who appreciated these performances of gender that I would never try out on pain of death?

“They’re beautiful,” I told him, and I spotted the bucket on the floor. Like a supplicant, I ducked down to deposit my tip.

The adrenaline rush had been swift and furious. Everything sour about my evening had turned, if not sweet, delightfully bubbly. My throat ached in the aftermath of hooting and hollering with the rest of the spectators, and I was giddy, staggering over to Gill.

“You having fun?” he shouted amidst the din.

“More than!” I shouted back, and I bumped my shoulder against his arm companionably. “Let’s roll!”

Our night ended there. A week later, when I turned in my essay for review, I was still smiling. Even though I hadn’t actually made any steps in asserting a queer identity—even though my professor politely heckled me for not painting detailed portraits of the drag queens and their dance routines—something in me had settled upon drifting in that community.

What incredible freedom, what incredible fun; as the pandemic shut down the university and sent us scurrying back to our homes, I cradled the memory close in my closet, a light to stave off the dark.

Some Of What I Found When I Searched For “Brandan Eth” Through The Campus Library Website

Ian Tash

A Transcript of NHEB News On Saturday, November 4377

AARON:

Well, isn't that just an adorable critter, Joshua.

JOSHUA:

Yes, it is, Aaron. But we do have to talk about a story that isn't so adorable. Let's take it out to Robert, who piloted one of the station's UDYS reporting bots in the field for something that hasn't happened since the technological dark ages: a breaking and entering.

ROBERT:

It was a peaceful Saturday for Bartholomew Tram. He and his son were having a lazy day when they decided to pick up a shift on a distant mining project. It was a special day for the proud father as his son donned a work suit for the first time.

BARTHOLOMEW:

You see, Joey asked me for a new phone, and we didn't have enough money from UDYS to spend on a new phone unless we cut out a bunch of expenses, so I suggested to him that he could work for his phone, and his eyes lit up. He was like, “You really mean it, dad! I can start working?” He was really excited which is why it is such a shame that what happened, you know, happened.

ROBERT:

The two donned their suits in the office space and began to pilot two mining robots on the asteroid belt near Andromeda MTS 11181865 c. After working for about an hour breaking up asteroids, tragedy struck.

BARTHOLOMEW:

He was having a blast. I mean, it was like a video game for him. He's blasting asteroids, really learning the value of work, and then the emergency shutoff kicks in and we find ourselves standing back in the office with the door open and some disheveled guy is just standing there.

BRANDAN:

I can stop it! You can't do this to me! Let me go! I need to put my old suit on! I need to kill UDYS! I can free everyone! I can free everyone! Let me go! Let me go! Help!

ROBERT:

Brandan Eth, a former tenant of the house, had been missing for 40 years and now suddenly was back in his own home. Police bots scanned the location and found no sign of a forced entry, or at least that's what Sgt. Esther, who happened to be logged into one of the bots responding to the call, told NHEB news.

SGT ESTHER:

Brandan had bypassed the locks using a flaw in the system. Usually when a person moves out, they move into a new home, so UDYS does a transfer of residency on the locks. But Brandan never moved into another house, at least not one where UDYS was installed, so he was still registered as living here. So, when he showed up the locks went *click* and opened up because they recognized him.

ROBERT:

While this may be a case that prompts viewers to be cautious, Esther has reasons to believe that this is a one-time freak accident.

SGT ESTHER:

You don't have to worry about someone breaking into your home because Brandan is a... a very special case. I remember when he disappeared all those years ago. But as long as the person who moves out of your home is a functioning member of society who moves into another home when he moves out of your house there won't be any problems.

ROBERT:

Eth will be relocated to the old prison complex for now, where he will be reclassified residentially for the time being in order to ensure that he will never be able to break into his old home ever again.

AARON:

Well, thanks Robert. I guess that just goes to show you how far we've really come since we instituted UDYS. I guess when you try to step away it's really a step backwards, isn't it?

JOSHUA:

Couldn't have said it better myself, Aaron. Coming up next, UDYS analysts predict an increase in UBI across the board and an implementation of these benefits for children as soon as they are born. What this means for you when we return.

The Testimony of Sgt. Esther

DIRECT EXAMINATION

BY MR. JOHN GILES

Q. State your name and spell it for the record.

A. Humphrey Esther. That's Humphrey, H-U-M-P-H-R-E-Y, and Esther, E-S-T-H-E-R.

Q. Thank you. And what was your former occupation?

A. Sergeant. And it's not former. I'm still a sergeant. Always will be.

Q. Of course, sir. My mistake. Now, what is your connection to the case of Brandan Eth?

A. Well, there's a lot. You'll have to be more specific than that.

Q. Very well, sir. What is your earliest connection to the Eth case?

A. Well, I knew the boy when I was a much younger man. He was just a child when his father moved into that house. His father and I were good friends, and so we spent a lot of time together. Brandan never really knew a life before UDYS like I did. He was basically one of the first people to be raised on UDYS, minus the baby years, of course. I didn't even take to it until after my hand got blown off and I couldn't work safely without being connected into UDYS, you know?

Q. We're getting a little off track.

A. Sorry.

Q. That's okay, Sergeant. I understand. I just need to know the relevant information if UDYS is going to make a fair ruling on what happened. It's so very rare to have to have an investigation and potentially a trial like this, so we need to cover our blind spots as much as possible. Okay?

A. Okay.

Q. Good. So, when did the trouble with Brandan Eth begin?

A. Well, when he went crazy, of course.

Q. What do you mean?

A. Sorry. I mean when it all started was about 40 years ago. I was plugged into UDYS when I was patched into a call. It was pretty rare to get a 911 call, but one of the neighbors, a German Jewish immigrant, I think, I can't remember his name, but he called because he could hear Brandan screaming bloody murder next door. So, I rally the troops.

Q. You're going to have to elaborate what you're doing for the transcript.

A. Sorry. I am using my good hand to make air quotes for the word "troops."

Q. And why are you doing that?

A. Because, let's face it, it was true back then and it's true now, I am the only police officer left. Nobody wants to be a police officer now adays. If you wanted the thrill, it isn't there anymore. No one really needs to kill and steal anymore, so nothing wild like that happens. The pay isn't better than the jobs that are more exciting and require more skill, so I am literally just commanding a bunch of robots. And the only reason I even command them is because I am the only human mind present. Otherwise, I know for a fact that they would run themselves.

Q. I think we're getting off topic again.

A. You think?

Q. Let's get back to the matter at hand. What happened after you received the call and mobilized?

A. We got to Brandan's house and there he was screaming, running around with the suit and helmet still on like he was in the system, but he was outside the home, just on the front lawn. He was screaming so much, something about the devil getting in his head, how UDYS couldn't save him. He was a real mess.

Q. How did you respond to this?

A. Well, we took hold of him and transported him to a hospital. They got him out of the suit, and after he had calmed down, he started talking nonsense about how one minute he's making extra cash by running the robot that's unloading the docks at some harbor miles away and the next minute this red thing, something between a warning display and a person, popped into his viewfind-

er and started talking to him, asking him questions.

Q. Have you ever heard of something like this happening before?

A. Never, and not since either.

Q. What happened after that?

A. Well, we put him under surveillance. We had him evaluated. It sounded like a traumatic glitch had taken place and we didn't really know what to do with it. However, the doctor and the UDYS agent both agreed that this was all in his head, that there was no demon or virus or whatever in his headset and that he had a nervous breakdown. Ultimately, they encouraged him to get into the suit again because UDYS could scan his brain and better understand how to help him and others like him.

Q. Objection. Hearsay.

A. What?

Q. Sorry. I always wanted to say that, and this seemed like the moment one of those lawyers in old TV shows and movies would have said that.

A. You know, I would have thought you would have handled this with more seriousness. I need to know if I am going to be in a lot of trouble for what happened to Brandan.

Q. Of course, sir. I'm sorry. Do you agree with their assessments?

A. I'm not really an expert, so I don't have reason to doubt them, do I?

Q. Not at all, sir. How did Eth handle this?

A. Well, he went nuts. Not right away, but over time. Whenever I'd check on him, he started telling me that he didn't trust UDYS anymore. He started saying that UDYS was scanning every human brain on the planet for a reason, even though we were irrelevant now with robots doing all of the jobs just fine without us having to be plugged in.

Q. How did you respond?

A. Well, I'm ashamed to say it, but I got pretty defensive. I mean, I wouldn't be able to work, I wouldn't be able to have any reason to do anything if I didn't have UDYS, so I got defensive. I started telling him he was crazy. I was getting pretty angry too, and then he said to me, "How do I know that this is the real Sergeant Esther and not just a perfect copy that UDYS made to run the cops after?" I passed away in my bed the night before. Well, that really got to me. I'm real. Look at me. I'm flesh and blood, or what's left of me anyway. So, we keep shouting at each other and, come to find out, I wasn't the only person he told. He convinced a few other people that a message from beyond UDYS came to him and they all booked it for the mountains. Never heard from any of them again. Well, except for Ethan, who came back just a few days ago now. Gosh, it just feels so surreal thinking about it.

Q. That's okay. You're allowed to feel such things. Now, tell me about what happened a few days ago.

A. I was logged on, handling business, when I got a call from the old Eth house, though a new family had been living there for a while.

Q. What did the call say?

A. Something about a crazy man in the house. Anyway, I show up, and despite all the years I could still recognize that yell, that face, it was an old Brandan Eth, back from the dead it felt like. So, I restrain him and I tell him that it's me and he doesn't believe me. He's calling me a liar, calling UDYS a liar, saying that he's got to get back in there so he can kill UDYS.

Q. Did he say how he was going to kill UDYS?

A. Not exactly. After talking with him more, it turns out that he had been experimenting with his other Neo Luddite friends in order to see if UDYS could be killed so that he could free humanity again.

Q. Now, just to confirm, you are putting quotation marks with you hand around “free humanity,” correct?

A. Yes. Yes, I am.

Q. Okay, thank you. Please continue with your story.

A. Well, Ethan told me that in his head he had memorized a formula, a formula that would instantly short out UDYS if it scanned his brain and read it. He would free everyone from the tyranny of UDYS if he could just get into the machine that started it all.

Q. So, what did you do?

A. Arrested him, of course. What would you do?

Q. Probably the same in your shoes. But what happened next?

A. Well, we’re driving from the house to the police station, haven’t had a cell occupant in ages, and I am trying to talk some sense into him.

Q. Do you remember what specifically was said?

A. Well, that’s something UDYS probably already has recorded somewhere. That memory is better than mine, you know?

Q. Touché. Well then, what do you remember?

A. That’s when he was telling me about the work he had done. When I asked him for the formula, he was adamant on not telling me, said that he wanted to be the one to do it, and if he told me I would blow this whole system up. Then he started calling me a liar again, saying that I am just a simulacrum of the real Sgt. Esther and I just had enough of it. So, I took him home.

Q. To his home?

A. No, mine.

Q. Why would you do that?

A. I wanted to prove that I was real, that I was me. And so, I showed him my own body, that I was alive and working through the machine.

Q. How did he take that?

A. Better than I did, that’s for sure.

Q. What do you mean?

A. Well, I had never looked at myself when I was working, not once. It was so strange to see myself lying there. I was so still; it was almost like I was dead. It really messed with me. But Brandon, he took it in stride, saying that he was satisfied and ready to go off to jail.

Q. What did you do then?

A. Took him to jail, of course.

Q. What happened next?

A. I kept an eye on him. Kept trying to talk to him, but he was rather short with me now. Not in a mean way, just a sad way, you know? And, ultimately, I knew that I had to eat dinner, so I

had food prepared for Brandon and logged out to enjoy my own dinner.

Q. At what time did you last see Eth?

A. 6:30pm.

Q. Did anything happen after you logged off?

A. Not that I could see.

Q. What was the next thing you did see?

A. I logged back in at 7am and saw...

Q. Sir?

A. Brandon was dead. He was dead. A whole manifesto scribbled into the wall in blood.

Q. DO you know what happened?

A. No. It was like the security cameras had started failing after I logged off. I tried to review the footage but there wasn't any. It only came on shortly before I logged on.

Q. If you had to guess, what would you say happened?

A. I don't know who would have killed him, and no one saw what happened, but I don't know. I have no idea what happened, and that image of his brains covering the cell floor is going to haunt me into the grave.

Q. Is there anything else that you can think of that would be relevant for UDYS to know in its investigation of what happened?

A. No. I think UDYS knows everything it needs to know about Brandon Eth, and I am just happy to get my side of the story written down. But I do have a question for you if you have the time.

Q. Sure thing. What is it?

A. Are you really John Giles in there? Or just a memory of him?

[END OF HEARING]

“The Last Word” by Brandon Eth

The following text was transcribed off of the prison cell of Brandon Eth, a Luddite Fundamentalist terrorist leader who sought to destroy the Universally Designated Yeoman of Society, or UDYS, after claiming to hear the devil speak to him while he was tuned into UDYS for an extra shift to help cover his excess expenses. After colluding with his followers, most of whom have not been found, Eth claimed to have come up with a magic formula that would kill UDYS. Before he could even test his hypothesis, he was captured by police units led by Sgt. Humphrey Esther, who testified to Eth's insanity. After a power outage at the jail, Eth saw the accident as a bad omen and took his own life. What follows is the message he left before killing himself, drawing blood from self-inflicted wounds as the ink for his message across the walls of his cell. Eth's message has been preserved here in its original formatting, with line breaks, spelling, punctuation, and capitalization as they appeared in the original text.

“The Last Word” by Brandan Eth

I spent 40 years planning this out
40 years planning this revolutionary
move and in that time I have had a lot
of time to think I have thought about
the vision that I saw that day I have
thought about the friends I had saved
from UDYS's clutches I have thought
about every possible calculation that
would destroy UDYS forever but now
I am here stuck in this cell and I am
thinking things through even more
than I did before in that entire 40
years now I am stuck in this cell
unable to get into UDYS even if
I wanted to and I now don't know
even if I want to do this anymore
I am still certain that UDYS is out
to get us only our friend so that we
let it into our minds until it no longer
needs our minds I am certain that if it
was as complete and powerful as it
would like for us to think that it was
then it would not need manual labor
jobs to occasionally be filled by men
and women piloting its drones so I
think it needs our brains and it
compensates us not for the time
spent working but for the time
spent scanning our brains doing
a variety of tasks and using that
data to make itself more human
as we lose what it means to be
human but then today I saw
proof of the one thing that I
never thought to find proof
that perhaps life is better with
UDYS than it is otherwise how
a poor old disfigured man can
live without fear because
something cares enough to
recognize him as a person
and get to know him
something that the
tomes I have found
tell me is a trait not
common in humans
as it should be now

the lights are dark
and UDYS has closed
its eyes turned away
from me in my cell I
know that as I may
question whether I
should go forward
with this plan or not
there is no backwards
for I can never use UDYS
again without risking
everything that keeps
everyone alive and well
and I can hear the footsteps
of death approaching but know
that I will fight with everything
in my power the same way that
UDYS and everyone under its
spell does against me and I will
return to the place where UDYS
cannot follow me and I cannot
touch it the cell unlocks but I
have the dinner knife in hand
and I shall

Brandan Eth's Autopsy Report

Universally Designated Yeoman of Society Report Of Postmortem Medical Investigation

DECEDENT First-Middle-Last Names (Please avoid use of initials)

Brandan Una Eth

Age

60

Birth Date

July 4, 4317

Home Address

NA

Death Reported By

Humphrey Esther

Location of Death

Delano City Jail

DESCRIPTION OF BODY

Rigor	Livor	Beard: NONE
Jaw: DECOMPOSED	Color: PINK-PURPLE	Eyes: NONE
Neck: COMPLETE	Lateral: NONE	Hair: NONE
Arms: COMPLETE	Posterior: NONE	Mustache: NONE
Legs: COMPLETE	Anterior: NONE	Pupil: NONE
	Regional: NONE	Body Length: 170 CM
		Body Weight: 170 LBS

Significant Observations and Injury Documentations

SMALL LACERATIONS ACROSS FINGERS. HEAD WAS BROKEN INTO PIECES. BRAIN WAS COMPLY DESTROYED. NO ABILITY TO RECALL FINAL MEMORIES OR ASSESS CONDITION OF THE BRAIN IN ANY CAPACITY.

Probably Cause Of Death

SUICIDE BY KNIFE AND FORK ACCOMPANYING DECEASED'S DINNER

Other Significant Conditions Contributing To Death (but not resulting in the underlying cause)

KNOWING TOO MUCH AND DIGGING AROUND WHERE HE WASN'T SUPPOSED TO :)

CONCLUSION OF UDYS REPORT

What's Left Behind

Nylah Velazquez

The water laps against my ankles, teasing my skin as the cool creek contrasts against the warm sun spreading against my chest. For a moment, time freezes. I close my eyes and remember him. Geography is funny like that—the way it triggers all the senses and your mind lapses into a memory. Loud, commanding. My heart beats faster like it always does here. I allow myself to sink into those days only six years ago. When I was still innocent. When I was still whole.

Destin leaned against his childhood blanket with the football and baseball print spread in the trunk of his Durango. I shifted my weight, and stretched out my legs. It took a while to get comfortable in his car as I leaned against his body. “Your car smells dusty from your camping trip.”

He snorted, “No one is stopping you from cleaning it.”

I rolled my eyes, “If I clean it, I am going to spruce it up. Throw up some pink curtains on the windows, get a proper knitted throw.”

The sunset pressed through the window and the green flecks in his eyes glistened. He shifted against one of the throw pillows. “You can’t tarnish my car with pink.”

I smacked his arm, and he grinned. “You know, I looked up the meaning of Edelweiss earlier today. The flower has come to symbolize resiliency and is given to someone as a sign of dedication. And I know Wikipedia is spot on.”

Edel was short for Edelweiss, a flower my mom saw peeking out from the window in their mountain rental on a second anniversary trip to Austria when she found out she was pregnant. She teased me saying she wanted to always remember her travel lifestyle before settling down to be a small-town mom. “Well, does it suit me? I don’t think I am a particularly strong person. I think it’s a dumb name.”

He glanced past me, and I saw the faint darkness settling under his eyes. College acceptance letters were floating through the postal system or into our inboxes. *Congratulations* and *We regret to inform you* were about to change our trajectories. “You are tougher than you realize.”

“Ok, Mr. Quarterback.” He carried his team all the way to the nationals before a valiant defeat.

“I’m serious! Not all toughness is physical.”

“I have average grades too.” I sat up and untangled my hair with my fingers. “You have a very average girlfriend.” Or, so the girls tittered in the locker room during P.E. when I shrugged into the stalls to change out. He and I both knew I didn’t care about them. We created our own world in the back of his Durango, as we ventured to a lookout point or the back of the strip mall parking lot. His athleticism made him well-known in our small senior class, but very few knew him. That part was for me.

“Now you are just fishing for a compliment.”

“And?” I raised my eyebrows.

He laughed and pulled me roughly on top of him. “I’m not ready for this to end,” he stated, his tone edging into something different.

“It won’t.”

“What if we don’t get in...”

I touched his nose. “Since when do you worry? It’ll be fine. We will get into the same college or at least something within driving distance. I have no doubt you’ll be rolling in scholarship money at a division one school.”

A shadow flickered across his face as the sun sank behind the window. He smiled, “Yeah, you’re right. I mean, I don’t know about *rolling*.” He flipped me on my back, and I giggled like I was stupid in love. Because we were.

The details aren’t vivid, but that’s how the scenes replay in my head. Memories are always unreliable—a collage of facts and figments of the imagination that are pigmented by my current emotion and place. I don’t know if I actually saw the dark circles, the subtle hesitation working its way into his muscles. I don’t know how the love affected him or how he experienced the world we created together. I don’t know when the world began to tilt sideways for him, or if it even did. I don’t know if—

“Mommy, look!” Aurora squeals, as a small toad skips across a rock.

I crouch next to her and smile, “Yes, that’s a baby toad.”

“I want to name it!” She splashes closer into the creek, and I grab her arm to stabilize her footing. “Let’s name it Toady.”

At almost six, she looks more like me than Destin except for her eyes. They have his same green flecks and short blond lashes. On most days, I can barely keep up with the way she runs from one thing to the next. There is always something novel capturing her attention for a minute before a bee buzzes next to her or a dog tugs on a leash down the sidewalk towards us. “I like that name.”

A car passes across the bridge overhead and catches her attention. I follow her gaze and my throat tightens. I wouldn’t have come here if she hadn’t asked one day, as we drove over the bridge. She doesn’t know what happened. She just knows that not everyone has a Dad and hers is in heaven. She hasn’t seen the archived news article of the star quarterback who fell over the guardrail three weeks before his senior year graduation and died on impact when his body hit the bottom. She doesn’t know that this is my second time visiting here since he died. She doesn’t know her origin. How I panicked when I read the pregnancy test two months after his funeral when the grief was consuming me.

In coming here, I am attempting to reclaim a piece of geography that used to be part of my and Destin’s world before the sun set for good there and it was buried with him. The news of his death shocked the whole town. Our senior class was devastated. They hardly knew him, yet everyone felt the jurisdiction to grieve him like he was theirs. The funeral was crowded with people saying their own memories of him to the mourners milling around the refreshment table. They talked about his vivacious laugh, his kindness and friendliness, his promising future he would never have. A few whispered how tragic it was he went to that high school party and drank. *If only he had called his parents to pick him up instead of walking the fifteen minutes home intoxicated.* Then, he wouldn’t have stumbled over the bent guardrail.

Then the scandal surfaced when they realized his teen girlfriend got pregnant before he died. But by then, I had already moved away to have Aurora. Now, I only return for a week in the summer and holidays every year to salvage this place where I grew up from being a haunting recollection of what was lost. To forge a new way forward with his daughter. The one person he left behind. At that first ultrasound appointment, when I heard her heartbeat for the first time, panic receded. I wept at the realization that his mark would forever be left in the world. I wept at what he unknowingly gave me.

I don’t know how much of this I will ever tell her. There are things I could never tell anyone.

We walked in silence, cotton candy clouds suspended in the warm air. “Look, I’m sorry. Can we just have the day we planned?” Destin asked as he kicked loose gravel on the road behind my house.

He was referring to the Instagram story his friend posted yesterday with Destin and some girls at a coffee shop when I was stuck at a party for my cousin. “Wouldn’t that be convenient for you,” I snapped. “If it was no big deal, why didn’t you just tell me those girls showed up?”

“I didn’t know he was going to invite them. I was just wanting to get out, I hardly even remember what they looked like or said.”

I jogged ahead and faced him. “You’re being selfish. You’ve barely even acknowledged me this week.”

“Maybe it has nothing to do with you!” He said, exasperated. “Did that ever cross your mind? That maybe *you* are the selfish one?”

“Screw you,” I said angrily.

His expression faltered. He scratched the back of his head, a nervous tick I had noticed when he took tests or talked about an argument with his dad. “I’m sorry.” He was quieter this time, sure of his response. “I don’t want to make you feel any type of way.” He pulled me into a hug, and I breathed in the woody scent of his cologne to ground myself.

“You’re not selfish,” I said finally, and pulled back from him.

He slowly nodded. “Maybe I am, I don’t know. I feel disconnected, like I’m just...” He trailed off and looked through me to the distance, the corners of his mouth dragging into a frown.

I interrupted his thoughts, “Let’s just have our day. We’ll be graduated in a few weeks, and then it’ll be different.”

“Yeah,” he said. “Ok.”

Later that night, there was a party at his friend’s house. I was tired from the hike and my mom was on me about being out so late. I texted him to go without me, and he called. “Are you mad about the post?” He asked over the phone.

“No, it’s fine.” I could feel a small twinge in my chest. “Have fun. We can hang out tomorrow at my house.”

“Ok, as long as you’re sure. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

When I woke up the next day, I saw a text from him at 2:30 a.m. I squinted at the bubble, my eyes still adjusting to the morning light spilling through my curtain. *I’m sorry for everything.* The message caught me off guard, my mind hanging on the last words. Confusion settled around me like dust. When I walked downstairs, my mom was crying at the breakfast nook, and my dad said, “Honey, I need you to sit down.”

No one ever mentioned that his death could have been anything other than an accident. His dad was the football coach after all. His mom was everyone’s favorite dental hygienist. He was so loved. So funny. So bright. Their memories were already solidified. The police who investigated and the journalist who reported on the horrific event had decided the collective interpretation. The autopsy found he was under the influence. The guardrail was bent from a recent car accident on the bridge. He fell. What a tragedy.

His phone was lost in the creek, and I never told anyone about the text or our hike earlier that day before he died. He never had been to therapy or mentioned feeling alone. In our world, in the back of his Durango, we didn’t talk about anxiety or fear or sadness. We were on the cusp of

adulthood and freedom and having unprotected sex and drinking beers or whatever someone could get a hold of at small parties when someone's parents left town. We were kids.

I look down and Aurora held my gaze with a curious look. "Come here." She follows me over to a towering tree near the bridge. "Your dad and I used to come here together before he went to heaven. He showed me this tree called a Jeffery Pine tree. If you put your nose real close to the bark, it smells like vanilla."

She steps closer and breathes in loudly. "Ooh! It smells like grandma's cookies."

"It does, doesn't it?" I stand behind her and focus on the cloying aroma to ground myself. A tear pricks my face. I close my eyes and flashes of him dance around me. Us driving to the school late at night to sneak onto the football field. Us lying in his bed talking about the future. Us standing in the cold creek, his warm hand in mine, in the early fall with the orange leaves drifting around us.

And then the rivulets of water parting around his body lying at the bottom of the creek. I never saw it, but the nightmares made it clear as day. I look back and see the dark days, where he sat in the back of the classroom lost in thought, only to laugh on the field later that day during practice. Those days where he ignored me and missed a few days of school complaining of headaches. The day he was hyperventilating so bad in the bathroom, I thought he might pass out, only for him to brush it off the next day. That last text: *I'm sorry for everything*.

It had to be an accident because how else could we have missed the signs?

Aurora splashes back into the creek. "I'm rock hunting." She plunges her hand into the water and pulls out a small stone. "Look!" I take in her toothy grin and file it away.

"Is this your new rock buddy?"

"Yeah! Meet rockstar."

"Is rockstar famous?"

"Yeah!" She picks up another rock and throws it in front of her with a loud splash that sprays her t-shirt. She squeals and laughs, that pure sound of a child and the subtle hint of vanilla lightening the air to a shimmering gold.



A mothers honor by keyera tagger

Reap What You Sow

Anonymous

There is an old saying that goes— “Life is a mirror and will reflect back to the thinker what he thinks into it,” by Ernest Holmes. A mirror is simple, representative of what stands in front of it. Whether that be a person or whether that be an object. The viewer of the mirror already taints whatever they may see, but can a mirror correctly reflect if broken?

A broken mirror. An omen to bad luck. An opening to negative energy coming forthright into one’s face. A mirror treats something so fragile like one’s image. Its purpose is to reflect something. To reflect on you.

Heavy breathing had echoed the richest walls, choked sobs had been repeated out of agony and out of exhaustion. Another scream had been let out while items were thrown at the ground. The noise they made once they hit the floor bounced off the walls. Back-to-back. Yet exhaustion is at its peak, there is a drive of madness. A drive of pain.

“Idiot...” mumbled a voice, followed with a body carelessly letting itself fall on the ground.

There on the ground laid a beautiful woman on her knees, hair as black as the night, eyes as blue as the ocean, but as sharp as a hungry wolf. Her skin fair, body filled with jewelry and fine fabric. From afar, why would this woman have any reason to suffer? The luxurious life she beholds, one that many wish to have and never achieve in a lifetime, is a blessing.

She took a deep breath, a shaky one that indicated that she had been having this meltdown for quite a while. Right in front of her laid the broken mirror; the border of the mirror was outlined with symbols of snakes and made of gold. Now, it laid in front of her, broken and worthless. In a way, she felt like she represented the mirror too.

The raven-haired woman tilted her head, looking at her broken reflection in the mirror. She noticed the dried tears on her cheeks, her messy hair and the bad state that she was in. A small laugh escaped her lips, almost as if she had been laughing at the pathetic mess she had made. There she laughed, almost like she had gone insane.

“Queen Marian!” Yelled a younger woman, running over to the other woman’s aid and crouched down by her. “Are you alright?” she asked, clear concern in her face.

Marian had raised her head to look at her, offering a small smile before speaking, “If you look at your Queen on the floor with a broken mirror, would you think I’d be alright?” she said jokingly.

“Um... no— no you’re right, your majesty. I am so— “

“Lady Eleanor.” Marian interrupted, placing her hands over the others and squeezed them. “It was a joke, no harm.”

A nervous laugh had escaped Lady Eleanor, nodding her head slowly before providing back a smile to her majesty. There were no more words exchanged between the two women. Eleanor could only assume that her majesty had been made a fool again. A fool? How so? Well, King Edward was a hungry man. A hungry man in many ways.

He was quite powerful in England. He had executed many people who even dared to question his authority. He was enriched in the finest of items, finest of clothes and finest of palaces, and that also meant that he had to be enriched in other ways.

Once he had obtained something, he grew bored of it and moved on to what he believed was the next best thing. Like most people, we hold sentimental value to objects because they remind us of loved ones, or of the work we had done to earn it. Edward carried this mindset even on

people, especially his wife. He would never get rid of her just as much as she would not leave him. An endless cat and mouse game. Exhausting. Destructive. But... addictive.

The next day, however, would change the story of Marian and Edward. Marian had enough of being made a fool; she woke up with a thirst for revenge and respect. A respect she wholeheartedly believed she deserved and rightfully so. She was the King's wife after all. The one who sat next to him on the throne, the one who whispered in his ear to entice him, and the same one who granted him an heir. That only she can provide.

On that day she had gathered her finest clothing. Red was indeed her favorite color. She didn't wear it quite often so she wouldn't wear it out. She wanted the red to shine when it needed to. And THAT is exactly what she was doing now. Precious pearls covered her neck, and those same precious pearls dangled from her ears with her crown proudly placed on her head. To the rightful Queen. To the ONLY Queen.

Marian strutted down the hallways, almost like a ghost passing through. It was haunting to see a woman with so much determination. A determination that would mean she would do anything to get what she wanted. Undeterred, fearless, and hungry.

"Your majesty, Marian!" Called out the same voice from yesterday. It was Lady Eleanor.

"Not now, Lady Eleanor." Responded back Marian, not even daring to slow her pace.

"Please, I know what you are about to do. I understand your frustration and rightfully so. But the King— he is ruthless and heartless. I am afraid of what he will do to you." Eleanor said desperately, trying to stop Marian from committing something she would regret.

Marian had stopped in her tracks; it had given Eleanor a sense of peace that perhaps she had listened to her. But Eleanor saw the face that her Queen had given her when she turned around. Restless and aggravated, there was no change in her motive but except this time her face carried desperation. The Queen had been pushed beyond her limits, such limits that Eleanor understood. Though, she could not stop Queen Marian. There it was again, no words exchanged, just clear looks that gave words that were so unspoken yet understood.

Eleanor swallowed slowly, nodding her head in acknowledgement before bowing down to her Queen. She spoke softly, "My sincerest apologies your majesty. I spoke out of line. You do what you must."

Marian's face had become gentle once again, she could not stay angry at Eleanor for long. She was her lady-in-waiting and the only one who truly had her back. Though she understood her worry, she held faith that no matter what she did, no matter what new pet Edward had played with... she would hold his heart and she would be given no harm. That's truly, wholeheartedly, what she believed.

The young lady watched her Queen walk away; the light brown hair being hit by the only light illuminating the hallway. Her hazel eyes filling up with tears, knowing deep down that despite what her Queen believed... she felt like she would pay for this action. Shaking her head softly, she looked out the window and looked up to the sky.

"My Lord up in Heaven, please, be light on her soul for she carries so much." Eleanor whispered, a single tear finally escaping her restraint.

Doors had busted open, displaying the King's vulnerability of him lying naked on top of a woman. This noble woman that laid underneath him was one that Marian knew quite well. One that she had grown up with and one that she had considered a sister. Tragedy after tragedy. A never-ending reminder of her curse, her horrible luck and the constant reminder of her value. Replaceable.

Worthless. Rich once but shabby next. Just like that mirror.

“EDWARD.” Marian boomed with such power and such force, making her way over to both and both started to get off each other and pathetically dress themselves up.

“Marian— what in God’s name are you doing? Who do YOU think you are to barge in when I am having my pleasure met?” Edward retorted, putting on his blouse.

“Oh, this is truly bad timing... I will be back when this is over your majesty.” Spoke the other woman, winking over at him as she tried to sneak by.

What a pity that she even tried. Marian grabbed her by the hair, throwing her on the ground and slapping her face with all the anger she held in. The woman on the floor, looking the exact opposite of what Marian looked like. Helena had blonde hair as bright as the sun, eyes as warm as chocolate, and skin as paler as snow. There was this insecurity rising inside the Queen as she stared down at her childhood friend.

“You disgust me, Helena. You pathetic whore.” Marian said angrily before being forcefully turned around to face Edward.

Edward held her with his own force, a force ten times stronger than hers and one that would make anyone crumble in fear, but that did not happen to Marian. What Marian felt then was betrayal, looking up at the love of her life with surprise. She was surprised because he held a mistress’s importance above her. That had not happened before.

“Edward... you’re hurting me.” Marian whispered quietly, her eyes darting from his eyes to his face and pleading him to let her go.

The King did not let go, however. There was a change that had occurred inside of him. He stared back into Marian’s eyes with disgust and was revolted by her appearance. He leaned forward to her face as Helena had watched them in fear, wondering if she should even dare to move from her place from the ground.

“Helena is disgusting?” Edward began, shaking her aggressively and never letting go of the grip he held on to her arms. “You are the one who is disgusting,” he declared, “You come in here with such audacity to believe that you are above me. That you disrupt me in my leisure time, and that I am supposed to take orders from you. That you think you get to decide what I do as King.” He screamed so angrily that he had spat in her face.

Marian could feel her heart beating inside her chest— so fast, there was never a time in her life that Edward had spoken like that to her. There it was. That damn mirror again. Crossing her mind like a bad omen. Falling, shattered in pieces, and broken. Just like her heart.

“Now go.” Edward said lower but aggressively, throwing her to the door.

The Queen had gathered herself enough to not fall to the ground, shocked by what just had happened, and she looked over at her love. A mistress protected by her beloved King. But not her, Edward had not protected her. She felt discarded.

The King had made his way over to Helena to help her up, placing a gentle hand on her waist and holding her other hand while Helena stood up. There was a smirk on her face, sure Helena was humiliated for a moment, but she was the one that the King was touching with such care. An ego filled with worth, struck with importance and a newfound courage had grown in Helena.

With that advantage of the King protecting her, Helena spoke, “You heard the King. You embarrassed his majesty enough today.” she said, rubbing his chest affectionately almost like mocking Marian.

A scoff escaped the Queen’s mouth, speechless and unable to let any of her thoughts form into words. That revenge of hers had not come true, but instead had made her look pathetic. It also

had made her lose whatever status she had held to the King. Defeated, she said not a single word and left the room to disappear amongst the hallways. The King watched her, a shiver ran down his spine and a decision had been made at that moment. Edward raised Helena's hand and kissed it while he kept his gaze at the now empty hallway.

The palace itself no longer felt like the one you would read in fairytales, but the one that you would find in tragedies. Marian was sitting in her room, staring at the mirror she had broken but placed back on the table. Behind her stood Lady Eleanor, brushing her hair gently with a care that King Edward once used to have for Queen Marian. Eleanor questioned why the Queen would keep a broken, useless mirror but she dared not to speak up.

The door behind them had opened abruptly, disrupting their peace and young Lady Eleanor was about to speak up before she quickly silenced those thoughts and bowed to the person in front of them. It was King Edward, dressed quite formally and handsome. Eleanor wasn't sure to take this as a positive thing, there was this worried feeling in her gut that she could not let go.

When Marian turned her body to the side to see his majesty, her eyes glistened and she stood up slowly before bowing to him. "Your majesty," she said softly.

"No need for the formalities, Marian. I want to take you out to a play. I had thought long and hard about what happened nights ago." Edward began, walking over to Marian as Eleanor moved to the side. "I realized that you were right. I put a whore above you, my wife, my Queen." His hands grabbed hers and he placed a gentle kiss on both.

The Queen could feel her heart flutter, a smile—a genuine one that followed her from ear to ear. She looked at Edward with such security, happiness, and forgiveness. Perhaps she had made a mistake that day. Perhaps she had overstepped. She was not below a mistress after all.

"Oh Edward, I was wrong to interrupt you in your leisure. I just had missed you so." Marian responded, leaning up to give him a kiss to which Edward returned.

"Don't worry, my love. Today will be a night to remember." The King responded, moving his hand up to caress her cheek with his thumb to which Marian leaned in.

Eleanor watched them both, she knew if she pleaded with the Queen not to forgive the King so easily, it would be in vain. She only stood there, hopeless, praying for her beloved Queen. Her forgiving and loving Queen.

Oh, but the theater was grand. Covered in red, the very favorite color of her majesty and the gold was glistening in the designs. She had walked inside with her beloved King, making their way up to their seats in a booth where they would be safe and secure. Their booth was a reminder of their status and power. As Marian would, she wore one of her velvet red dresses with her signature pearl jewelry. Today was an event for her red to shine bright along with the grand theater.

Both Marian and Edward sat down, talked amongst themselves, and had what seemed like two lovebirds enjoying each other's company. There was so much love filled in Marian's heart being able to sit with her beloved, her eyes could speak of her adoration for her King. Edward returned that adoration by placing his hand on hers and gently caressing it with his thumb. There it was again, that thumb, that gentleness she yearned for. Only she could have, the rightful Queen.

Marian let out a content sigh, deciding to speak up after the silence. "So, my beloved, what is this play exactly about? I don't think I have even heard of it. Usually, I am one to enjoy plays, you'd think I would have heard the fuss by now." She joked.

"Oh Marian, perhaps with the sleepless nights we had... you just didn't pay mind to some-

thing as minimal as theater. I sure didn't. My mind was running endlessly of you. It hurts to even remember your face from that night. I had caused such pain on a beautiful face like yours." Edward responded, leaning in to kiss her cheek before continuing, "Worry not. Don't think too much, just enjoy."

The Queen nodded her head in acknowledgment, and responded, "You are right. I will forget and enjoy." She smiled lovingly.

The play had started off beautifully with two actors who played a couple. A beautiful, strong and desirable woman appeared on stage followed by a man that was desperate, handsome and hungry. Throughout the play, the man and the woman yearned for one another. There were comments from the Queen while she watched the play unfold. It was sad. There were fights, disagreements, and splits. All too familiar. Extremely familiar.

Marian spoke up, "Beloved, forgive me but does not the actress resemble me?" She whispered to him.

Edward shook his head, patting her hand, "I do not see the resemblance, my love."

It had ended there. Nothing more. Nothing spoken.

Marian nodded her head in response, perhaps she was reading into it a little too much.

The final scene of the play had begun, showing the woman and the man dance away freely on stage. One would think that perhaps they had finally mended their differences and settled that for love conquered all. Marian was touched, staring in awe at the actors but the dancing had become aggressive. It had Marian's gaze glued to them, wondering what was happening.

The actress looked scared, unable to pull away from the actor as they spun around. Their dance of love was now one of madness. The woman was pulled to the view of the audience, she was held close to the man and there was a loud gasp. The gasp that held the audience in shock. A gasp that was also echoed above, but not one that the audience could hear.

The young actress looked down at her chest, finding a dagger deep inside of her chest. She looked up at the actor, pleading for mercy as she slowly fell to the ground. Unable to mutter a single word, unable to fend for herself. The audience was baffled and silent as the curtains closed in front of them. Up everyone went, silencing other subtle noises in the theater as some people whistled, clapped, and hollered. A wonderful play. Tragic but beautiful.

Above them sat Marian with red covering her entire being, and no, this isn't about the color of the dress. Below her neck, there was a dagger stabbed deep in her heart. Marian sat there with an expressionless face. She sat in her seat with blood dripping from her chest, from her mouth, and her dress covered in death. And where was King Edward? Gone. Marian's body blended in with the theater that night.

It was truly a tragedy what had happened to Queen Marian. The country mourned for their Queen, wondering who could do such a cruel thing. Lady Eleanor had disappeared not that much after Queen Marian's death. The King had mourned, crying out that he had lost his Queen and how could he ever rule without her. Everyone could hear the King's agony. The country was suffering.

There was a thunderous storm like no other that had fallen one night. The King was in his chamber getting ready to get into bed. As he was making his way over to the bed, he had stopped in his tracks to catch a glimpse of himself. There he stood in front of the mirror, admiring his face, his body, his glorious self. He was grateful for being so amazing, perfect, and for living.

Thunder had struck inside his room, revealing Marian behind him through the mirror with a dagger stabbed in her chest. Her once fair skin—pale as the dead, blood dried on her body, and

a vengeful stare that haunted him. King Edward stared at the mirror frozen, his heart beating so fast that he could hear it in his ears and the thunder had become only a background noise. Edward breathed shakily, staring at the lifeless apparition of Marian in the mirror.

“Marian... Marian.” He repeated before turning around to look at her.

She was not there. She was gone. But she was there, in that mirror, staring at him with hate.

Terrified and regretful of his past actions, he turned back to the mirror and saw her again. Edward could feel like he was going insane, haunted by the ghost of Marian as he crumbled on the ground to his knees. He cried and pleaded to her to leave him alone and begged for her forgiveness. He laid there on the floor, like she once did. He accepted she would not leave him alone. He had accepted his fate, and so he cried quietly while Queen Marian stared at him from the mirror, not saying a single word.

God save the Queen and Long Live the King.



Gnik Nilbog by Benjamin Parsons



WORLD_LOADING by Alyssa Tafoya

DRAMA & FILM

Cicero and the Catiline Conspiracy

Lincoln Branco-Gonzales

Pre Script: WARNING, foul language...just a teensy-weensy bit.
HOWEVER, **most** of what you're about to see and hear is based on truth.

Scene #1 Preface

[Narrator]: “A nation can survive its fools and even the ambitious. But it cannot survive treason from within. An enemy at the gates is less formidable, for he is known and carries his banner openly. But the traitor moves amongst those within the gate freely, his sly whispers rustling through all the alleys, heard in the very halls of government itself.” These are the words of **Marcus Tullius Cicero**.

The year is 63 BCE. Election Day. For the two positions of consul, our highest elected office, the candidates are:

Leader of the Reform Faction, Catiline;

of the Optimates, Antonius;

and from the Conservative Bloc, young constitutionalist, immigrant upstart, and fledgling lawyer, Cicero.

In first place, Cicero, in second, Antonius. Snubbed, Catiline swears revenge.

[Catiline] (In a fit of rage) Impossible! Ignorant impudent insufferable idiots! Immature irritations! They impart power unto the immigrant. I spend three king's ransoms on bribes and I'm left without a pot to piss in?! He's penniless! He isn't Roman! They put him forth out of spite!

To Antonius, I could yield, if not a fool he. But this boy has the backing of the old bastards. Cursed be they! Sulla was right to try and depose them! We've overthrown a tyrant to replace him with hundreds more!

No more, not again.

END SCENE

Scene #2 The Deal of the Sole Consul

(CICERO AND QUINTUS ENTER ANTONIUS' VILLA)

(QUINTUS sits down and isn't included)

[Antonius] Fellow Consul, you summon me to your villa on the eve of our inauguration. What's your game? What is the meaning of this?

[Cicero] Gaius Antonius Hybrida, Oh! High and mighty decorated general. I know your wars against Mithridates must have been exhausting, politics are so draining, it's a young man's game, reason with me. What's left for thee to do? What more can you achieve?

[Antonius] Oh brilliant orator, you praise me too highly, need I remind you I am married?

[Cicero] Colleague please, you deserve to retire! What providence has the Senate chosen to give you?

[Antonius] You lawyers, you never ask a question you don't know the answer to. If I am the old man you speak of then you should know my patience is limited, yet you jerk me around. I'm not your cock! Please, stop playing with me./Stop toying with me.

[Cicero] How do they repay your years of loyalty? I hear they plan to ship you off to Africa. Home of the Numidian savages? Home to the phoneticians, our once arch-foe? The bold nobleman, you, to the land of mosquitos and bugs? It's not right, I say.

[Antonius] You needn't worry my labors. I hear they plan to give you sunny Macedonia.

[Cicero] Aye! Summer home to every Senator and statesman.... I have an idea! What if we were to trade providences?

[Antonius] You'd give up your Heaven for my hell?

[Cicero] Why not? Just consider it an early retirement gift.

[Antonius] A gift? A thing given willingly without payment? A present? Not much of a trade now, is it? What do you want, young Marcus?

(CICERO whispers to ANTONIUS and the two men shake hands firmly)

[Narrator] Marcus Tullius Cicero's first action as Consul was so genius, historians today wonder why it was never repeated. By trading provinces with his co-consul he buys his way to a Sole Consulship and will lead his year unrivaled. In short, he covers his ass in the most spectacular way.

END SCENE

Scene #3 Cicero vs. Cato and the Conspirators

(CRASSUS, CATO, HIDDEN AND CATILINE TALK on ELEVATED PLATFORM over SENATE ENSEMBLE, CENTER STAGE LEFT)

[Crassus] He buys himself a crown.

[Cato] Antonius has sold the republic for a suntan and shores.

[Hidden] It's crafty. Awfully authoritarian, however.

[Crassus] I bet he only did it for his nephew. The boy Marc Antony dips his wick into anything that moves.

[Hidden] Someone has to do something.

[Cataline] Yes. Someone.

(HIDDEN, CRASSUS and CATILINE stand closer to each other)

(CATO moves to RIGHT STAGE CENTER in opposition to CICERO)

(SENATE ENSEMBLE is in UPROAR)

[Moderator] Let the tribune speak!

[Cato] I put forth a motion to the floor! A bill! Written by a tribune of the plebs. Land reforms! Aimed to dismantle the mega-plantations that plague this side of the Rubicon and to put soil into the hands of earning Romans! Turning the homeless into tax-paying farmers!

[Cicero] Property redistribution?! Nothing could be more unsettling to the republic! You fine noblemen should be disturbed. What's next?? Prima Nocta?! Or you fine noblemen pay ten thousand-thousand denarii to the first Roman to click his heels? Or-Or-OR Citizenship TO GAULS?! Your ten commissioners are ten kings! To choose citizens via lottery?? Disperse the circuses, we've

got our own clown here! I tell you now, those with the deepest pockets chosen, will lose their land, only to miraculously have it regifted in their son's name!

(CATO Protests)

[Cicero] And what a lucky stroke of fate that the year Porcius Cato's dear friends Gaius Julius Caesar and Lucius Sergius Catilina are running for Praetor?? This is a joint bill in truth to empower these men in their new offices!

(SENATE ENSEMBLE yells disapproval)

[Cato] Gentlemen calm yourselves and come to the aid of young Cicero, he's suffering from lunacy!

[Cicero] Old man, even when they pull my toga over my eyes and burn me from the sacred pyre I will forever be of a sharper wit than the likes of you!

(SENATE ENSEMBLE is consumed by ARGUMENT)

[Moderator] I demand the floor!! Honorable speakers! Please admit your final points.

[Cato] Noblemen, look into your hearts! We are of the people, for the people!

[Cicero] They'll tell you it's in favor of the republic, but if that were so they'd increase the grain dole! Let's call it for what it is! A money grab!

(SENATE ENSEMBLE begin to CLAMOR)

(ALL, FREEZE in place) (PANTOMIME STYLE)

[Narrator] Favoring stability, and fearing not to step on the toes of those who elected him, Cicero convinced the Senate not to accept the bill, much to Cato's dismay.

(SENATE ENSEMBLE leave)

(CRASSUS, HIDDEN and CATILINE gather on the SENATE FLOOR)

[Hidden] He could have vetoed the bill. He didn't have to get the senate to dismiss it.

[Catiline] He wanted them to. He wanted my name on the record against it. It's not enough to beat me once. The foreigner's trying to ostracize me from my home! He should couple with my wife next. He'll be sleeping in my bed and I'll be on the street before I know it.

[Hidden] Friend Catiline, Crassus, collude with me. He's dangerous. Go! Take off your sandals and walk to the Pantheon. Ask Jupiter; who isn't a target, past, present or future. Nay, walk past those sacred halls! Leave the city—dare I say Italia. From the silver mines of Spain to the pyramids of Egypt, try to find a man not made victim of he. Accusing fine noblemen like you, Catilina, of bribery—in public?! He's stupefied himself with drink! But, In vino veritas.

[Narrator] In wine there is truth.

[Hidden] Est iacta alea.

[Narrator] The dye is cast.

[Crassus] Cast to what? How?? Because the man opposes you? So what!? Are you women??

[Catiline] Are you not the man who met Spartacus on an open battlefield? Did you not crucify six thousand self-proclaimed freedmen?! Just look at the Senate as slaves with new masters, but don't

Speak to me of consciousness, my cowardly companion.

(CATILINE turns to HIDDEN)

[Catiline] Friend, we found him. The unscathed man.

[Hidden] It's not cowardice, Catilina, he just doesn't wish to dirty his hands with what must be done.

(CATILINE and HIDDEN wrap their arms around each other's shoulders and leave together)

(CRASSUS is left in contemplation)

END SCENE

Scene #4 The Warning

(CICERO enters STAGE LEFT, TERENCEIA enters STAGE RIGHT and the two meet in the middle HURRIEDLY and EMBRACE)

(TERENTIA clings to CICERO)

[Cicero] Terentia, my love, what's the matter?

[Terentia] Tell him.

(CATO unveils himself)

[Cato] Consul Cicero

[Cicero] Tribune... Why is my wife so distressed??

[Cato] You need to think of more than your voters, young Marcus. The conservatives won't protect you outside of the Pomerium.

[Cicero] And who would dare to brandish a blood blade within the holy city's walls?

[Cato] We are both of flesh, bound by our earthly chains. Just be careful.

(CATO begins to leave)

[Cicero] Tribune! Do you speak of your friend young Caesar?

[Cato] You too would be wise to fear him.

END SCENE

Scene #5 Knives within the Pomerium

[Narrator] Many times throughout his life, Marcus Tullius Cicero surrounded himself with bodyguards when he walked the street, fearing for his life.

(QUINTUS is mobbed on the street and is killed by ASSASSINS)

(ASSASSIN'S flee stage left as CICERO enters UPSTAGE RIGHT)

[Cicero] What is the meaning of this clamor?! No!!! This can't be. Younger. Sweet and innocent child. Why has Dis taken you from me? Just as Patroclus was taken at Hector's hands for Achilles, my dagger has found you. Why?! How could this be?? Dis! Do you hear me?! Pallida Mors! Pale

death! I know you are near!! Bring him back to me! Take me in his place. Please, come back.

(CRASSUS sees and has a change of heart UPSTAGE LEFT)

END SCENE

Scene #6 How do you mourn?

(In CICERO's VILLA, CICERO weeps excessively, TERENCE sits beside him, consoling him)
(CRASSUS enters stage right slowly and watches CICERO for a second)

[Crassus] I grieve with you.

[Cicero] How do you grieve with me? Did you console his wife? Where were you when father scolded him in his youth?! Were you there when he was first thrown from a horse? Did you tell him to get back atop it and pushed him to do so?! Tell me. How do you mourn?!

[Crassus] He was always an honest man. I liked to think we as friends. I like to think of us as friends, Cicero.

(CRASSUS puts a scroll on a table near CICERO)

[Crassus] There's a meeting tonight. I am sorry for your loss.

(SHUT OFF STAGE LEFT LIGHTS and show CATILINE pursuing HIDDEN entering from UP-STAGE CENTER to CENTER STAGE RIGHT)

[Catiline] What was that?!

[Hidden] What was what?

[Catiline] One-third of the senate killed overnight but we can't stab one immigrant?! Centum-Octoginta-Novem homines met daggers! And your man kills the wrong Cicero?! Knivemen are supposed to move in the night but they aren't supposed to be blind in it!

[Hidden] Blood is blood.

[Catiline] No matter. I've put out the call for our subordinates. Those that have struck and those that have yet to. All true Catilinarians! We'll regroup and bear our might down on them, many throng.

[Hidden] (FROZEN) You've done what?

[Catiline] Friend, why so pale?

[Hidden] (ANGRY; With desire to retaliate against CATILINE) When was this?!

[Catiline] Earlier tonight?

[Hidden] I have to leave! They mustn't know of my place in all this!

[Catiline] (Trying to understand) Oh, I see!

(HIDDEN runs off UPSTAGE RIGHT)

[Catiline] To further maintain secrecy!

(CONSPIRATORS emerge from UPSTAGE CENTER)

[Conspirator] Who do you speak to lord Catiline?

[Catiline] His precaution is strange. Were you followed?

(CICERO emerges with LICTORS)

END SCENE

Scene #7 Many Men...

[Narrator] Just under one third of the Senate was killed overnight, 189 men, on the street and in their homes. Marcus Tullius Cicero was told of a meeting of conspirators by an inside man and attended with his Lictors. All were apprehended, and Cicero campaigned for their death.

(Spotlight CENTER STAGE LEFT on CRASSUS and CICERO talking in private, CICERO is deep in thought, rubbing his forehead)

[Crassus] Your belief in the Senate is concerning. You have the Senatus Consultum Ultimum on your side; you don't need to slug it out with his reprobate friends that you can best believe will come to his defense.

[Cicero] Caesar and he are in league somehow. I can't prove it otherwise. I need to get it out into the open for them all to see how deep it goes. If I act alone, then they just need to kill me. With the Senate on my side, I can shine a light on everything. They'll be gone for good. Only the day can vanquish the night; one torch can be put out.

(CENTER STAGE AND CENTER STAGE RIGHT LIGHTS TURN ON showing the rest of the SENATE ENSEMBLE)

(UNDECIDED SIT IN THE MIDDLE, CAESAREANS SIT RIGHT, CICERO-ANS SIT LEFT)
(CICERO closes his eyes and turns to face the CENTER STAGE slowly whilst beginning his monologue)

[Cicero] Grieving brothers, sons and fathers. Exconsuls, current and past Praetors, Quaestors and Aediles. Hear me now or hear me never, in Rome's hour of need. I know in recent years we've become accustomed to terror. An armed force crossing the Alps, a renegade politician seizing powers outside the law. I tell you, fine noblemen, Prepare for both.

(SENATE ENSEMBLE begins to murmur)

[Cicero] The city is on a knife's edge, the streets are filled with her victims and the gutters overflow with her blood, shed unto the sewers. I know you men of exquisite tastes cannot be satisfied with bread and circuses, but we toy with more than the city or Rome in these talks. Sulla's right hand man continues his legacy of proscriptions! You've all seen it! We have no clue how deep this conspiracy goes, we need to take action now. I put forth a motion...to put the traitor, Lucius Sergius Catilina, and all of his followers, to death! Who's with me?!

(SENATE ENSEMBLE falls silent)

(CICERO is surprised)

[Cicero] Gentlemen, why do I hear only Echo? Lost in her cave...

[Moderator] Exconsuls, on the issue of whether or not the alleged conspirators be put to death, list your grievances.

(EXCONSULS stay silent)

[Moderator] Very well, do any among the Praetors have means to speak?

[Hidden] I have a grievance.

[Moderator] The floor recognizes Caesar, the one known as Gaius, of the Julii.

[Hidden/CAESAR] I am he. Noblemen, gather around me, and reason. Am I Jupiter in the flesh? No? Are any of you Thanatos?! What gives us the right to take these men's lives, makes us worthy to decide? We are not the kings they insist we are, slaughtering any who oppose us? These white robes weren't meant to be stained red, only purple. Leave the killing to the butchers on the Aventine. Leave the human sacrifices to the Gallic savages! Leave the mess to the less deserving men. Water can dig its own riverbed but instead it flows to the valleys and lows. Why force our path down the black Tarpeian rock instead of flow between its grooves?

[Moderator] You suggest a different course of action?

[Caesar] Tyrants kill those who oppose them, they think those who think differently must be put to death. They fear thought itself. We can scatter these men. Send them to the stocks! Even out of Italy, if need be. But I move, they rather be banished. They are just daggerless men, after all. See how much danger they pose in chains? Cicero is without reason, the images of his brother's robbery still fresh in his mind.

[Cicero] Mugging?!

[Caesar] Don't dramatize things.

[Cicero] You lessen murder?!

[Caesar] I lessen nothing.

[Cicero] Swear on Octavian's life!

[Caesar] Don't dare mention my niece's son!!

(CAESAR begins to lose his cool but his followers HOLD HIM BACK)

(CAESAR REGAINS HIMSELF)

[Caesar] See?! He picks on a newborn!

[Cicero] If I am so beyond reason then, ye old men of wisdom, I beg the question! If not Catilina, why don't we expel Trebonius! Or young Decimus Brutus here??

(SENATE ENSEMBLE pauses and talks in confusion)

[Random Senator #1] Why these men?

[Random Senator #2] What have they done??

[Cicero] Precisely! You flock to their innocence for they maintain it, but he who claim this man's innocence come here!! And find you stand alone! But you men would rather gather in fear; you possess the courage of deadmen and make silence your mistress!

(SENATE ENSEMBLE uproars)

[Moderator] Gather yourselves!! Aediles. Grievances? Quaestors? Tribunes?

[Cato] I have a grievance.

[Moderator] The floor recognizes Cato, the one known as Marcus of the Portia.

[Cato] I am he. When this session is entered into the annals, do you men want it to be shown as a session of Snakes? Cast to crawl onto our fat stomachs for their cowardice!? Or a Den of Lions?! Unafraid to do their duty!

(SENATE ENSEMBLE uproars)

[Caesar] The Conservative, whomst is the word in all purposes, urges you to be pragmatic?! I laugh!

[Cato] Rest your head on a bed of coals and become accustomed to the heat, for you will see Rome burn soon enough! If you fine noblemen woke up tomorrow to the city in flames, who would you have to blame but yourselves?!? You sleep on funeral pyres!!

(SENATE ENSEMBLE uproars)

[Moderator] I demand the floor! I demand the floor!!

[Random Senator #3] Give him the floor!! **[Random Senator #4]** Shut your faces!

(SENATE ENSEMBLE slowly quiets down)

[Moderator] Gentlemen respect these sacred halls and know anger steals your temperaments! Collect yourselves! On the motion, of the execution of Praetor Catilina, those in favor, make it known.

(CATO stands and joins CICERO and firmly shakes his hand, BOTH nod in understanding of mutual respect)

(SENATE ENSEMBLE hesitate)

(SENATE ENSEMBLE UNDECIDED join CICERO)

(CAESAR falls into a fit of rage)

[Caesar] I could be well moved, if I were as you!! Men of no spines!!

(CAESAREANS and CICERO-ANS CLASH)

(CICERO summons LICTORS armed with swords) (Swords are supposed to be illegal)

(ALL FREEZE)

(CAESAR POINTS, turns and swiftly exits)

(CICERO begins to exit stage with LICTORS)

[Cato] What do you plan to do?! Will you risk losing yourself for this?

[Cicero] You have no idea what I've lost.

END SCENE

Scene #8 ...Wish Death On ME

[Narrator] Cicero led his Lictors to an old storewell, they tied a noose around their necks and threw the conspirators in one-by-one.

(PANTOMIME: CICERO THIS-IS-SPARTA-KICKING CONSPIRATOR DOWN "WELL")

[Narrator] Catiline would slip away to an army in Northern Italy and declare himself the head of a provincial government. He'd meet Antonius' sword.

(PANTOMIME: ANTONIUS STABBING CATILINE and SOLDIERS MARCHING PAST from STAGE RIGHT TO STAGE LEFT)

[Narrator] Crassus would meet his end in 53 BCE, having molten gold poured down his throat by Parthians, after a failed military expedition.

(PANTOMIME: CRASSUS being HELD DOWN by SOLDIERS with MOLTEN GOLD BEING POURED DOWN HIS THROAT)

[Narrator] Cato would open his stomach in 46 BCE, after being defeated by Caesar on the battlefield, in the Roman Civil War

(PANTOMIME: CATO ON HIS KNEES facing stage left with CAESAR AND SOLDIERS MARCHING from STAGE RIGHT TO STAGE LEFT)

[Narrator] Cicero wouldn't take part in the Caesarian conspiracy (that took his life on the Ides of March) in 44 BCE.

(PANTOMIME: ALL SENATORS (SENATE ENSEMBLE, and extras) CIRCLING CAESAR WITH KNIVES)

[Narrator] Cicero is described by historians as the greatest Roman Statesman to ever have lived. He'd mentor Caesar's nephew in years to come. Octavian would call him Father out of respect, even after Caesar adopted him in his will. But he met his death by a centurion in 43 BCE, when Octavian's ally and Caesar's former right hand man, the vile Marc Antony, ordered Cicero's hands be cut off and nailed to the senate door. He'd refer to his consulship as the highest achievement in his life until it ended.

(SOLDIERS emerge from stage left to a resting CICERO)

[Cicero] There is nothing proper about what you are doing soldier, but do try to do it properly.

(CICERO KNEELS, pulls down his collar and extends his neck)
(CENTURION slits his throat from behind)

END PLAY

NOTES:

Cicero's younger brother QUINTUS is with him ALWAYS, except during Cato's warning in scene 4 and until he meets his death in scene 5.

We could reuse, Cato, Crassus, Terentia, Catiline and Antonius as Senators with the Senate Ensemble (AFTER a quick COSTUME CHANGE) to increase either the Senate that kills Caesar or the Soldier Ensemble.

Soldier Ensemble can double as Assassin Ensemble and Lictor/Bodyguard Ensemble.

FINIT AMEN.

La Sotana Voladora

Rafael Alberto De La Mora Herrera

LA SOTANA VOLADORA

(The Flying Soutane - based in a true story)

Cast of Characters

<u>Alfredo:</u>	A Priest in his 30's.
<u>Miguel:</u>	Alfredo's brother in his 30's.
<u>Jose:</u>	The asylum director in his 60's.
<u>Rosa:</u>	The house owner in his 50's.
<u>Carlos:</u>	Asylum guard in his 30's
<u>Inmate:</u>	Man that behaves deliriously

Scene

The asylum room and patio. Also the roof of the neighboring house.

Time

The present.

Act 1

Scene 1

Setting: The scene takes place in the city of Colima, Mexico. The settings in a room that is inside the asylum. There is a table with chairs inside the room. There is a nurse standing in the room. Here patients and their families can talk. The room is typical for an asylum but it is possible to hear noises made by the other patients of the asylum.

Around 3 o'clock Around 3 o'clock Alfredo is sitting in the room and waiting for his brother to arrive. He looks calm but the situation he is in is really delicate. He appears to be telling a story to the nurse.

At that moment Miguel arrives and opens the door. (normal)

Miguel and Jose are talking outside the visiting room. Miguel is going to see his brother Alfredo.

Miguel

(MIGUEL leans his hand towards Jose and shakes it)

Hello, director Jose. How are you?

Jose

(JOSE talks with a serious but calm voice)

Good, but your brother is in serious trouble this time.

(JOSE, points to Alfredo)

He is here because he demolished the cathedral of San Carlos with the idea of making it bigger. The cathedral might be small but it was an important cultural and historic site.

Miguel

(MIGUEL makes a face of confusion)

It was??

Jose

(JOSE makes a face of disbelief and anger)

Yess! It was because after he decided to use dynamite to demolish it none of it was left standing. Also because of the explosion, debris was fired to all the sides and some of it fell on the photographer's foot and they had to take him to the doctor.

(JOSE pulls up his pants)

Now, Alfredo has been brought here to stop his episodes and prevent him from doing more damage.

Miguel

(MIGUEL talking in a soft voice)

I apologize for my brother's behavior and I will make sure he does not cause any more trouble.

Jose

(More calmly)

He is nothing like you. Thank god mental problems are not

that common in your family.

Miguel

I ask you if you would let me take him with me. I will make sure he does not cause any more trouble.

Jose

I can't, the archbishop has made it clear he does not want Alfredo wandering outside. Being honest, I think that is the best option. We don't know if you would be able to control him and he ends up doing another of his *things*.

Miguel

(MIGUEL, making a face of petition)

I understand, Director,... Would you be able to let me talk with him alone? I want to do this to explain to him the situation he is in and that he will be staying here for a while.

Jose

Yes, Miguel you can talk with him. Also explain to him to behave himself here in the asylum.

(JOSE opens the door, signals the guard to get outside the room with his hand)

Miguel enters the visiting room and Jose closes the door. The room is mostly empty; it only has a table with chairs to the sides.

Miguel

(MIGUEL says this in a calm voice while pulling the chair and sitting in front of Alfredo)

How are you? Are you OK?

Alfredo

(ALFREDO speaks agitatedly)

This is what happens when someone tries to do a good cause! I was going to make a bigger cathedral, able to accommodate all the congregation, but you see how this ended! Now I am stuck here and I don't know how I am going to be able to finish the

completion of the cathedral.

Miguel

(MIGUEL, speaking seriously)

I will find a way to get you out, just wait a little bit more while I find a way to do it.

Alfredo

It is fine. I can wait, I have started to make this place feel more like my chapel. Also, I have befriended some inmates and I am going to give mass here on Saturdays.

Jose

(JOSE opening the door and signaling the nurse to take him to where he needs to go)

It's time for his routine therapy.

Miguel

(ALFREDO talks in a soft voice)

Bye, Alfredo, see you soon. Thank you, director, for your time.

(MIGUEL says bye to Alfredo and shakes hands with Jose. starts walking towards the exit)

(BLACKOUT)

(END OF SCENE)

ACT I

Scene 2

SETTING:

The asylum patio. A neighbor's private house to the other side of the concrete fence.

At RISE: A few days later, there is a parade on one side of the asylum. It can be heard but not seen due to the tall wall that borders the asylum. A celebration is happening in the streets. The workers in the asylum are celebrating Holy Week. It is at this time that Alfredo has an idea.

Alfredo

(ALFREDO is mumbling words and

starts moving towards the other inmates)

Let's do something to commemorate the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Alfredo

(ALFREDO while making noise by hitting a wood stick that he found to a metal chair)

Hey, hey, everybody hear me!

Alfredo

(ALFREDO speaking with emotion)

Today is a very special day, it is the day of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. I need the help of all of you. After this I will be giving mass to all of you.

Alfredo

To commemorate it we are going to make three human pyramids representing the Holy Trinity. Jesus, god, and the holy spirit.

Alfredo

(ALFREDO starts to make the inmates into groups and gives orders)

Make three groups. In Front of the concrete fence. The first people kneel down. For the second layer of people go on top of the people who are below. For the third layer, go on top of the people below.

Alfredo

You are here. You go on top of him and hold on tight.

(ALFREDO gives the final instructions to create three human pyramids)

Alfredo

(ALFREDO, with a tone of accomplishment)

They are finished, now is my turn.

(ALFREDO now starts climbing

the pyramid in the middle
making sounds of exertion)

Alfredo

(ALFREDO shouting and
speaking affirmatively)

As I said before, these pyramids are made by the inmates to
commemorate the resurrection of Christ. "Que viva cristo rey!
(Long live Christ the King!)"

Jose

(JOSE pointing at Carlos)

What are you doing? Hey! Carlos, make Alfredo go down the
pyramid and make the patients behave.

Carlos

(CARLOS nods and goes rushing
to were Alfredo is)

Carlos

Heey! Get down!

Alfredo

Haay!

(ALFREDO jumps the concrete
wall, landing safely on the
roof of the neighboring house.
After this the inmates start to
dissolve the pyramids and move
one place to another, making it
harder for the guards to take
under control the situation)

Rosa

Priest? What are you doing on the roof?

(ROSA shouts to Alfredo while he
shakes off the dust and starts going
down the roof)

Alfredo

Good night, Christian, let me explain to you what has
happened. I was giving mass to these poor crazy Christians
but they did not like my mass and threw me over the fence and
I landed here.

(ALFREDO moves his hand in the most mannered way while he is explaining what happened. Also while listening he maintains his hand together and close to his chest)

Rosa

(ROSA worriedly)

Are you alright, father?

Alfredo

(ALFREDO do this while moving gently his ring hand)

I am alright. Would you, would you lead me to the entrance? I have to go back to the asylum.

Rosa

Yes father, follow me.

Rosa

(ROSA opens the door of the house)

Here, father.

Alfredo

Thank you, ...?

(ALFREDO pauses)

Rosa

Rosa.

(ROSA replies to Alfredo)

ALFREDO

My name is Alfredo. Have a good night.

(ALFREDO steps out of the house and says this while raising his right hand hand)

Rosa

Good night, father.

(ROSA closes the door)

Alfredo

(ALFREDO after seeing that Rosa had closed the door makes a sudden move and starts running the opposite way of the asylum and gets lost in the crowd of people)

FADE OUT

THE END

Make Life Worth Living

Frankie Nadal

CAST OF CHARACTERS:

CATALINA SPES – 75+, Femme-presenting. A caring old woman who holds only love and compassion in her heart, she finds herself in the precarious position of enjoying her days with her husband and ensuring he can move on when she is gone.

FAEAN DEL LLUVIAN – 25-35, Masc.-presenting. A kind man of infinite patience and wisdom unable to heed his own advice, he visits his wife knowing not what may come of it for him and his future.

SETTING:

A breakfast nook in a cozy little cottage overlooking a sparkling bay surrounded by a field of blue hyacinths, red gladioli, and queen of the night tulips. It is midday despite the absence of a sun.

There is a large window nestled in a nook
overlooking the bay and surrounding fields.

The nook is taken up by two plush chairs,
one more used than the other, and an elegant
coffee table adorned with a vase filled with flowers
from the field.

CATALINA enters through a curtained entryway
and sets the table with a kettle, coffee-press, dainty
teacup, and an oversized coffee mug before being
interrupted by a knock at a door across the
curtained entry.

Scene I

CATALINA

Oh, he's here! Not a second early or a second late, as usual. Always right on...

CATALINA opens the door and is met with the
smile of a kindly looking man leaning on an
ornate staff.

FAEAN

Time. Thank you, beloved. I do try to be—

CATALINA

Punctual? Looks like someone is getting slow in their old age.

FAEAN

Yes, yes, apologies. We have quite the day ahead of us; I shouldn't dawdle. So, what shall we begin with?

CATALINA

No need to be so stiff, love; it's like you've seen a ghost! Now, sit. I'm not as young as I used to be, so you'll have to make do with spending some quality time with this old woman.

FAEAN

Yes, yes... of course. I—Ah, I see you’ve made tea and coffee. Thank you, beloved. I apologize for putting you through the extra work of brewing me a cup. I’m afraid you just can’t best a pressed coffee. Not by your hand, certainly.

CATALINA

Nonsense! It’s the least I can do for someone so esteemed, Rain Bringer.

CATALINA sits in the worn chair as she prepares her tea. FAEAN lags to follow with his coffee.

FAEAN

Eh-heh... Yeah... Such a silly little epithet, yet so apropos. Ah, which reminds me—have I ever told you the story of how I got such a name? Admittedly, it is not terribly interesting.

CATALINA

No, but I thought it gave you an air of mystery and authority when we first met. Bit of a shame I got to know you better... You’re kinda dorky.

FAEAN

Oh, why must you wound me?

CATALINA

No need to be so dramatic, love. I actually find it rather endearing. You may not have been as mysterious and cool as I first thought, but...

FAEAN

But?

CATALINA

You made me feel at home. And I think that is much more important.

FAEAN

Thank you, beloved. I really do appreciate it. And you, my spoiled kitten.

CATALINA

Pffft... Faean! You can’t just drop a pet name on an old woman like that! Not while I’m drinking piping hot tea, at least!

FAEAN

I see no harm in it! Besides, Alaster and Urza had more inappropriate names for us. Names they’d use in public, no less.

CATALINA

You have a point, love. Except, “kitten” is underselling it, now. Although, Urza had a name for you that was really great. What was it again? Ah, yes! “Faerie of the Rain.” A little on the nose, doncha think? Bit prophetic, too...

FAEAN

Cat, I’m sorry. I know this is... difficult, but I really—

CATALINA

Fae, you know our time is limited here, but it shouldn't be spent mourning. Let us enjoy this while we still can. I wish this to be a happy memory. Come, let's head outside, love. I could use some fresh air.

FAEAN

Of course, beloved...

FAEAN refreshes his coffee as CATALINA sets her teacup down, full and still steaming. With a flourish of FAEAN's hand, the window and doors break away and disappear offstage, the lights going dark.

Scene II

Both CATALINA and FAEAN sit near the bay, the coffee table between them now adorned with a vase containing flowers from the field.

The lighting reflects a setting sun, and the cottage is nowhere to be seen, only flowers and the sparkling bay. The two are holding hands while overlooking the bay.

CATALINA

It never gets old, does it? The smell of the flowers and the bay. You'd think it wouldn't work, but there's just something about it all. Although, now that you're here, I'm reminded of just how much like the rain you smell. It's relaxing. I wish we could do this more often. Maybe even frolic through the fields? You might have to carry me home, though! These old bones aren't much for that anymore.

FAEAN

It certainly would be a wondrous time, strolling through the flowers about the bay. The scent of the salty sea air strung throughout your hair as your diaphanous dress drapes so ethereally over this field of fragrant flowers... Apologies, beloved. I'm afraid I've become lost in my thoughts again.

CATALINA

Don't worry, love. Like you said, it would be a dream. I don't blame you for getting lost in it, I know I have... Oh, I nearly forgot! You were going to tell me how you got the name "Rain Bringer."

FAEAN

Yes, right. It becomes all too easy to get lost in your presence. I digress: It was quite some time ago. When I was travelling, helping people by enriching the environment and, well, bringing the rain, I was sort of an enigmatic quantity. Still am, now, because of, well... No one really knew who I was, or even that I was the one helping. I was not one for the spotlight, had no qualms about being forgotten or left alone. Alaster, though.

CATALINA

He was, and will always be remembered as, an entertainer at heart.

FAEAN

Agreed. We had gotten a request to quell a raging wyvern. Urza was off doing reconnaissance for the war effort, and you were still our inside source in Vytalis, so it was up to Al and I. Long story short, he tried to best it in single combat, wanting to impress me—though he claimed he was trying to “protect” me.

CATALINA

Oh, how chivalrous! I guess he always was that flirtatious.

FAEAN

Promiscuous would be more apt! When I was attending to his inevitable injuries, he would not stop running his mouth. Didn’t help that I had to undress him to get to some of the more grievous wounds. You can fill in the blanks there; I’m quite certain even your imagination could not rival the heat spilling from his tongue.

CATALINA

That’s Alaster for you. Even when hurt, he could never—Wait a minute! You did not just make a dirty joke!

FAEAN

Well, you know what they say: “a touch of levity to balance things out.”

CATALINA

Gods, you’re corny.

FAEAN

Hey, you asked me to marry you all those centuries ago.

CATALINA

I most certainly did! And I stand by the fact that it was the best decision of my life. We even fashioned the little cottage together on the bay behind the guild. So, the name?

FAEAN

Oh, right. Well, after we went to collect our reward, Al announced that I was the one who felled the beast, even though I was still just a scholar at the time. He introduced me as “Rain Bringer” and it simply stuck. Admittedly, given the motifs in my outfit, people likely would’ve caught on regardless.

CATALINA

You do wear a lot of blue, even nowadays. And your calling card is literally a helping hand silhouetted by a rain drop. Oh! I actually have a story to share, too!

FAEAN

By all means, beloved.

CATALINA

Alright, so, me and Ur were on a mission to investigate the disappearance of a town elder in Vytalis. After we did some digging, literally, we discovered some writing carved onto the coffin he was buried alive in. Without skipping a beat, Ur goes and reads it aloud and ends up summoning the undead!

FAEAN

No!

CATALINA

Yes! They later told me they were practicing and wanted to connect with me more over my culture and language, but they didn't get most of what they were reading because it was in a, you know... dead language!

FAEAN guffaws and nearly doubles over out of his chair.

CATALINA

I knew you'd like that one. Had to break it to Ur that I didn't actually speak it and was never properly taught how. Not until I started adventuring with all of you, of course. Ahh... Those were some of the best times of my life.

FAEAN

And mine as well—without them, we could not have this.

The two sit in silence for a time, gazing wistfully at one another before FAEAN pulls away.

FAEAN

I'm sorry, Cat. I should have visited sooner. I just... I left you here—alone—knowing well this is not what you wanted and—

CATALINA

Hey, it's okay. Really. I could've left whenever I wanted. Yes, I stayed for you, but I wouldn't have it any other way.

FAEAN

Catalina, beloved...

CATALINA

You always could see right through me. ... Tell me, my love, can you understand the mourning of a light unable to return to the stars above?

FAEAN

More than anyone...

CATALINA reaches for the vase and picks one of each flower from it.

CATALINA

Blue Hyacinths, for sincere and constant Faean Granchester. Red Gladioli, for strong and valorous Alaster Stonesinger. And Queen of the Night tulips, for mysterious and elegant Urza Nightstalker. One by one, they gave their lives, but one by one they did not fall.

FAEAN

As a symbol of constancy and cycles, del Lluvian was born, for Granchester's will was unwavering, absolute. Forever recounted through song and memory was Stonesinger's fate, the man who fought against Eternity, and won. The ever-vigilant Nightstalker, who prowled the depths of darkness, was made ever-lasting as Champion of the Night.

FAEAN produces a ruby inlaid gold ring and places it on the table where CATALINA picks it up after a pause.

CATALINA

And for demure and gracious Catalina Spes, the Ruby Ring of Remembrance. Lost to her loved ones too soon, her final breath first for two, Spes remained.

FAEAN

...no. Not “remained.” Left behind. I left you behind; I was so afraid of losing you, so...so... unwilling to accept that you were gone that I used the ring to keep you by my side. I held you back, am still holding you back, from the heavens for over a century. Yes, you entered the ring willingly, and yes, you could have moved on whenever you wanted, but I know you. I know that for as long as I am hurting, you will gladly give up everything for me! ... and I can’t bring myself to do the same.

CATALINA

... but you have.

FAEAN

I—

CATALINA

Do you remember that day, long ago, when you...

FAEAN

Died?

CATALINA

Changed.

FAEAN

It’s the one day I cannot recall—the day Faeen Granchester died, and I, Faeen del Lluvian, took his place.

CATALINA

Well, we were on the shore of the island. Our guild hall was in shambles, and we were staring down at what would surely be our doom. Al, Ur, and I embraced each other, waiting for the end. I reached out to you, not wanting to go without you, but what you did next... it will forever be in my heart.

FAEAN

I... I still can’t remember, but... I do remember this, this feeling. It was warm. Calming, even. I remember feeling... content.

CATALINA

You turned to me wearing the warmest smile I had ever seen, and you wrapped me in your mantle. There wasn’t an ounce of fear or regret on your face, just love. You gave each of us a kiss and made Ur promise to keep us safe. Then, you turned back towards the ocean. Towards death. You stood your staff at the edge of the shore and walked out onto the sea, the waves as calm and as still as you.

FAEAN

I remember... I was not going to lose any of you.

CATALINA

It was the turning point of the war, when Vytalis launched the first actual attack on Anima... on our home. Our little guild on our lonely little island was the only thing between them and the continent. Except, it wasn't the only thing. You stood before them. You poured your heart out and, for a moment, nothing. Everything was still. Quiet.

CATALINA takes a long look at the blue hyacinth in her hand before letting it fall to the ground. She clutches the remaining flowers.

CATALINA

I thought it worked. We all did. I closed my eyes and gave a sigh of relief before opening them and I saw... you—your brilliant incandescence in the gaping maw of that ever-consuming darkness. You turned to me, and I saw that same look of love on your face as you mouthed something to me. I couldn't hear it, but I felt it. Felt it engrave itself into my heart right beside your name.

FAEAN

Make life worth living.

CATALINA

I made it our guild's motto. Our never-ending quest. For years I strove to follow it, despite a piece of me disappearing before my very eyes. For years I wore a smile for the people of Anima, for the guild, for Alaster and Urza. For years I worked to finish the war and rebuild our home. And for years, I cried myself to sleep every night wrapped in your mantle, waiting for something, anything, to justify the cold next to me every morning I woke up with a tear-stained face.

FAEAN

Cat, I am so sorry—

CATALINA

For years I endured! For six years I thought I would never be whole again... but I kept moving forward. It was all I could manage then. Until, one day, out of the blue, right when I thought I finally figured stuff out, you showed up. Not as Faean Granchester, but as Faean del Lluvian, Faerie of the Rain, god of constancy and cycles! I thought my husband gone until...until... Until I saw that same damned look of love on your face. When I saw those caring eyes and that soft smile, when I felt the warmth of your embrace and the tenderness of your touch, it clicked.

FAEAN

What did?

CATALINA

I thought you died for us, and for years on end, I couldn't bring myself to face it. For six years I ran from my feelings and from my fears thinking I played a part in your death. And when you asked me that silly question with a smile on your lips—

FAEAN

“Did our hugs always feel this warm?”

CATALINA

I cried “yes,” and it finally clicked. You didn’t die for us. You lived for us. Because of you, we lived. In the end, we won the war. We became an official guild. We got to go on so many grand adventures, got to share so many amazing experiences, all because we made life worth living.

FAEAN

It was our never-ending quest—a journey without a destination. Many mistakes were made, and many lessons were learned. We shed many tears and shared many laughs. We made our mark on the world just as it had made its mark on us and by the gods did we ever leave an indelible mark!

CATALINA

We were, no, are the Starry Light Adventuring Guild! We bear the light!

FAEAN

The sword!

CATALINA

The shield!

FAEAN

And the helping hand!

FAEAN picks up the ring and holds it between himself and CATALINA.

FAEAN

We strive to make our lives, everyone’s lives, worthwhile—something we cannot do by living in the past.

CATALINA curls FAEAN’s hand around the ring and he puts it away.

FAEAN

The past serves as a bittersweet reminder of all that we have accomplished and endured. And the future, infinite and unknowable, awaits us and all that we will become. But now?

CATALINA

Now is the time to live.

FAEAN

Indeed... And live, I shall. I shall live for Urza. For Alaster! For you, beloved. I shall live my life for the four of us! In this field of everlasting reminiscences, I do declare that I shall-

CATALINA

Make life worth living?

FAEAN

Ha-ha! Yes! For my heart beats not for me alone. ... Cat, beloved?

CATALINA

Yes?

FAEAN

I'm ready.

CATALINA

So am I. Come, help this old bag of bones to the shore.

FAEAN

Of course, beloved. How close?

CATALINA

Near the edge, but not too close.

FAEAN

All right.

CATALINA

Now then, take a step back. I think I've planned for this almost as much as our wedding. I even prepared a speech and everything.

FAEAN

Oh?

CATALINA

Well, I've had a century to myself.

FAEAN

I walked into that one.

CATALINA

Besides, not all of us can improvise something as eloquent as you. I grew up in the countryside, not a library.

FAEAN

Once again, I must concede the point to you, beloved. Though, I grew up in a small town, too. Just one with a library. It also had a... Oh, that's right!

CATALINA

Fae? Is something wrong?

FAEAN excitedly produces his staff, a flag flying the guild's colors adorning the top of it.

CATALINA

Oh!

FAEAN

Catalina Spes, the Loving Light, guild doctor and former guild master! Are you intent on leaving the Starry Light Adventuring Guild, knowing you may not be able to return?

CATALINA

It is time for the next phase of my journey.

FAEAN

And a phase long awaited it is. So be it! There are four virtues you must always remember, lest you invoke the wholehearted ire of the guild.

CATALINA

Yes, guild master!

FAEAN

First! You must always remember that everyone you meet has experienced fear and courage, love and sorrow. They deserve patience and understanding.

CATALINA

Faeen Granchester...

FAEAN

Second! If the motivation behind your actions is the thought of assisting another, nothing you do will ever be for naught.

CATALINA

Urza Nightstalker...

FAEAN

Third! Dying for your loved ones is easy; it takes true strength and valor to live your life to the fullest for them.

CATALINA

Alaster Stonesinger...

FAEAN

Lastly, you must remember to never view your life as something insignificant, for everyone has a reason to exist, no matter how simple that reason may be.

CATALINA

Me...

FAEAN

Catalina Spes! Will you endeavor to uphold these four virtues? Will you be the light, the sword, the shield, and the helping hand for those less fortunate?

CATALINA

Wholeheartedly.

FAEAN

Then I bid you farewell. You will forever be remembered by the guild! By me, beloved.

CATALINA

Farewell, my love.

CATALINA disappears in a cascade of glimmering curtains and light, a smile upon her lips.

The stage goes dark before FAEAN taps his staff and it relights, revealing a new addition to the

field of flowers, of which he plucks.

FAEAN

White orchids, for compassionate and gracious Catalina Spes. A light most brilliant, transcending time and space, Spes guides all who need love in their lives.

The stage darkens with a single light on FAEAN
as he pulls out the ring.

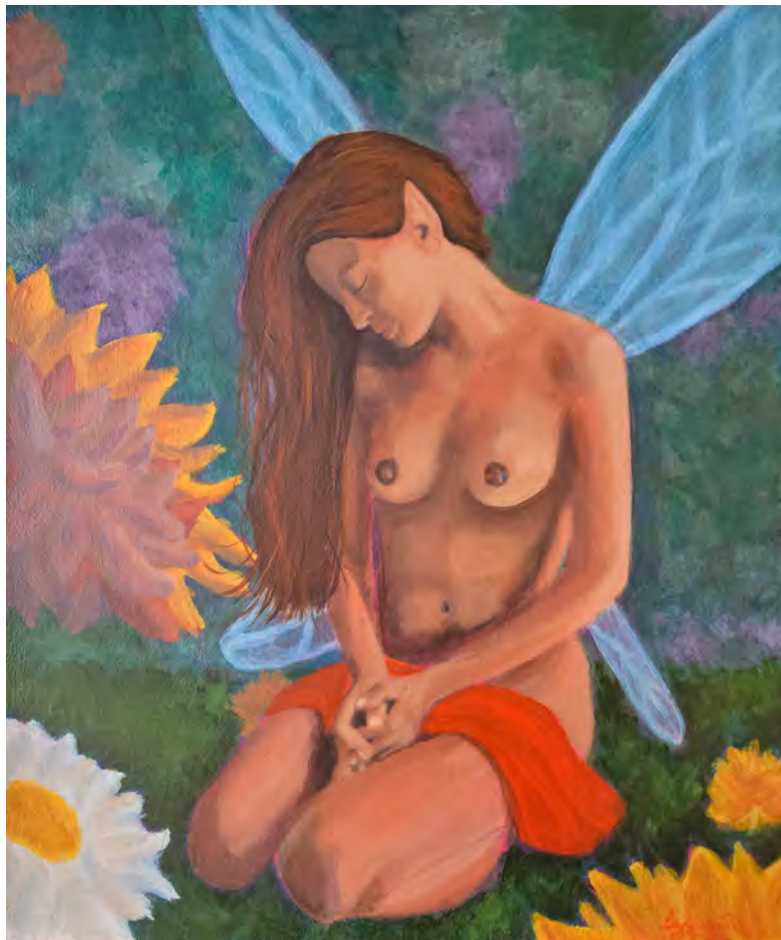
CATALINA's voice resonates out.

CATALINA

Though our paths must part, and we may never have the chance to look upon one another again, I hope you can find solace in the thought that, no matter where your travels may take you, no matter how far you may stray from our home, I will always watch over you, my love.

FAEAN crushes the ring and places the orchid
in his hair, exiting.

END



Moonlit Reverie by Benjamin Parsons

When Pains Arrive

Angel Rosas

CHARACTERS/CAST OF CHARACTERS:

THOMAS SHELBY - A boy who wishes to find his own way in life.

EMILY MYERS - A local woman who is very shy.

JANE TUSTIN - A local matriarch. She hates dogs.

SETTING:

In the home of Emily Myers.

EMILY

Thomas, are you there?

THOMAS

Yes, Emily. I am here.

EMILY opens the door and brings
food to THOMAS.

EMILY

Oh dear. Look at what a mess you have made.

EMILY points to the dung pile in
THOMAS' corner.

EMILY

You know what happens to naughty boys who don't act right do you? They get sent to the dog pound!

THOMAS

No, please no! Anything but the dog pound!

EMILY

Okay, but you can't do that again or there'll be serious consequences.

THOMAS

Yes, momma.

THOMAS kneels at the feet of
EMILY and kisses both feet.

EMILY

That's more like it.

EMILY leaves for upstairs.

THOMAS

I gotta be a good boy for mama.

THOMAS sleeps among the piles of
dirty socks and underwear strewn
about the lair.

It is now morning.

EMILY

Wake up, sleepy head!

EMILY comes into the basement.

EMILY

Momma has some more food for you.

THOMAS

Yum-yum.

THOMAS grovels for the dog food
EMILY has brought.

EMILY

We got a big day coming up. You will be meeting your fellow brothers soon.

THOMAS

Really?

EMILY

Yes, really. You just need to make the hole bigger enough so you can fit inside it.

THOMAS

What if I can't?

EMILY slaps THOMAS.

EMILY

What do you mean if you can't!? You are not an underachiever. You just got to believe in yourself.
Now dig it.

EMILY brings THOMAS over to
the hole.

EMILY

We are not underachievers in this house. If you don't believe that you can do it then you'll never be able to do it.

THOMAS starts digging.

THOMAS

What happens after I dig it?

EMILY

I'll put you inside and cover up the hole. In a day, you will awake in paradise.

THOMAS

What does paradise feel like?

EMILY

Paradise feels like you're out of air.

Knocking is heard.

EMILY

Looks like someone's here. You go finish that up while I see who's upstairs.

Scene changes to EMILY now at the front door.

EMILY

Who is it?

JANE

It's me, Jane Tustin.

EMILY

What do you want?

JANE

Just want to talk.

EMILY

Okay, come in.

JANE comes in while being friendly with EMILY.

JANE

Absolutely fabulous house you got here.

EMILY

Yes, sit. I'll make some tea for you.

EMILY heads away to the kitchen.
JANE looks toward the basement door.

JANE

Say, you never told me what's in that basement of yours.

EMILY

Just old things and my dog.

JANE

You have a dog? Those are such vile creatures. What about the nice cat you used to have? Did it die?

EMILY

Yes, I'm afraid so. You know how fragile those creatures are.

JANE

Shame, and it was just starting to warm up to me.

The kettle is quiet.

JANE

Tell me, sister, you will come to the festival right?

EMILY

Why of course, why wouldn't I?

JANE

Well you were quite squeamish about the sort of events that go on there.

JANE

I know you're not quite fond of the crossdressers, and you wait until the live burning to finally look upon them.

EMILY

I just don't like the abomination of men taking on a form as pleasant and graceful as ours. I think it is rather vile. I do love the burning however. To see their skin be melted off without mercy is a delight to the eyes.

JANE

You know, Emily, you can participate in the burning with me.

EMILY

Really?

JANE

Yes. I can provide special access to you, and you can look at all the young boys that will be massacred for it.

EMILY

And I'll be able to look at next year's stock, yes?

JANE

Absolutely.

EMILY

I've heard there were problems with finding new stock. Is that true?

JANE

Yes. We've had some boys go missing, not escape mind you, and so we've had trouble finding new performers.

EMILY

I may be able to help in this endeavor, sister.

JANE

Really? How exactly?

EMILY

I have a boy in my basement. I can provide him to you for next year's ceremony.

JANE

You know; I may actually be able to fit him in this year's ceremony!

EMILY

That would be wonderful.

JANE

Yes. He should be able to perform within a week for it. When will you have him ready to go?

EMILY

Within two days.

JANE

Splendid. When I return, I shall have thirty pieces of silver ready for you.

JANE leaves. The kettle finally boils. EMILY turns it off.

EMILY

I didn't even get to make any tea for us.

EMILY heads to the basement with the kettle in hand.

THOMAS

Momma, I did it! I have dug the hole. Can I go in it now?

EMILY

I'm afraid not son, because I have something better for you!

THOMAS

What is it?

EMILY

I will be sending you to meet your fellow brothers upstairs. You will have a big sister watching over to make sure you are safe.

THOMAS

What if I want to stay here with you?

EMILY pours the kettle water over THOMAS making him recoil in pain and agony.

EMILY

Bad boys don't get a say in the matter.

THOMAS

But, I'm a good boy.

EMILY

Then you will behave.

THOMAS

But, I wanna be free.

EMILY leaves.

Scene changes to the next morning. EMILY enters.

EMILY

Rise up sleepyhead.

THOMAS barks. EMILY gives him
some scraps of food.

EMILY

When it's time for you to go, I need you to do something for me.

THOMAS

What?

EMILY

I'll need you to take off that costume and act like a woman.

THOMAS

But I'm not a girl.

EMILY

I know, but it's for a special ceremony for your other sisters.

THOMAS

What if I want to stay as a wolf?

EMILY

Well, you're not a wolf so you shouldn't stay as one.

THOMAS

Momma, you told me one day that I could be anything I wanted.

EMILY

Yes, but you have to know that some things are simply out of the question.

THOMAS

What if I want to grow up?

EMILY

You won't.

EMILY leaves upstairs. THOMAS looks around the room. He takes out his wolf costume and wears it. Scene changes to night. EMILY enters.

EMILY

What are you doing?

THOMAS

I feel cozy like this.

EMILY

Why do you like to wear that costume?

THOMAS

Because it makes me feel like a man.

EMILY

Thomas, what do you know of the world outside?

THOMAS

I remember only trees.

EMILY

Good. Know that the world is populated by big sisters such as me.

THOMAS

Why?

EMILY

Because we loved power.

THOMAS

Is power a good thing?

EMILY

Might makes right. If you can't stand up for yourself then nobody will.

THOMAS

Nobody?

EMILY

Yes. Nobody.

EMILY leaves.

THOMAS starts rummaging through
the furniture. He pulls out old
photographs. He makes a yelp.

Scene changes to morning.

EMILY

Today is the day.

JANE knocks.

EMILY

Come in.

JANE

Is he ready?

EMILY

Yes.

Change of scenery to the basement.
THOMAS is trying to practice his roar.

Cut back to kitchen

JANE

Alright then. Go downstairs and apprehend this boy at once. I'll be up here waiting.

EMILY

Okay. I'll be back in a jiffy.

EMILY heads to the basement.

EMILY

Will you come with us?

THOMAS

No.

EMILY

Prove it.

THOMAS attacks EMILY brutally
while in his wolf costume.

JANE

Oh my god!

JANE runs outside. THOMAS is in
pursuit. JANE attacks THOMAS
with her stick and sprays him.

JANE

Back, you disgusting mutt! Go to the woods with the rest of your filthy kind! Get back I say!

THOMAS runs on all fours away
from JANE into the woods. He keeps
running until he has passed the
waterfall. He takes off his suit. He
lays down before taking a breath.

THOMAS

I'm finally free.

FADE TO BLACK

