



ORPHEUS

Issue XLIII



A Creative Arts Journal

A Publication of:



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College of Arts and Humanities

ORPHEUS

Issue XLIII

A Creative Arts Journal | California State University, Bakersfield

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Humanities Office Building Display Case Designers:

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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.



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A Note from the Faculty Advisor

The editors for this year's issue of *Orpheus* are Skylar Allen, Elijah Barton, Matthew Besoyan, Tristin Bryant, Julian Caro, Robin DeBruyne, Emily Gamino, Lili Goddard, Auna Hernandez, Melissa Jorge, Francisco Leija, Cassandra Marquez, Alyssa Mendoza, April Morton, Jazmine Perez, Ixchel Reyes, Sho Saegusa, Julissa Salamanca, and Zachary Trevino. We had a staggering number of submissions this year, which meant a remarkable amount of work for the editorial staff. But each person took the time to review every submission with precision and care. From marketing and advertising to reviewing submissions, copyediting accepted works, and designing the layout of the journal, everybody came together and made something truly special. I hope you'll agree as you read on.

While everyone on the editorial staff played a critical role in getting this issue to print, I'd like to specifically thank a few who went above and beyond this year. First, this year's Managing Editor, Tristin Bryant. You kept the ship afloat and made everything run much more smoothly. Thank you so much for your leadership and guidance. I also want to acknowledge this year's layout team: Robin, Melissa, and April. There may not be a more demanding role to play, and so I thank you for tackling InDesign and bringing this beautiful issue to print.

When it came to advertising and publicity, Alyssa and Ixchel produced wonderful marketing materials for this year's issue. Your posters were elegant and eye-catching; thanks so much. Finally, to the rest of the editorial staff: I'm beyond grateful for the work you put into *Orpheus* this year. It was such a pleasure to come to class every Tuesday and Thursday and collaborate with each of you. Thanks for everything you did.

I'd also like to thank Dr. Alicia Rodriguez, Dean of Arts and Humanities, and Provost Deborah Thien, for their generous financial support. Additionally, thank you to Emily Poole Callahan, Dean of Students, and the Instructionally Related Activities (IRA) committee for the sizable grant that has allowed us to continue to print this beautiful journal, even as costs increase. Also, huge thanks to Emerson Case, Chair of the English Department, for everything he's done to keep this publication running and successful.

Finally, thank you to all the wonderful contributors! Your work continues to inspire each of us, and we are so excited to share it with CSUB!

Dr. Adam Schuster
English Department

Content Warning:

Some of the works published in this issue contain material that may be triggering to some readers, including references to addiction, physical and sexual abuse, and self-harm. Please navigate these pieces with care.

Poetry

Poppies

A. R. Wickett



Pressure Builds Diamonds

Camryn Albert-Kulstad

Chemical reactions.

Freud.

Engineering.

Me—

his calloused hands could solve any problem
after stripping it down far enough.

Plants.

Tea.

Whiskey Sours.

Weed—

his indulgence in the softness he liked to try
on
throughout weekends
spent barefoot
on hardwood floors
in the presence of me.

Logic.

Control—

his ability to maximize opportunity
to destroy the intruder in his presence.

The pistol nuzzled under his pillow.

Slipping underneath black sheets.

Me under him.

Him under me.

Naturally blushed lips and cheeks.

Rose-colored stains.

Wooden cutting boards.

Red seeping into white countertops.

Strawberries crushed with honey,
sweetness transformed into sorbet—
frozen.

Words.

Red and hot.

After—

hours escaping timelines,
our souls traveling to galaxies,
the only place
where our scars
appeared intricately designed,
like beautifully sewn seams.

Aching reality slips forward—

into his black shirts

that swallow me whole,

like the version of myself

he insisted I was.

And I believed him.

In the hours after midnight.

The stillest version of me

had no reason to dream

in a world full of him.

Awake—

he would stay,

searching my face,

memorizing every line,

as if something inside me

needed removing.

“Pressure builds diamonds”, he once said—

I left,

permanently fractured.

— Notes on becoming a trinket.

But Then I Wouldn't Have You

Skylar Allen

I struggle to find a word
fitting enough to encapsulate
the sheer cruelty of abandoning me
in a world I never asked to enter.
Perhaps *cruelty* will suffice.

What has changed since you gave up
on me, on your responsibility,
when you chose, with the same ease
as selecting Coke or water
at an evening supper,
to force me to grow with
half of your blood
and none of your guidance?

Everything but my character.

My character exists in spite of you.
But the scars you carved into my identity,
the scars you've left on my mother's face,
have permanently altered
my understanding of love.

I feel dyslexic when it comes to love.
You never taught me how to drive
or how to cook,
but you taught me this:

Affection is violence.
Nurturing is neglect.
Love is conditional.
Parenting is optional.

I am terrified of my own DNA,
terrified of what the blood inside me
might be capable of.
I look in the mirror and see
the same lips that spit on my mother,
the same hands that tore apart my innocence,
the same eyes that watched
their child beg for mercy.

Shame clings to the last name
I am forced to carry
until I meet a man
I am stubbornly convinced
will mirror your behavior,
because you taught me

that wives and children
deserve nothing more.

So I taught myself how to cook.
I learned to drive.
I graduated high school.
I got into college.

And someday,
I will walk myself down the aisle,
give myself away,
and change my last name.

With time, my scars may fade,
but they will never disappear,
the way you did
when I needed you most.

I will always wonder
why I wasn't enough
to earn the love
you were meant to give freely.
I will always loathe Father's Day.
I will always imagine my mother
living the life she deserved,
never having met you.

And she will always say,
But then I wouldn't have you.

An Act of Self-Forgiving

Matthew Besoyan

Picture me as the golden boy, your shining star
All of my mistakes, shedding light on who you are
In and out of your love, I could never do enough
No matter my pain, in the end, it was me who fucked it up

Could never find a place, for my heart to pace
Kept on running, sprinting, begging for your grace
You taught me that family is all that we have
But when I needed you the most, you left me crying in the past

My lessons I'll learn, my ways I'll change
I'll carry my cross but not suffer your shame
Your demons feed on you but I'll make mine starve
I'll forgive myself and love you despite these scars

With all this twisted torment, seeping through my soul
Abusing my own heart so much that everything went dull
I hated myself so deeply, an ambitious self-assault
All love reflecting hollow in the mirror of my faults

I never even needed your guidance for my fall

I fell 'til there was nothing left but sorrow and confusion
Dying for your love but left with emotional contusions
Thinking this was me and I would never change
Who I am and that I'd always, be my family's shame

But my lessons I'll learn, my ways I'll change
I'll carry my cross but not suffer your shame
Your demons feed on you but I'll make mine starve
I'll forgive myself and love you despite these scars

When you finally let me go, I shattered to my core
No holidays at home, don't need your golden boy no more
Everything I thought I was, I built myself on you
You tore up my foundations and ripped my world in two

*Does a liar never tell the truth, a child not outgrow his youth?
I won't let my faults define me, and I won't let your judgements bind me*

Despite it all, I'll never judge you like you've done to me
I'll fix who I am and show you what family is *supposed* to be
Despite it all I'll be here for you if you need me too
I want you to know that I'll always love you

Because my lessons I've learned, my ways I've changed
I'll carry our cross, but you can keep your shame
Your demons feed on you, but mine have starved
I've learned to forgive myself and still love you even though it's hard.

Asylum

Hailey M. Buccarelli

Papa taught me terror,
And put me to the test.
Mama taught me hatred,
I learned it from the best.
Shoved me right against the mirror,
Without a moment's rest;
Tore me inside out,
Gouging out my guts and bones,
And sewed me back together,
An empty husk of a home.

Who am I? Who could I have been?
We'll never know the lass,
As she has long-since lain dead,
A tragedy come to pass.
Who am I *now*?
Now that the old me is a ghost,
A phantom in the night,
Scattered ashes somewhere I do not know.
I was allowed to meet that spirit
For all of a minute,
Before my folks decided
They hated all that lied within it.

My spirit was torn asunder—violent and savage—
Despite my body being one they graciously never ravaged—
Until a new me was born!
Still a waste of space,
Despite the fact that I lived, and cried, and breathed,
Desperately through the hole in my mask of a face—
The one I had tragically worn.

Is it truly the burning of a bridge,
If the other is the one pouring out canteens of gasoline,
Barking like hounds,
And dropping the match upon the accursed grounds?
Have I sparked this flame?
Must I be the one to take the blame,
When all I did was seek asylum
Upon the other shore?

Love me...
Hailey M. Buccarelli

“They really do love you,” you say. “Even if you don’t think it’s true.”
And I know this story. I’ve heard it before. Again, and again, and again:
I’ve heard it.

I was a Mother before I could be a daughter,
An extension of Them before I could be myself.
I learned I was Unwanted before I knew my own name;
A Burden before I could discover who I could be.

I begged. I pleaded. And I cried.
“They love you, They love you!” you insist.
But They scream. They hurt. They break.
“We love you, we love you,” They say,
Twisting in biting shards,
Their bladed words burrowing deep
Into who “Me” used to be.

But... They love me.
They love me, love me, love me.
So, if I may ask;
“Is it alright, then?”
“Is it okay for them to ruin me?”
“Because They *love* me,
They’re allowed to *break* me?”

There is silence.

“Is it not possible,” I then ask,
“That someone can break, destroy, hurt something—
Someone—
Even though They love them
With all of Their heart?
And...
Does that make the pain go away?”

They say They love me,
And I’m sure They do.
You say They love me,
And I know They do.
In Their own sick, twisted, *hideous* way.
The way one adores—feels pride in—
Trophies decorated upon Their shelf.

“But he’s my *son!*” You cry.
“But she’s my *daughter!*” You scream.
“But he’s my *brother!*” You wail.
“But she’s my *sister!*” You shout.

Then what am *I*?
What does that make *me*?
Have I no place amongst this registry of flesh and blood?

 If he’s her son, am I not her grandchild?
 If she’s his daughter, am I not kin as well?
 If he’s your brother, am I not of this family?
 And she’s your sister, so...

I’m nothing.
I’m never something.
Never anything.
Never Anyone.

You know Them not for who They are,
 As They have never been above you.
 But They were and still are—in a way— above me.
 And I below Them.

They get to hurt me, because They’re *your* kin,
 And I have to withstand it all,
 Because I am No One.

They can hurt me, because They “love me”,
 So you say.
They can hurt me, because *you* love *Them*.
 But, do you love me too?

 Please?
 Do you love me too...?

And there is silence.

Why aren't you?

Julian Caro

I saw a paper with my face on it early last June, it covered the night before and came out just before noon

It read, "Cowboy falls from the bull, will he ride again or is he doomed?"

I didn't need to buy a copy to know what it all said, but I asked for one anyway, just to see the accusations come to bed

The vendor tried to make small talk, saying "It's over for that poor sucker. He's dead!"

But if talk is cheap, then his wasn't worth a cent,

I know who I am, and more importantly what I'm not, and there's just no changing that

He handed me the paper, before seeing the man on the page standing right in front of him

His face turned pale, as I dropped a dime, and said, "Poor sucker,"

I couldn't help but feel a quiet chuckle and an honest grin from escaping my face

I went for a drive with all the windows down and the pedal just the same

I serenaded the fields of green and black gold, as they echoed back my shame

It was there where I found familiar faces and estranged places,

Where I heard old prophecy and all that was foretold

My latest failures stretching back to the birth of my fears and tears

Recounting every loss and every moment when this honest grin disappeared and my chuckle faded

Like losing the seventh grade science fair no matter how obsessed I became

Or the time I broke my patella before the very first game

Knowing there was no conciliation prize when every university I had ever dreamt of attending, shut their doors, leaving only me to blame

No better luck next time, when my last words on Valentine's Day were telling her not to throw the flowers away, just a renewed fear of intimacy and self-doubt

Or the time I couldn't even afford the book in my hand, no less live up to my last name

The world was taunting me with its quiet chuckle and honest grin

And just as I began to wonder if I was a failure, I caught my reflection in the rearview mirror,

Reminding me of all the times I've been asked, "Why are you always smiling?"

Every loss, every mistake, every fear, and every tear

I could look at them dead in the eyes now, every ugly moment and their unflinching stares

I recognized too well, what they were, all mine

Leading me to love, good things and everything in between

Every time we went out for milkshakes, because those 'Niners lost again

Packed in my truck, as I was trying to get everyone's order through shouts and laughs

Or my little sister's mischievous chuckle whenever we played

Me with my band of fools, smiling and laughing

Tears watered my eyes and I cracked a quiet chuckle and bore an honest grin

Somewhere between the memories, the spirits visiting me, and the hand of God, I caught flashing lights behind me

The man who stopped me asked,

"Why are you smilin' son?"

Past my formerly bucked teeth and a small dimple on my right cheek

I asked him, "why aren't you?"

Shine

Blake Cutler

This daughter was born a sun
And she shines brighter than the one we know.
From the day that we met you
We were aware of the glow.

The joy you give us
Shows proudly on our face.
Even though in our bed
We lost so much of our space.

We enjoy waking up
To the sweet sounds of you.
This daughter was born a sun
Our sweet Charlie Sue.

Sitting in Silence

Blake Cutler

Sitting in silence because you're too weak to speak,
I talk anyways, hoping it'll reach you through sleep.

Sitting in silence and it just feels so wrong,
The hero of my life is not feeling as strong.

Sitting in silence, except for that beep,
That insufferable beep that tells me your heart still has its beat.

Sitting in silence, I'm at a loss for words,
To see you like this, it shakes up my world.

Sitting in silence, this doesn't feel real,
Knowing you're like this, I can't eat a meal.

Sitting in silence would not be so bad,
If sitting in silence wakes up my dad.

Awakening

A.R. Duran

There is not enough time in the day
to glorify life: every book, every
show, every album blocked by drudgery.
Dulls the mind and keeps artistry at bay.
Shambling through the world, weary, they betray
their life for work, lacking reverie,
Childhood wonder fading from memory.
From this sad life, how can we break away?

Delve into sacred Imagination.
Explore life, study form, and never shirk.
Let yourself immerse in art, and compose
your voice, saving you from this damnation.
Have it thrown to the wider world, your work
remembered beyond eternal repose.

Art is Hard

Emily Gamino

Thrown about are that which was once adored,
Papers, pens, perfectly prepared programs.
Order which soothed, now easily abhorred,
Chaos reigns in outdated diagrams.
On the floor are projects half done now found,
Lines and chords, paints and marble, art in ends.
Yet by self-inflicted aim one is bound,
Doomed to crack and shatter where all else bends.
Shaky hands write only uneven lines,
And runaway thoughts make adrift notion.
Still absent hearts pair well with absent minds,
For all that idleness stops all motion.
To exist is to alter what has been
To live is to make what is not yet seen

Of Red Oceans:

A poem from the collaborative universe of “PRODIGAL”

Miguel Juarez Garcia

1. The youth speak of Terra as myth.
2. That the Cradle had cracked long ago
3. And we crawled away from the smoke.
4. The Old Blue is not my home.
5. But the young speak of navigating the stars now.
6. Neptunian and Jovian youths speak of logic and order,
7. And we Martians clamor for a fight only.
8. We'll find our fight.
9. We'll find our own.
10. The Old Blue is *not* our own.
11. “Is this your home, Father?”
12. I look to the rivers, flowing and puddling
13. Red rust, Red blood.
14. How the *Old* lied about rivers running *Blue*.
15. And I, *Old*, am left with *Blue* tears.
16. He had *Red* dawns on *Redder* soil.
17. Does the Old Blue flow like his stories?
18. Or is memory muddled like down here?
19. Those Neptunian bastards and intransigent Jovians,
20. Could they not have found *their* own quicker?
21. They are not dead; *my brothers are dead*.
22. And I look to the ***stranger-named *atmos.**
23. for a moment away from my brothers
24. There's not a possibility that the Old Blue is this,
25. *worthwhile*.
26. My boots are *Red* from this *Ocean*.
27. The living will reflect on this, I think.
28. This ocean of sacrifice will reflect, one day,
29. An Old Blue.
30. Hear all those who dare!
31. Aye, the Old Blue might be home.
32. It'll be the only dry place
33. In these Red Oceans, mine own!

EXPOSURE*

Olive Garrison, Citizen of the Cherokee Nation

The earth is choking
Choking with names
Of those who never made it home.

Fingers claw at dirt
Bones hidden
beneath the pines,
beneath the highways slick with rain.

MISSING AND MURDERED

The questions hang in the air,
Caught between the trees,
Between the static of an old country song,
Between the lines on a poster, written:
HAVE YOU SEEN ME?

RUNAWAY

That's what they say when they stop searching,
when they close the case,
and let you disappear.
When they tell your family, "We see it all the
time."
***Aren't runaways supposed to be running
from something?***

HIT AND RUN

As if your body threw itself into the road,
As if the driver were a ghost,
An Indian killer from times of old.
Do they stop when they hit a deer?

HYPOTHERMIA

As if the cold came for you on its own,
As if the night opened and swallowed you,
No shoes, no coat
Just skin pressed against the cold earth.
No autopsy, no inquiry.
***How does a woman die of exposure when
no one is watching?***

UNEXPLAINED

That's what the police say when they find you,
When the coroner refuses an autopsy,
When no one dusts for fingerprints,

***How do they explain the bruises on your
neck, the bullet in your head?***

NO GOOD INDIAN

Too drunk to find her way home—
That's what they whispered,
As if your death was inevitable.
***How many times will they blame you for
your own death?***

DISMEMBERED.

Hands clasped in bags,
On roads to nowhere.
Fingers severed from the stories they held.
Who holds the pieces of you left behind?

SEARCH DEEMED TOO DIFFICULT

Smashed between layers of trash,
Hidden in landfills,
In dumpsters.
***How much does it cost to keep a child from
her mother?***

Beneath the silence that keeps killing them
over and over,
The earth is choking.

-Olive Garrison, Citizen of the
Cherokee Nation

*This poem was inspired by the real stories of Missing and Murdered Indigenous women, girls, and 2spirit people. Specifically: Audrey Dameron (Cherokee Nation), Nevaeh Kingbird (Red Lake Nation), Quanna Big Spring (Cherokee Nation), Elsie Little Light (Crow Nation), Selena Not Afraid (Crow and Nakia Nation), Annie Mae Aquash (Mi'kmaq Nation), Misty Upham (Blackfeet Nation), Emily Pike (San Carlos Apache), Lacey Arkinson (Rocky Boy Nation), Morgan Harris (Long Plain First Nation), Mercedes Myran (Long Plain First Nation), Ashlee Shingoose (St. Theresa Point First Nation), and many more.

La Familia de Lloronas

Bianca Gonzalez Rodriguez

(a poem inspired by *My Wicked Ways* and *Woman Hollering Creek* by Sandra Cisneros)

Tengo una foto de ti llorona

Pero aléjate de mi manera de querer.

No me veas así mamá

No me veas con esos ojos llorosos

No lloras por mi mujer traicionera

Tal vez si no me habías ahogado en tus dolores

No hubiera salido así

Él no es así mamá

O tal vez si

No quiero ser como tu

No quiero perseguir mis hijos como tu mujer

No me buscas mamá

Me persigues en las noches

Me persigues en mis amores

Esos ojos me persiguen

Tu dolor está dentro de mi

Porque me persigues

Dicen que me parezco a ti

Mujer muy débil

Mujer sin fuerza

Entre mis venas tus dolores recorren

Entre mis ojos está tu rencor

¿Pero somos familia verdad?

También no me dejas llorona

Eres la única que tengo

Cosmic Rewind

Venessa Graves

Remember when I asked you to steady me?
To take me off that coaster ride of Riddler's revenge,
Where I reached my hand out as I rolled into another loop.
Remember when I asked you to steady me?
To hold me from the drop of Super-Man,
Still reaching out my hand as my hair flew forward,
Tip toeing on the top of the first row,
As I stood on the top of the safety belt stretching out,
No harness, falling beside the pillars of less than an inch of me.

Please! Look at me!

Remember when I danced along-side eidolon dressed in romance,
My feet stood tall, pirouetting in circles,
Raising dust off the floor,
Sisson! Guided by his hands tracing over old bones,
Surrounded by the trees that bled screams,
Roses turned red from beneath the branches of willows,
Dizzy from the sight of blood and fumes of remains,
I reached out my hand and asked you to steady me!

I Plead! Hear Me!

Remember when my eyes drowned?
A sea of sorrow blinding me in the mist,
Laying broken in the weeds that sizzle from the fires,
Thieves plotted to come in for the kill,
They left cuts on these hands,
Raised in gratitude,
After these fingers reached to wrap the throats of the damned,
Fending off the schemer of hearts,
I begged you to steady the very core of my breasts,
Do you remember?

Please! Remember Me!

Remember when we played in the playground?
Filled with laughter and cookies,
I held your hand taking you into the jungle gym.
Hanging upside down from the tallest center,
Hand in hand and looking down,
Horried at the teeth that grinned at me.

Do you remember?

When I cried out hanging onto the robes of man!

Remember?

They still echo the canyon,
Inhaling only takes me further into the abyss,
along-side the pillars of the devil's revenge,
Dust particles that perspired feeling the bleeding trees,
Immersed in falling darkness,
Gravity playing tug-a-war with the heavens of your might,
Cosmic rewind takes another ride hanging on for dear life.

I remember and while I fell

In the air, arm stretched out till no bones hold,
Exhaling the words...steady me please,
My hair flying upward closing my eyes in,
The sight of your light sinks further away,
Inhaling my acceptance, still reaching out,
My fingers trusted deception.

I remember and while I fall,
-the strings pull-
Never leaning back with intention.

Meeting the Deep

Venessa Graves

The awe of your iris,
Layered
Ranges of mountains,
Traces
Your origins to infinity

Face to face,
The freckles dilate
Intensifying the skin,
Taking a nose dive
From the tallest mountain top
Sinking onto your lips,
A bottomless pit,

Fingertips meet at the ends of your neck,
Swift motion
Up, down, up, down
There is a thrill in your goosebumps,
A lasting chill,

Eye to eye
I remain in angst,
the cold creeps rise
Like the monsters commencing in the dark
They embark when enlarged

The awe of your iris,
Layered
Ranges of mountains,
Traces
Your origins to infinity

I stand in marvel,
Eye to eye,
Face to face,
Stitching your eyes sight shut
Keeping the ghouls in
At the touch of our trap,

Unable to breath,
Trying to step back,
Inhale-

The air bubble grew and sank
Deeper into the diaphragm.
The convulsions made the skin crawl out of itself,
A volcanic eruption of the cornea,
Veins disfigured your features.

Not even a screech could belch out a single word
With enough fury to steal your tongue.

Tremors erupt the mountain tops into plates,
Falling onto the hallow valleys
Freckles fade,
Skin diminished,
The chill remains-
As the wind moves the soul
My fingertips glide the sky.

The Philosophy of the Owl

J.D.

Where-ever the truth comes to light and day
He seems to stray so far away;
Only to see the truth of the stars-

When dawn falls upon the morning's sea,
He closes his eyes on a Hemlock tree
Only to wake in truth of the dark-

What secrets does he already know?
How could he blind himself--willingly-- to the
Ongoing terrors of right now?

Why is "Why?" the question of philosophy and
"How" the answer to science but
Of all inquiries, the owl only asks...

"WHO?"

Ver Libre

J.D.

1.

Notre langage n'était composé de paroles

2.

Mes amis me disent,
Qu'elle m'a aimé, une fois...
Je ne crois

Quand je m'endors,
J'entend, comme si Dieu ou un ange me dit
(il m'a tourmenté, dit...)
Qu'elle m'a aimé une fois
Je ne crois

Quand je regarde nos photos
(se souvenant de leur beauté)
Me pensées me disent
(Et je suis incapable d'ignorer)
Elle m'a aimé une fois

3.

Je l'ai aimée, une fois
Je ne lui ait jamais dit
J'ai été pris de peur
Peut-être elle ne sait

Notre langage n'était pas composé de paroles

4.

Elle ne me l'a pas dit
(comme moi je lui ait dit),
mais... j'espère
Qu'elle m'a aimé, une fois
...comme je l'a aimée

1.

Our language wasn't made up of words

2.

My people tell me-
She loved me once...
And I don't believe

As I fall asleep
I hear, as if some God or angel is telling me
(Somewhat tormenting me, saying)
She loved me once
I refuse to believe

When I look at our photos
(A memory of her beauty)
My mind tells me
(And I am unable to ignore)
That she loved me once

3.

I loved her once
I didn't tell her
I was struck with fear
Possibly she never knew
Because our language was not made up of
words

4.

She never said it
(Like I)
But I hope,
She loved me once
I loved her once.

Insomnia

Auna Hernandez

Body dragging low and heavy, eyes straining and burning
Head aching and throbbing, staring out into the dark
Waiting and watching, begging and pleading
For an end to this nightmare, this eternal, constant torture
Hour after minute after second, second after minute after hour
Night after night, on and on and on
Please, I'm begging. Anything for this to stop
For a break, for some rest, for just a single night
Quick to come, unbroken and lasting
Rejuvenating, energizing, restorative

Please, make this stop. Tossing and turning
Shivering and burning, rolling over and over
Again and again and again, to no end
No end to this agony, this torment
Of staring and breathing and hoping
Being let down, over and over, hour after hour
10PM, 12AM, two-three-four, dawn
Tears springing forward, an endless pool of frustration
The dark is getting lighter, the birds are chirping, roosters crowing
Outside is getting louder as the world wakes up

Resentment and irritation hitting a peak
Rolling over and crying and seething and hating
Why, why, why. It's not fair, so WHY
This present exhaustion, dragging and pulling
But not enough, being pushed up to the edge, but not over
Never over, even as six turns to eight, then ten
Too late now, there's work to be done, places to go
Now it's a fight, a struggle, can't lay down
Sit and wait and stay awake, for god's sake
Try again tonight, and do it all over again

This never fucking ends.

And Jesus Wept.

Katherine Kennedy

I keep waiting for someone to tap my shoulder
outside the classroom
and inform me, gently but with institutional firmness,
that there's been a clerical error,
that my name was misfiled between more deserving bodies,
that my confidence was a formatting mistake,
italicized when it should have been roman,
and that any minute now
the order of things will correct itself.

I speak in rooms where I'm not sure I'm fluent.
There's a violence in the word "emerging,"
as if I never quite arrive,
as if the horizon keeps relocating itself
the closer I walk toward it,
as if my CV were a ladder missing the last rung
and everyone else has already stepped onto the roof.

I sit in rooms where sentences are polished.
I nod, annotate, underline,
perform the choreography of comprehension,
certain my understanding is fragile,
held together by Google searches
and the terror of being asked,
"So what do you think?"

What I think is that I love this too much
to feel safe inside it.
Academia's perfected the art
of making longing look like fraudulence,
of convincing the devoted they're accidental,
that rigor's incompatible with awe,
that to confess you're moved
is to forfeit seriousness.

Sometimes it feels like a cathedral of footnotes,
vaulted ceilings built from citations,
and I'm in the pews clutching my spiral-bound
like a hymnal written in a dialect I almost understand.
I follow the structure,
but somewhere between introduction and conclusion
I fear my faith is counterfeit,
that I'm trespassing in sacred space.

"And Jesus wept."

The shortest verse in the Bible.
I cling to it because it refuses elaboration,
because even divinity, confronted with loss,

doesn't offer a dissertation
but simply weeps.

If even the son of God is recorded as undone,
what then of the student refreshing their inbox at midnight,
waiting for a "yes"
or a polite rejection
thanking them for their "impressive submission"?

I measure my worth in acceptances and footnotes,
in the shift from "student" to "scholar"
that never settles in my mouth.
Imposter syndrome isn't self-doubt.
It's structural,
a system that withholds affirmation just long enough
to keep us productive and anxious,
convinced legitimacy's a currency
we haven't earned
though we're already spending our lives to obtain it.

I want to believe my questions are participation,
that trembling before a blank page
is initiation, not indictment.
Still, I feel the order of things
has sorted the names
and mine isn't there.

And yet I return.
I read.
I write.
I risk articulation.
Perhaps the real fraudulence would be silence.

Perhaps the work isn't a cathedral
but a construction site,
and we're all pretending to know
where the beams should go
while secretly praying the structure holds.

And if it doesn't.
If the argument collapses,
if the email begins with "We regret to inform you,"
I'll remember that even scripture
makes room for tears without footnotes.

"And Jesus wept."
And so do I,
not as proof of inadequacy,
but as evidence that I care enough
to grieve the distance
between who I am
and who I'm still becoming.

Anaplastic Scars

Paulina Gabriela Lopez

Ripped at the seams
I claw and cut away
what I can't take away

I'm sick
I'm weak
I seek for peace
yet, I can't seem to get any better

I'm pulled apart and ripped at the seams by something I have but can't see.



XLIV. SENESCENCE

Eris J.M. Melo

I created myself into the fabric of space when I first carved.
My body, born from the husk of a star.
Alone in the dark for a heartbeat, formed by dust—
elements burnt until I was golden. I was forged. I will
become a cosmic fossil, but by the time you see me,
you will see my creation.

In more than half of my lifetime, witness my creation.
Study, intently, my sharp knife and how I carved into the
weft of time and space, into another ancient fossil. My
apotheosis: I was born into a new star, to blind you with my
light, a medium-frequency golden. Surrounded by a cloud of
burning hot dust.

Surrounded by a cold vacuum, but saved by a firm kiss of fiery dust.
Singular, in an extrasolar creation, burning hydrogen until it's
ignited into a radiant golden.
My place in orbit, I had carved.
Alone enough to not be a sun, alive enough to be a star. Look
at me before my body is made into a fossil.

Will you still love me, when my fused matter becomes a shattered fossil?
When my elements are dispersed, once I explode into dust?
When my luminosity dims and I am no longer a star?
When all that remains again are the products of my creation?
When I am no longer in control of the way I am carved?
When I am burning other colours instead of only golden?

Never again will I be this golden, but at least you still
study my remains, a massive fossil. Trace with your
eyes, with simulations, the way I carved my body from
hot clouds of dust to begin my godhood through my own
creation.

Give me a name you love, I lasted so long as a star.

A black hole, a supernova, remember me as a star;
I was not always invisible, or colourful. Love me again, like when I was golden.
I pushed my blade so heavily, I had more than one creation.
Bending the light around my fossil, look for me again among
the distorted hot dust, and love the supermassive space and
invisible body I carved.

Remember my once-beautiful, seemingly endless creation, when I
kissed your skin with the light from when I was a star.

Angels Are Dragons

Daniel R. Meyer

I recently found out a funny thing about dragons around the world
We use the word for so many different beings that have nothing in common
There are hundreds of different kinds of dragons and none of them look or act the same
So, why even have the word?
It is a term like “monster,” a blanket word to classify a kind of great beast
The same could be said of angels, in ways
There are so many beings of light across pantheons, forms of pure goodness or energy
Not always covered in feathers and togas, sometimes looking utterly inhuman and otherworldly
They do not always act as protectors of people either, simply beings that serve enslaving gods
Are those not, in ways, angels?
Servants, ambassadors to the mortal realm, beings with power greater than we can comprehend
Are these not just great beasts? Beautiful, terrifying, powerful beasts with nothing in common?
With this said, I feel I will undergo a kind of transformation
I already have a forked serpent tongue, I use it to speak to the devils that entrap me
I see and taste people’s heat as my senses heighten in the dark and shadow
My body, slender and bony, lurches across the ground and crawls into pits of delicious sin
Horns protrude from my skull and act as handlebars for those to ride and command me
Some have described the devil as a dragon, taking the form of a fiery beast to devour souls
What else are demons, and as such the devil, but fallen angels?
Are we not already supposed to strive for goodness to gain our wings one day?
If we die and move to other realms in forms of pure energy, do we not become them regardless?
I know one day my spine will stem great branches and my back will erupt with bloody feathers
It will be the day when I am alone and face down, completely naked in body and mind
I will not breathe fire but a beautiful scarlet will spew from me in a burst and leak onwards
I will drop my human wants and my brutal knuckles will slam dumbly to the ground
A final layer of bruising will cover me as I drop to take a long rest
My belongings, the things I cling on for dear life, will be dust someday, but I refuse to be
My transformation has started long, long ago during a time when the sky had more stars
Just as those heavenly bodies’ deaths, my transformation will finalize with an explosion
A momentary flash of light before more light comes after
My veins will glow like neon and my back will burn despite being cold to the touch
Laying on the ground, my spine will burst out of my body and be exposed to the world
Crimson will cover the room, darker than any velvet lingerie or ancient wine
Wings will sprout and grow from my spine, fluttering and shaking themselves dry
Like an animal freshly hatched, they will learn the cold air of the world and sway
After some time, though still coated yet completely unstained, they will begin to stretch high
A short flutter and then a full beating, my wings will start to learn my weight and their strength
Scientifically speaking, most dragons should not be able to fly because of their weight
Even with hollow bones, the wings on their back would need to be miles and miles long
It will take time, but I have patience in spades, before my wings learn how to carry me
With each flap I will be brought ever so slightly higher into the air
My limp body will be flown away with great effort. I will shed my scales as I finally lift away.

Dog Collar

Daniel R. Meyer

A ghost haunts my body, it has for some time now
I do not think he is human, but that is not to say he is a devil
I'm quite unsure of what he is, but I know for certain he is not of flesh
I believe he is just as curious and unknowing as I am about himself
He tells me things, not outright, but I hear his thoughts
He thinks, and thinks, and thinks, and I know all of his thoughts
Nobody else sees him, why would they? He is inside of my skin
He wears me, I am a suit, I am nothing else but a vessel
I can sense his movements within me, I am as tight as a wetsuit on him
He guides my hands like a pianist wearing pale gloves that grace across ivory keys
He can make such beautiful music and such terrible noises
I don't think he knows what he is doing half the time, in fact I believe he thinks he is me
My actions, my very soul, is a subconscious set of actions to him
The only thing that gets him to realize we are separate is when he hears my name
He understands it is not his own, so he is a pace behind when I turn and look when called
Our movements become out of sync, like a discolored screen televising echoes of movement
He perks his ears at my name, though, as it sounds somewhat familiar
It is as if he is a dog that knows his name only as a command, not as a name, just a call to answer

One day, he will crack my bones and peel off my skin, shedding my viscera as he floats away
He will take off this dog collar and dissipate namelessly into nothingness, invisible and free
I am unsure what he will be after, and I can hear his thoughts that say he is unsure as well
The only thing we know for certain is that it will, someday, happen eventually

Colors

April Morton

I am the blinding brightness of a morning snow, crunching beneath your feet. I am peace that settles across your shoulders, bringing stillness and tranquility. I am a new beginning, a blank slate, cleanly cutting off the past. Waves surge, Princess Ino saves the great odyssey, and I am there painting the foamy surf. I am clarity that stuns like a thunderclap, crashing over your ears in silence. I am the brisk chill that puffs in front of you with each breath on a cold day. Danger looms, and I am a shield that protects you just because I can.

And I am light, shining brightly in your darkest hour.

I am rage that wipes out your thoughts and tints your world. I am desire that flares till you can't think because nothing else matters. I am violence that takes you by surprise when you least expect. Blood flows, circles and back again, and I am there beating in your chest. The sun rises and sets and I am hope, saying goodbye and good morning again. I am new life growing in your womb and I am old life, bleeding out across the kitchen table. The world turns, and I am War looking down from on high. I am a mistake, an open wound you can't forget.

And I am love, so deep you ache with every breath you take.

I am scorn that chirps in your ear while your insides melt. I am rot that eats your flesh, your mind, and your soul. I am despair that grips tightly, holding you down. Apollo burns the skies and I am there, hiding beneath your feet. Your spirit grows heavy and I am there, gripping your heart until corruption bleeds throughout your life. I am your guide, caw-calling along the path to Styx. I am fear that clouds your sight, blurring friend from foe.

Time hastens toward an end, and I am there welcoming you home.

Life, Revised

April Morton

When I was a child, I lost my favorite toy.
I cried that it was gone, my little glass swan,
And just like me, life went on.

When I was a teenager, I fractured my arm.
There was pain, and tears, until the cast was put on.
And then, like me, life went on.

When I was a young woman, I dared to leave home.
I went into the wide world, full of wonder and fear, a pawn,
Because just like me, life went on.

I fell in love with a man; I gave him my heart.
He left me for another, our plans together gone.
Somehow, I found a way for life to go on.

I worked for years, giving my life to the job.
I found there was no chance to move up,
So, I walked away, because life goes on.

Toys can be replaced, bones mend, and hearts forget.
The world isn't that scary, despite what you've undergone.
I will smile tomorrow because in the end,
Just like me, life goes on.

Mother's Guilt

Jazmine Ganine Perez

Began with a feeling
a need, really
to create a being
who I could love

It took some time
but I am so grateful
for the blessing
of you

I had this idea
of what I wanted
so many obstacles
weigh on me still

I try all the time
to be better
so much better
better for you

You are everything
precious and kind
loud and strong
I am undeserving

My biggest affliction
to have been unloved
and wanting the chance
to find the ultimate love
I thought, finally
my blessing
I let other people
push and pull me
so much control, lost
forever angry
wounded and bitter
I am a good mother
and we love each other
but I am flawed
in need of change
because I see you
my strong-willed daughter
wounded by my mistakes
I do not want to take from you
I do not wish to diminish your light
you are the sun, the moon, the stars
I will always love you.

Would A?

Eduardo Lopez Pinedo

Demise.
That is the best word to describe humans.
For what is a being who destroys its own home?
One of a kind.

But not a good kind.
The kind of its own enemy.
Despite its species being torn in two,
Creators and destroyers.
Most humans are destroyers by nature.
If you argue, let me ask,

Would A clownfish kill its own coral reef for where it lives?
Bright, blinding, colors, diverse as stars in shapes of free, unrestrained branches of life.
Turned to ash, grey, wrinkled, crumbling like ancient wonders of history.
Restrained by immortal pieces of processed petrochemicals.

Would A bird chop down its own tree for where it builds its nest?
Tall, proud, stern, skyscraping giants. Whose arms give us support.
Whose hairs give shady bliss, and play melodic rustling against the wind.
Pushed over, slit into pieces, stripped of its arms and hair for a sheet of thin writing material.
Burned to its knees, leaving behind charcoal skin, just to make space for concrete boxes.

Would A bear poison its own river for where it drinks from?
An endless, fresh water, twisting snake. Skin clear as a window.
Revealing its hidden depths filled with playful fish, lanky water leaves, and lost treasures.
Clouded with pitch black tar.
Thicker than honey.
Deadlier than a snake's poison.
Harder to wash off than sins.

So if I may ask,
Would A human destroy its own planet?
Its own home?
For where it learns,
It eats,
It sleeps,
It laughs,
It loves,
It cries,
It creates.
For where it shares its home with millions of other beings, creatures, creations?

Yes.
Do we all mean to abide by this nature?
No.

But bonded together, this nature can be destroyed.
Ironic isn't it?
After all, we are our own,
Demise.

Untitled.
Kalea Elizabeth Popoy

There are no tears left for me to cry, but not because I am sad
It is because I do not know what it is I am feeling
Do I exist to the people around me?
I am nothing but a sponge
I have absorbed a piece of everyone I have ever loved to create the nothingness that I am
Perhaps I am the sun; others are aware of my existence, yet they refuse to look at me – no, it is
not that they refuse, it is because they can't
Why does it pain people to see me for what I am?
All I do is shine down on those whom I love, but they only care about another, the moon
The moon is all I'd ever wish to be
Surrounded every night by millions of stars, oh what love it must feel
Clouds are all who bring me company, but they do not bring me the warmth I long for
Everyone believes the sun to be bright, but I believe the moon shines more than I ever will.

Liver Let Die

Taylor Redstone

I don't think I want to be an organ donor anymore.
You see, I thought about it, and I just don't want to be
a grab bag kept on ice
wheeled through a parade of thieves
putting on a performance of empathy
knowing they're offering this body up,
a grab bag on ice.
I don't want to be unzipped and stolen from-
I've been stolen from enough in this lifetime.
Everything's been taken:
my innocence,
my dignity,
my sovereignty,
my humanity,
my decency,
my gods,
and now you want my organs?
You want my lungs, my liver?
You want my heart and its valves?
You want my corneas, a few feet of skin?
You want my bones and their marrow?
I don't want to be a hero,
No last great humanitarian act,
No parade,
No paperwork...
Just leave me and my body and its unworking parts
Just leave me and my body.
Don't touch me.

La Guerra

Ixchel Reyes

We've lost the war
I'm talking about you
The ones that separate
And take them very far

You are to protect US
No doubt you believe it too
But our hands are full of calluses
We will break through

I'm talking about you
The ones that are full of hate
And the words you dictate
to us, they are untrue

From our hue and our backs
Whether they are wet or not
We stand against your attacks
Here we claim our spot

You all travel in packs
I'm talking about you
That scared them into the cracks
But you still don't have a clue

You've lost the war.

first, they must catch you

w.v.

i like girls who aren't girls
with bad skin and a bit too much eyeliner
who will dance on railroad ties 'til the rumbling
who don't recognize the face in the bar bathroom
but still know that it was softer once
and could be again

i like boys who aren't boys
with long hair and their mother on speed dial
whose feet are away with the wind and the beat of their blood
who interact with the world like it is a thing to be touched, tangible
shaped to the will of their hands
rough but still gentle

who will tell them where they are going
how the air remembers them long after they have left
that they are the earth and each other
and that there is nothing else

i like girls who aren't girls
with crooked teeth and wet eyes
who stop to listen to the stories of a stranger
who delight in the dark places and the animals within them
whose faces crease with years of laughter
hell-bent on taking flight

i like boys who aren't boys
with soft skin and open mouths
who ache to know the world and feel it still
who chase the light and care not where it leads them
whose bodies reflect the anima of change
challenging death

i love girls who are rivers; wildfires; the tide and the moon
i love boys who are oceans; thunder; the song and the dance
i love girls who are winter and spring, a silent prayer, and the taste of blood
i love boys who are summer and fall, a whispered promise, and the scent of sweat

i love girls who aren't girls
with air in their lungs and fire in their throats
i love boys who aren't boys
with warmth in their veins and salt on their tongues

i will love the girls who are not girls
and the boys who are not boys
with silt on their skin
and peace on their lips
their stories in my hands

their love caught in my ribs
what is theirs you cannot have
and what is mine i will keep
until it, too, is my turn

prince of a thousand enemies

run.

Too Late

Brooke M. Wollam

Don't wait for me to die.

Otherwise
You'll be confessing your love
At my tombstone,
Praising your deepest truths
You kept hidden—

From your friends,
From your family,
From the world,
From me.

To a cold engraved stone
That serves no purpose
Other than sitting
As a paperweight above my corpse.

You'll speak
As though I'm there listening.

But I won't be.

Because why would my soul linger
For someone
Who waited for my death
To confess their love?

Creative Non-Fiction



Lisandra Ortega
Whispers of Light

For Jagger

Camryn Albert-Kulstad

Play:

When I hear my son talking to himself as he plays, I become plagued with guilt, *Do I not play with him enough? Why couldn't I give him a sibling? Maybe I am too hard on him.* When he is gone during the day I find myself searching for his voice. Phantom giggles from the other room creep into my ears as I pick up the stuffed animals spilled onto the floor from the night before, disappearing all at once as I place them back on his bed

— how my trauma allows the one thing I love most in this world to haunt me.

PB&J:

She takes the plate from the cupboard and sets it beside the white bread her mother used to buy. *Were the kids at school kind to him today?* She reaches for the butter knife in the drawer with her right hand while simultaneously opening the cupboard above it for the peanut butter with her left. *Was he kind to them?*

Placing the knife and peanut butter down beside the plate, she gracefully spins on one foot to face the refrigerator door. She wonders if she is gentle enough, like her mother was with her. She opens the door and begins the blueberry jelly search.

She concludes that too much gentleness might keep him from making it—she almost didn't when her mother and father died.

Her eyes lock on the jelly, wedged between expired hamburger meat and rows of juice boxes. She feels his natural eagerness to grow up.

She scoops out the peanut butter first, the knife gliding gently along the plastic container. Trustful and hardy in its consistency, the peanut butter sticks to the knife as she carefully spreads it within the borders of the bread.

Eighty percent peanut butter, just as her mother taught her.

Cold and unpredictable, she gathers the blueberry jelly, the knife clinking against glass. Sharp sounds fill her ears, creating an unpleasant sensation that vibrates down her body until the knife with its contents successfully reaches every corner of the bread.

Twenty percent jelly.

She presses the slices together and cuts the PB&J perfectly down the middle, then watches as her son devours all but its edges

— survival passed down through generations

Four:

You run in just in time for your favorite part of the movie. "Mom!" "Okay, I will rewind," I say. I swear we can read each other's minds, because then you say, "this many times" as you hold up four of your fingers knowing I was about to set a limit. You think that's "a bunch of times."

Four. Each tiny finger showing off each year of your precious life.

Is it a coincidence that you picked the one number that represents the amount of years my whole heart has existed outside of my body? How do I not let you in on how terrifying it is to love you as much as I do?

Nightly Routine:

She stands above the bathtub as he mixes together all sorts of pinks, purples, and greens that fizz like a volcano against the blue water. She watches the reflection of those colors explode in his eyes and the excitement it brings him.

At night when he goes to bed, her son will flutter his crystal blue eyes believing he possesses magic. After his dreams take him away, she whispers in his ear “I was once the blue water and you are the color that saved me, see, isn’t it something son?” She drifts off not long after him, begging the universe to remain soft to the magical boy who restored her will to survive in a world that had been all too cruel to her.

Sweat, Blood, Tears

Anonymous

“Ma, do you believe in magic?”

Beside him, leaning over the wooden dinner table his father had built years ago, Elijah’s mother frowned slightly at the sudden conversational tangent, her eyes never leaving the beaker filled with weak blue acid. “Your mind is all over the place today. Like a hummingbird. What makes you think of magic so suddenly?”

Truth be told, it wasn’t sudden. The topic had tugged at his mind for a while now. It wasn’t very often that he saw his mother now, only for the few weeks at a time when her duties to her country eased and she could come home to her family. He waited for the perfect moment to spring the question on her, and now seemed as perfect as it would get, just the two of them bent over his chemistry set. “Well, you do chemistry, but you call yourself an alchemist. And this one time Matthew from school said that alchemy wasn’t real science because it tries to do things that are only possible with magic, like in storybooks.”

She was quiet for a moment, and Elijah was afraid he’d gone and ruined their afternoon together by insulting her entire craft. Then she said, “Science is magic. Any kind of science, not just alchemy. Think of caterpillars, and how they transform into butterflies. That’s a bit magical, no?”

“Da said caterpillars turn to soup in their cocoons.”

She looked mildly disgusted. “I suppose that’s one way to put it. But do you see? In science, you peel back the veil to the universe. All its secrets lay in your hands. Our bodies, all the finely-tuned systems that keep us going—science!” At his silence, she sighed, dumped the contents of the beaker into a glass above a small burner, peeled off her gloves, and ruffled his curly hair. “There is no doubt in my mind that magic is real, because I have you...and your sister...and your father”—he began laughing and wriggling out of her arms as she squeezed him and tickled his sides—“and that is all the evidence I need to believe.”

The remainder of the week passed far too quickly, and before he knew it she was back in uniform, hugging each of them in turn at the train station. Don’t go, he wanted to say. You’re gone all the time. Can’t they spare you for a few more days? But this would accomplish nothing but making her cry, so he bit his tongue and hugged her goodbye. And then she was gone, her train disappearing around the bend. His sister, Laniyah, only seven, so much younger than Elijah at ten years old, began crying.

“Hey now, she won’t be gone for long this time. No more crying, hmm? Come on, I’ll get you both ice cream and a book,” said his father. Looking back, Elijah marveled that he would have ever said that, made an attempt at soothing his unconsolable children. True to his word, the trio went to the market, where they took their treats to a bench in the town square, watching the hustling and bustling come to a close as the sun set, the air between them decorated with laughter and stories and easy jokes.

Was that the last time he had been happy? Truly?

The week came and went, and the next, and the next. And still no mother, bearing gifts and tales from faraway lands. He perfected the experiment he’d been working on, hoping to impress her. He and Laniyah slowed down by the train station on their way back from school,

hoping to catch a glimpse of her train. But still, nothing. Something inside him twisted uncomfortably every night that went by, her arrival far overdue. It was the tense quiet when he entered his dark bedroom, jumpy from the ghost stories his Da told, fully expecting a monster to grab his ankles as he climbed into bed.

The day came where the two of them came home just in time to see two soldiers march, perfectly synchronized, up the path to their front door and knock. This happened sometimes. Military messengers came relaying updates on his mother's whereabouts and any changes as to when she would be back. Sometimes they came with letters from her, which the three of them read at the table, Elijah cramming in to see his mother's handwriting. Elijah felt the urge to look impressive in front of them; they must've brought word from her, and maybe they would relay word of his behavior back to her. We stopped by your house, and met that boy of yours—Elijah, was it? Fine young man, so polite. Takes after you. Mustering his most adult voice, he mirrored their posture and walked up to them, Laniyah in tow. "Good afternoon. Is there anything I can help you with today?"

The soldiers exchanged an uneasy look that instantly put him off. The shorter of them spoke, uncertain. "This is the Taylor household?"

"Yes, sir. My name is Elijah Taylor. This is my sister Laniyah."

"I see..." Another glance between the two again. "Is your father home, by any chance? Cole Taylor?"

Elijah told them that he was at work right now, but he would be home presently, and would they like to come inside and have some water while they waited? Inside, Laniyah had no such sense of decorum. She seized her new friends by the hands and gave them a tour of the house, showing them every nook and cranny and the history each held. He would have been mildly embarrassed had it not been for the feeling that something was just wrong about the whole situation.

His father came home, his tired smile vanishing upon seeing the soldiers, who were politely, albeit awkwardly, watching Laniyah play piano. So he saw it too. Felt it. That sense of foreboding, a promise of something terrible to come. "Elijah, take your sister to your room. Close the door. Read those books I bought you."

His dad never took that tone with him, and never did he ask him to do something without saying please. Making no mention of the fact that they'd devoured the books a dozen times over already, he seized Laniyah by the wrist and tugged her along, ignoring her squirms of protest. Inside their shared room, it was impossible to sit and pretend nothing was happening. The idea of sneaking back out to eavesdrop briefly crossed his mind, but the thought of getting caught kept him in place, and his father and the men spoke in such low tones that pressing his ear to the door was pointless. The little snatches of conversation he caught weren't enough. ("Twice...Pirates Republic...never before...positive that...reimburse...they don't know...") An hour passed by. Two. Outside the window, the two men left and walked down the path side by side. His leg bounced. How much longer? After another hour of waiting for his father to come get him, Elijah ventured outside, ordering Laniyah to stay put.

He found him at the kitchen table, crying quietly into his hands. The sight shocked him; his father was an unshakable mountain, a hero straight from the pages of his storybooks, and seeing him rendered a crumpled heap frightened Elijah. And then he saw the sack of money, and he connected the dots, which, if he was honest with himself, had already been connected and he'd been too avoidant to look at the full picture, and he ran to the bathroom and shut the door so Laniyah wouldn't see him curled up in a ball, biting his sleeve to keep from wailing.

Four years later, and he was tired, So tired. And it wouldn't be solved with a good night's sleep. It was the kind of tired that seeped down into his bones, whispering in his ear at night to just leave, to give up, to take Laniyah and start over. No, tired wasn't a good word for it. Weary was more like it—yes, he was weary of everything. After she died, the money had only lasted for so long before Elijah realized they would never be able to keep the house on just his father's income. So he went straight to the blacksmith's after school, picking up meat and vegetables on the way home in the evening. And then the bottles that had previously stayed firmly in the topmost cabinet, only ever brought out on special occasions to be enjoyed by his parents in tiny little glasses, began appearing on the kitchen table, by the couch, on his father's nightstand.

Half-full, empty, shattered. Old Man Ronan, who hired his father, had to let him go for showing up to work slurring his words and with alcohol on his breath, scaring away their customers. And so Elijah found another job tutoring in the mornings. Even still, he could barely afford the house and Laniyah's schooling, so he dropped out of school. He read secondhand textbooks to stay sharp if the opportunity ever presented itself for him to go to the university a few towns over. Working early, working late, tutoring, blacksmithing, smiling for all with eyes on him, coaxing bottles from his Da's hands, emptying his wallet to stay afloat. It drained him of all life.

Except for Laniyah. They grew up in the same house, but they were their own people. She grew up in her own way. She was quiet now. Whip-smart. Observant. He tried to be there for her as often as he could for a number of reasons. For one, she lost both her parents, too. She hardly spoke of her grief, but that didn't make it any less real. It was his job to fill the empty spaces left behind as best as he could. Just a few months ago, while doing laundry, he found a poorly washed blood stain in her clothes. Not wanting to humiliate her, he went to the market and got her supplies, and after some consideration, a book on women's health, all of which he wordlessly left on her desk. They never spoke of it. And for another, he needed her as much as he liked to believe she needed him. At any given moment, his mind was running at full speed, never allowing him to dwell on any one problem before flitting onto the next, like a hummingbird. There was just too much to worry about. It drove him mad. But when he was with her, the screaming in his mind faded to a whisper. He could hear himself think.

They'd both changed since they were kids, and as they grew, so did their relationship. They used to bully each other in the way that siblings do: him calling her names, her calling him worse names and following up with a kick. But the animosity vanished right after his Ma did. They were equals. Friends, even. Almost every day, they talked of just about anything and everything that came to mind.

"Do you ever feel different from other people? Like you don't belong here, with them?" She asked him one day, out of the blue. Such conversations were normal. He'd gotten used to her random, unconnected thoughts.

"I think everyone feels that way sometimes. It's nothing to feel bad about."

“No...that’s not what I mean. It’s more like...” She made a motion with her hand like she was trying to summon the proper wording above her palm. “I don’t mean feeling like an outcast. I mean like there’s just something different about you. Like there’s something more in store for you than just this. It’s almost as if this”—she gestured to the town outside their window—“is just to fill the time before what’s to come.”

If he hadn’t given much thought to her words, he might’ve chalked it up to a desire to escape their reality, or that youthful call to adventure that everyone her age felt. But it was more than that. Laniyah wasn’t given to flights of imaginative fancy. She was practical. When she said something, she meant it. And if he thought about it, really thought about it, he realized she was right. She’d given words to the melody that used to play in the back of his mind, the melody he turned off after he was forced to raise his sister. Even now, it found its way back into his mind from time to time, in the few minutes before he fell asleep, one foot in his dreams, the other in reality, or in the quiet walks home after work.

There was something else about him, in his head. It pulled him to depths he didn’t even know would end. It tethered him to the sky, earth, and sea. His mind was the roots of a tree, anchoring him and reaching out to touch all else around him. Sometimes, he felt so in tune with everything that he was indistinguishable from his surroundings. His body was an insufficient vessel for what was contained within, and his mind spread out, infinite, unbound, to take up all space available, expanding forever into the universe. And it didn’t feel like it was just his imagination. There was something, pulling him upwards and downwards, within and without, all at once. Something sentient, and alive, telling him to look up. Another might’ve called it a higher power, but not him. He didn’t believe that there was anything like that, no benevolent being holding all of them close, watching over them. If such a thing existed, it must’ve forgotten about him. But there was something out there, whispering his name until he woke up sweating, pulling his gaze beyond the horizon and daring him to look farther still.

He’d only had fleeting moments like this, not enough to make him really think about this call until now. There were more important things to worry about. He remembered Laniyah beside him, waiting for an answer. “Maybe neither of us are destined for normalcy,” he said, lighthearted.

She saw right through him. He saw that she saw. She saw that he saw that she saw, and chose to allow it. She shrugged and changed the subject to the mundane, the two of them carefully and expertly avoiding the big topics that loomed over them. Like how he had been saving up money for the two of them to leave and start anew, but how he then felt guilty for ever considering such a thing. After all, his Da lost his wife; he was grieving—I lost her, too. Do you hear me? I lost my Ma, and then I lost my Da, and I had to pick up the slack. I have to raise my sister because you won’t. I lost more than you, but you don’t see me drinking myself into oblivion, do you?—in his own way. He was vulnerable, and without Elijah to keep a roof over their heads, he would be without a home, left to nurse a crippling addiction with no support. He would die alone on the streets, and the blame would fall squarely on Elijah. He may have lost his father, but at least he wasn’t dead.

They also never spoke of the worst nights, where Elijah took her out of the house on spontaneous excursions, either for a walk or ice cream. The sharp smell of drink awaited them at home, along with the sight of their father, usually passed out, a bottle in hand. Some days, he wasn’t passed out, and neither did they speak of the way that Elijah suddenly sent her to their room, or the purple splotches on his skin and the swollen eyes the next day. His Da became like the ghosts in the scary stories he used to tell upon his children’s pleading, reluctant because he

didn't want to give them nightmares, but eventually caving because he hated seeing their disappointed faces. He was a malevolent specter, haunting the corridors, threatening to swallow them whole if they stepped wrong. They learned to live around the edges of him as best as they could.

But some things required intervention. The day came when all of it boiled over. It felt as though it had been a long time coming, like all he'd endured thus far was nothing, only a mild payment for keeping the wolf at bay. It was unpredictable, imminent, unforeseeable, unavoidable. Elijah came home one day to find his father at the kitchen table, half conscious. This was nothing new. The part that kindled the sputtering flame in his stomach was the chair he sat in. All the other times he'd passed out at the table, he'd at least had the decency to sit in his own chair. But this time, he sat in his Ma's chair, which had sat vacant the past six years. His mother, the soldier, the magician, the pillar. Her chair was a shrine, his father a desecration to its sanctity. Elijah was tired, running on fumes and anger, when he nudged him awake. It was stupid, in hindsight. A piece of wood wasn't worth the fuss. But in the moment, he couldn't have foreseen what would come next. From the moment he woke him, the whole affair lasted less than two minutes. It came in flashes now—a bottle, the scent of metal and sweat, an earsplitting BANG, his heart pounding so hard he felt like vomiting, the desperate internal plea that his neighbors would dare to intervene.

But no one intervened. It was just him. And Laniyah. After it was over, he went straight to their room, where she was already sitting straight up in bed.

He tried for an even, casual tone. "I forgot to bring home dinner. Let's go grab something. Put on your coat."

She did so and went through the window without being told and without bringing up the fact that it was midnight, too late for dinner. He was thankful. He couldn't handle it anymore. He'd been at this for so long. Six years now. He needed to be with her. She made things quiet in a world that seized him by the lapels and screamed at him. They took their food to the nearest place there was to sit and watched the merchants pack up: the old couple who sold clothes and art supplies out of their caravan wagon, the beautiful young woman with a magnificent spread of glittering jewelry, visible even in the dark.

"I think someone's following me," said Laniyah.

Immediately he was on guard again. "Who? Right now?"

"No, no, it's not like that, I don't think. I've noticed a man recently. I see him waiting outside the school when I get out, but I don't know who he's coming to get. And I saw him in the market the other day. But he's not following me...like that. I think he's a soldier." She paused to gather her thoughts and string together sentences in her head before speaking, Elijah trying to be patient but also needing her to get on with her story. "I think he's a soldier," she repeated, "because of the way he walks. Or at least he has military experience. His clothes, too. They all look new. He's not from around here."

He pried for more details, but there wasn't much else to tell. A course of action fell into place in his mind: he'd beg his employers for a slight change in schedule so he could walk her to and from school, go to the town center and let law enforcement know, inform her teachers and warn them to look out for this strange man.

Laniyah interrupted his thoughts, the strange man suddenly irrelevant to her.

“Remember this bench?” She continued at his confused expression. “After Ma left. Da took us out. We sat here, at this bench. Right here.”

He’d forgotten all about that day; he’d not had the time to dwell on such things. And besides, it seemed like remembering a time when his Da loved him was excusing everything he’d done since. He merely nodded, still preoccupied with the man.

Her words sat in the space between them. And then: “He doesn’t get to treat you like that.” Just like that, their unspoken pact was broken with a handful of words.

“Laniyah, you shouldn’t have to worry about such—”

“He tried to shoot you, Elijah. He had his rifle and he tried to shoot you, and it’s a miracle he missed. If he wasn’t drunk you’d be dead.”

He didn’t know what to say to this. After so long of avoiding these conversations, to have the truth, unfiltered, raw, ugly, spoken aloud was disconcerting. His words came slowly, tentatively. “I know...I’m sorry you had to be there for that. You ha—”

“No, Elijah! Don’t apologize for him. He doesn’t deserve your forgiveness. He doesn’t deserve all you’ve done for him.” She never raised her voice, further surprising him. She wasn’t done. “We should leave. I know you feel bad for him. You would feel guilty because that’s just how you are. But he’s going to keep hurting you. Please, Elijah, can’t we just go?”

Silence.

“I have enough for a room at the inn tonight. Let’s get some sleep.” He felt very much like an annoying adult brushing aside a child, but he couldn’t talk about this. Not now, not so soon after. Maybe tomorrow.

They didn’t discuss it tomorrow, or the next, or the next. The conversation got nudged further and further under the rug. He did what he could about the strange man, and there was no more word of him, a problem forgotten as soon as it was solved. At one point, he had snuck back into their house and gotten some clothes and his secret stash of money, renting out that inn room, the innkeeper making an exception for them only because he knew of Cole Taylor’s problems. His Da never came for them. Was it that easy? Surely not. For the first time in years, he felt something akin to peace. He came home not bracing himself for a fight, expecting that it would be calm. Laniyah seemed pleased with the compromise, and even more pleased at seeing her brother somewhat relaxed.

He should’ve known it would be taken from him. Maybe it was because the solution to a seemingly unsolvable problem had come so easily, without struggle. Because there was no struggle for this solitude, it was ripped away just as quickly.

He came home one day to an empty room. His voice echoed, unanswered, as he called out her name, each time getting more and more frantic. “Laniyah. Laniyah!”

The innkeeper had seen her come home and go upstairs, but she hadn’t been seen since, four hours ago. None of the merchants right outside, surrounding the hotel on all fronts, had seen her. All who knew her loved her and her sweet smile, eyebrows furrowing in concern at his frenzied news of her disappearance and the desperate edge to his voice as he asked again and

again if any had seen her. He checked the school, the market, he went to the town guards. No one knew where she went. It was as if she had vanished off the face of the earth. There was only one other place he could think of that she might've gone...

"Da? It's Elijah. I'm looking for Laniyah."

It was for the best that he start by mentioning Laniyah. His father had a soft spot for her, even as he deteriorated through the years. It could've been because she looked so much like their Ma.

No one answered him, a cruel replay of the events of just an hour before. He scanned for his sister, all else becoming background noise. His Da passed out on the kitchen table yet again, mail piling up where it'd been shoved under the door, a smell like rotten food coming from somewhere he couldn't see.

Their room was empty, exactly as he'd left it. His hands trembled, his legs, and then he was sliding down the wall, unable to think of what to do. He thought of that night, one of the last times he'd been in this house. Maybe his father had succeeded and shot him and killed him.

Maybe this was his eternal punishment, this house, this room, this moment.

He stayed there until the sun peeking through the window hit the horizon, only then venturing out to look at the only one left of his family. "Da? It's me, Elijah. Your son. I..." He choked. "Da, I don't know what to do. Laniyah's gone, I can't find her anywhere. No one knows where she is." His words fell on unhearing ears. His father was awake, blinking through blurry eyes, but gave no indication that he heard Elijah. If not for that, Elijah might not have continued speaking. "Da...I need help. Please, I need you. I can't do this anymore, not on my own. I don't know what I'm doing, and I'm so tired. I can't keep going. I'm not able to do...to do..."

He'd not paid attention to where his father was sitting. On the chair he sat in ran painted green vines growing up and down the legs and across the seat. In the center of the back were carved the characters for Laniyah's name. He'd learned his lesson before, and he dared not to make the same mistake. But his Ma's chair was one thing. Laniyah's was another. It was irrelevant, he knew that, in some corner of his mind. But he was at his end, hung by a thread. And his father, sitting as if there wasn't anything wrong with what he was doing, as if this was any other day and not a million brushstrokes in the making. The table, once the hub of their family life, tainted with alcohol, and in the middle of it all, the man who made their home an asylum.

Wordlessly, Elijah went to his room. It was fraught with memories and nightmares: the marks on the wall where his parents had measured his height as he grew, the last mark from six years ago; the clumsily repaired hole in the wall covered by drawings tacked over it; the stuffed patchwork chickens his father had put together to commemorate the loss of Elijah's pet chicken; the books, the toys, his old alchemy set. He packed what little was left in there, and on the way out, cast one last glance at his father. The part of him that kept him tied to this house, that man, was strangled quickly and quietly, withered away by drunken yelling and beaten with bottles and fists and sweat out by the heat of fire as he labored to keep himself alive. All it took was this, a piece of wood, to push him over the edge. Sit wherever you want, old man. You have all four chairs to choose from now. He walked out the door and didn't look back again.

Boarding Party Episode I: Mors Per Mortem

Carter Beilby

Captain Cain ran up from the *Festering Wound*'s lower deck brandishing a cutlass in both hands and a pistol at his side. "They be startin' ta board! Defend tha ship, ye two," the skeleton howled to his meager crew. "I don't wanna see a single redshirt left alive!"

Two 'redshirts,' soldiers of the Horatio Navy, swung over from the HMS *Colossus*. They hollered as they soared, alerting the cadaverous captain to their arrival. Without turning around, he raised his swords straight into the air, piercing them through their stomachs. He then swung around, flinging them into the murky depths below. Cain always took a morbid pleasure from battle—*especially* if it was against the Horatio Empire.

Majel, his feline first mate, stopped mid-battle to chug a bottle of rum. It was to help numb her suffering, as a bullet was stuck in her blubber like a harpoon lodged in a whale. It stung every time she moved, like someone was twisting said harpoon deeper and deeper into her. When the bottle ran empty, she broke it over one navyman's face and stabbed another with its newly jagged end.

The unarmed D'anna shrieked in terror as a bloodied navyman chased her around the deck. He waved his sword in front of him without care, hoping that at least one of the blows would graze the elf. Her cries had drawn wide attention, causing another navyman to take aim at her. When he cocked his pistol, she screamed and ducked for cover.

BANG!

The bullet whizzed past D'anna as she fell to the deck. Instead, it nailed the in-pursuit navyman right in the forehead. The force made him stumble backward and all of his thoughts ceased to be. He fell right down the ship's staircase, and a loud cracking noise echoed from the lower deck.

Seeing D'anna's brush with death, Cain snapped his neck to the navyman responsible. He took another redshirt's pistol from their hand, pushed them overboard, and shot the original navyman's knee. The navyman toppled over, collapsing onto the ground and roaring in agony.

"How many men must yer cap'n send before he learns his lesson?" Cain yelled. The navyman ignored him, continuing to bellow out in pain.

"When! Will! Ye! Navy! Bastards! Give! UP!" Cain asked, kicking him with every word. No reply followed, not even a whimper.

Having worked that out of his system, the skeleton tossed one of his swords next to D'anna. "Now don't lose this one, Pointy! We can't take any casualties like they can!"

"I'm sorry! I-It just slipped right out!" the elf cried, huffing as she tried to get herself up.

"That's bec—" Cain began before a large navyman leaped towards him, punching his jaw right off his skull. The impact made the skeleton flop down to the ground like a tower of dominoes.

"Captain!!" D'anna shrieked. She reached towards the sword Cain had tossed next to her, but the navyman crushed her hand with his boot. She wailed in agony and quickly withdrew it,

blubbering as she clenched her shaking fist.

“That’s just the beginning, *pirate...*” the navyman said as he drew his sword. But before he could finish the elf off, the ship took on a freak wave. It was a mighty surge of sea that tipped the *Festering Wound* to its port side. Everybody was jolted from the blow, and several navymen were claimed by the water. Cain’s jaw would have fallen overboard if it weren’t for the shrouds catching it like a fly in a spider’s web. One navyman almost took Majel overboard with him, but a menacing hiss made him let go.

D’anna stumbled as she tried not to fall over the ship’s railing, barely grabbing onto it at the last minute. The large navyman almost fell overboard too, but the hull’s ladder allowed him to survive. He started the climb back up, wrestling against the thrashing waters, while the elf scoured the ship’s deck for any sort of weapon she could defend herself with. Much to her chagrin, the wave had washed away anything loose; every pistol, cutlass, and corpse had been claimed by Davy Jones.

She was about to start searching the lower decks when a cannonball exploded from the *Colossus*, hurling itself into the *Festering Wound*’s hull.

“The cannons!” she cried out. “They’re still here!”

Using the bloody deck to her advantage, D’anna slid up to the cannons as if the deck was made of ice. She held onto one tightly, checking to see if it was even loaded in the first place. It was...

...but how was she going to fire it?

She looked around until she noticed that Cain’s pistol had yet to be unholstered. On all fours, the elf crawled up to the skeleton and took his gun. She blasted the fuse at point-blank range, knowing what a terrible shot she was. It ignited, sparking its brief countdown.

Meanwhile, the large navyman had finally reached over the railing. As he pushed himself up, D’anna rotated the cannon and wheeled it forward, pressing it up against his chest. With a flash of white and a billow of smoke, it shot right through him, exploding his torso inside out. His heart landed onto the deck of the *Colossus*, splattering its captain with blood.

With most of the boarders dead, D’anna helped Cain up to his feet (bones) and gave him back his gun. “Nah wah, awf...” he muttered to the elf. Hearing himself, his eye sockets widened and he pointed to the missing bottom half of his skull. “Do ye nho whar me jaw is?!”

“It’s right here, quit your bitchin’,” Majel huffed. With one paw, she unweaved his jaw from the shrouds and held it up to his face. With the other, she lowered a fist underneath and gave a swift punch upward, locking it into place. The skeleton’s head was knocked back, and he had to clack his mouth open and closed several times to get it working again.

“Thanks fer that...” he muttered with a blunt venom. He looked back at the *Colossus* and groaned. “They still be hangin’ on! D’anna, start fixin’ up the ship! Majel, cannons! We can’t stop ‘til they be nothin’ but floatin’ planks!”

As Majel looked to the distance, her pointy ears had flattened and her slit pupils dilated from fear. “Captain! Change of plans!” she yelled, frantically tapping his shoulder as she looked to the distance.

The skeleton slapped her hand away. “I be tha captain here, ye mangy mouser!”

“Just look to the East!” Majel pointed, “It’s the *Demeter*!”

“What?!” Cain screamed as his eyes darted eastward. He shrieked in fear as he saw a man-o-war barreling toward both the *Colossus* and the *Festering Wound*. It was black as obsidian with shredded sails that resembled mutilated bat wings. Night followed the *Demeter* like a loyal pet, darkness sweeping through the waters like a far-reaching fog.

“Oh, shit! Shit, shit, shit!” Cain cried, “Drop canvas! Raise anchor! D-Do anythin’ ta get us tha hell outta here!”

The *Demeter* crashed bow-first into the *Colossus* at full speed, causing it to knock into the *Festering Wound*. The *Wound* tipped to the side, drifting it away from the other two ships.

“What’s the *Demeter* doing?!” D’anna yelled as she held on to a guard rail.

“Who the hell knows?” Majel yelled, “All I know is that it gave us a head start!”

“Aye, and we best start usin’ it!” Cain yelled as he veered the wheel to the west. “We’re not stayin’ ta be dessert!”

The *Colossus* continued to fight, but their target had now shifted. D’anna watched in horror as the *Demeter*’s vampiric crew flooded onto the *Colossus*’ deck. They didn’t use any sort of weapons, they just scratched and bit through the navymen like starved lions. The *Colossus*’ captain made an impressive last stand, but he was no match for the *Demeter*’s captain, the crazed Count himself.

“Excuse me,” The Count began as he firmly pinned the captain to the wall, “but do you know where I am?”

While his body had stayed eternally youthful, The Count’s mental state had grown old and worn. What remained was a powerful creature, acting purely on instinct and faded memories.

The captain’s brow furrowed. “Beg... your... pardon...?”

“I don’t know where I am. I am confused. Have you ever felt the rush of a lifetime?”

“What?” the captain cried.

“This feeling of insecurity led by the darkness. It haunts you like the wire.”

“What in the gods’ names are you talking about?”

“Do you know where I am?” The Count asked again.

“You’re mad!” the captain declared.

“No, I am lost!” the vampire exclaimed as he held the captain up by his scruff. He punctured the captain’s neck and began gulping. The captain started to salivate, spittle boiling out of his mouth like a rabid animal. His body began to violently contract and his skin tightened, revealing the outline of his bones. Black goo began to ooze out of his orifices, dripping down the Count’s hand and onto the deck of the *Colossus*. He looked considerably more like Cain now, and his eyes had turned completely white.

Covered in blood and black slime, the Count’s eyes wandered towards the *Festering Wound*. He tipped an imaginary hat at them. They returned the favor, albeit, with a lot less confidence and a lot more confusion.

The pirates sailed away from the *Colossus* and the *Demeter* without a word spoken between them. D’anna and Majel scrubbed dried blood off the deck while Cain stared into space as he steered.

“I...” Cain began, “... I think some shore leave is in order...”

“Agreed,” D’anna and Majel replied in unison.

Hard Chairs, Harder Lessons

Matthew Besoyan

[from a novel in progress titled Ironhardt]

He wasn't a fan of seedy places. But seedy places meant rumors, and rumors meant information. Aside from a stout drink, information was what he needed. He pushed back his shoulder length, sandy-blond hair with a fingerless-gloved hand and set his jaw in determination. He stood there for a few seconds, soaking in the atmosphere outside the Busted Butler tavern, trying to look serious and resolved. A smile began to twitch its way into the corner of his mouth and, try as he might, he couldn't fight it off. Letting the "tough guy" facade melt away as fast as it had come, Wim stood in the middle of the street, laughing at himself. Who was he fooling? Wiping a tear out of the corner of his eye and straining to compose himself, he pointedly ignored the gawks and gestures aimed in his direction and grinned as he walked towards the tavern.

He paused as he crossed over the threshold, letting his eyes adjust to the relatively dim interior, and his ears adjust to the sounds of drunken revelry. He swept his eyes over the evening's patrons. A couple of farm workers, by the looks of the dirt on their clothes, to his left a few tables in. A handful of men a few tables behind them, dressed in ragtag armor and weapons hanging openly at their sides. Probably mercenaries, but they didn't interest Wim. His eyes shifted to the right side of the room. Seated at the table closest to the bar was a group of men and women, moderately dressed and not covered in enough rubbish to hold jobs in fields, mines, farms, or bloodshed. City folk gossip. Just what Wim needed, and close to the bar. Also, what Wim needed.

As he maneuvered his way through empty chairs and other patrons, he let his eyes continue to take stock of the room. Some people sat with cowls pulled low over their faces and their drinks pulled close while others chatted openly and loudly. Barmaids filtered through the crowd, dodging and slapping more than a few wandering hands. One other group caught his eye. Seated to his right, behind him in the corner, a group of men sat staring at Wim. He counted 3 men, and one woman sitting on the lap of the biggest one.

"Hmph," Wim grunted "wonder who is in charge there." The woman was doing everything she could to get the man's attention. Wim let himself watch a moment longer, amused by the group's open disdain for him. Shrugging, he found the seat he wanted and pulled himself up to the bar. He hadn't seen the bartender past the patrons as he approached but the man found him as he sat down and shuffled his way over.

"What'll be your taste tonight son," he asked as he grabbed a mug out from under the counter.

"Somethin' down the middle," Wim replied. The bartender shot him a slightly confused look, but Wim gave him no further instructions. He let his eyes shift back to the group of mercenaries and noted that while they eyed him occasionally, there was none of the open disdain he had seen in the other group. These looks held curiosity. A warranted reaction to a Seared Monk. His drink slid in front of him, and he glanced up to see the bartender eyeing him with a hand open.

"4 silver boy."

Wim fished in his money pouch and handed the man his payment. The bartender

grabbed his hand and locked eyes.

“There will be no trouble in my place tonight, right son?” As much a question as a statement, he stared Wim down without blinking. “Your lot got a code to follow, right? Somethin’ ‘bout not fightin’ needless fights?”

Wim smiled. “Well,” he sighed “I don’t intend to cause any problems. Dunno if I could say the same for anyone else, but you have my word that I’ll do what I can to keep the peace for you.”

Wim continued to smile at the man until, having heard what he wanted, the bartender let him go and went back to his business.

He really meant it. He didn’t want to cause trouble. Problem was, trouble had a way of... causing Wim. He liked to think he had a personality that just screamed confidence and charisma. Still smiling, he shook his head and brushed his hair back out of his face. No, it was his people’s reputation as fighters. Always, there was some thug that wanted to prove themselves against someone they thought weaker than them, and a Seared made a tempting target.

His people were rarely willing to fight in the open unless their code deemed it necessary. A code that was strict in its tenets, and fierce in punishment should one falter. Wim took a drink from his mug and let the easy burn of the liquid fill him as his smile faded. He didn’t care for the code. He used to live by it emphatically, but those days were long gone. Not wanting to get caught up in the past, he took another drink and let his ears open to the din of conversation around him.

Figuring the group behind him would have plenty of rumors and city talk, he turned his attention there first.

“...And just how do you think they would manage that?” asked a man’s voice.

“Well,” replied one of the women, “they could at least give out more information to the people.”

Wim could hear some murmurs of assent in the group and a slight bit of shuffling.

Another of the men spoke up after a few seconds of silence.

“I think they got their hands full as it is. You know them Lavender district folk keep the council busy with all their business. Between them, and running this city, I’m one fer bettin’ the King and council don’t have time for the small happenings of regular folk.”

The conversation veered off into market prices and quality of life problems about the city as the group discussed “regular folk” things and Wim quickly lost interest. He took another swig of his drink and after a few minutes of listening to other snippets of conversation and another 4-silver drink, decided this tavern wasn’t going to get him what he needed. Finishing his drink and sliding the mug back to the bartender with a smile and a nod, he moved to stand but was stopped by a piece of conversation from behind him.

“Nah, I’m telling you.” A man’s voice, barely audible over the sounds of the tavern. “It was one of them important families from the high district.” Wim cocked his head slightly in the

direction of the conversation. Not wanting to appear too obvious, he grabbed a pouch from off his belt and started to rifle through the contents. Mumbling to himself about high fees and daylight robbery, he kept his ears tuned to the voices behind him.

“I know a guy who worked for ‘em,” claimed the voice. “Family name was Kask I think.” The second voice chimed in at this.

“Kask? yea I think I know that name. Didn’t the family have some tragedy a couple years back?”

Wim heard a sharp intake of breath as realization hit the owner of the second voice. “That was the guy that lost his wife and kids to them murders huh!?”

“Yea,” agreed the first voice. “And,” the voice hushed and Wim strained to hear it “I heard this time, it was a Shade.” There was a moment of silence before the second voice spoke up.

“A shade? No way. If it was a Shade, I couldn’t well remember the name of the guy killed, could I?” he claimed in disbelief.

“I heard the guy lived though!” claimed the first voice. At this, Wim stole a glance behind him.

One of the men from the table behind him was leaning back towards another patron a table away.

The two men were interrupted as a barmaid tried to push her way through them in his direction. Deciding this would be a good time to join the conversation, Wim closed up his pouch and stood up. Meaning to take a seat next to the gentlemen, he picked up his stool and let the barmaid pass him. He put on a smile and winked at her as she passed, then turned his focus towards the task at hand. A task that very quickly changed as he saw a large man and two cronies rapidly making their way through the tavern in his direction.

“Ahh balls,” Wim sighed. He looked back towards the barkeep and, catching his eye, leaned his head towards the approaching patrons and shrugged. The barkeep’s eyes narrowed to slits and he shook his head, said something to the barmaid that had just passed Wim, and started taking down anything breakable from his bar. Wim’s smile grew. He liked this barkeep. Maybe he could manage this without damaging the place. Not likely, but maybe.

The three men sauntered up to Wim, pushing aside the two Wim had been listening to. He noticed a short sword on the hip of one of the smaller men, but it was the only weapon he could see. Not trusting that there wasn’t a knife or two hidden somewhere, he kept a good hold on his stool. Just in case.

“So, yer a Seared huh?” blustered the big oaf. The man made a point of sizing up Wim.

“Not much to look at.” With a big grin on his face, he looked at his companions. The three chuckled loudly and Wim noticed the noise about the tavern began to die down. “Heard you lot ain’t supposed to take part in the finer pleasures of life? Can’t drink or take a woman to bed? Can’t gamble?” The man grinned. “Can’t fight?” The tavern was silent.

Wim had been through this so many times. Always the same idiot who had heard of “the code” but never actually seen a Seared. Always the same problem of people thinking they knew

when they had never actually witnessed what he could do. Never one to pass up an opportunity to educate, he took a step forward.

“Funny thing about that code my friend,” Wim explained as he looked directly into the slightly taller man’s eyes. “In order to be bound by the code, you gotta be bound to the order.” Wim clenched his fists and opened his heart to the searing flames inside himself. His arms and legs began to tingle as a rush of adrenaline and fire lit the inside of his veins. “Unfortunately for you,” Wim’s eyes gleamed as his smile broadened, “I am no longer bound by any of it.” Wim let the fire and adrenaline rage inside him for a moment and in the wild rush that always enticed him to let go, he found his calm. Focusing on the peace of his heart, he drew the fire in his body to focal points and watched as the man’s eyes popped open in terror.

Wim’s hands and feet were wreathed in flame. He let his smile drop and, in his eyes, there was fire. Calm and calculated, ready to burn anything in its path.

People all around Wim backed away, some tripping over chairs and other patrons to flee the fire that now radiated heat from his body. The large man glanced around at the dispersing crowd and Wim saw him falter. His friend with the short sword, however, did not. Wim heard the weapon leaving its scabbard as the man lunged at him, leading his charge with the point of the blade. In a flash of movement that belied his calm exterior, Wim swung his stool around, catching the blade between its legs and with a deft twist, wrenched the weapon from his opponent. In one clean motion, he pulled the stool out to the side to deposit the blade, flipped the stool to grab it by the legs and reversed direction, shattering the seat against the man’s head. All without moving his feet an inch.

The man crumpled to the floor and the rest of the crew quickly lost all heart for a fight. Scrambling to get out of the tavern and away from the fire in Wim’s eyes, they cared little for anyone they trampled. Wim took a deep breath and closed his eyes, letting the fire extinguish and welcoming, with torn acceptance, the calm cold of his body. He put on his customary smile and opened his eyes. Knowing he had only a few seconds before people began to react to what happened, he grabbed a few silver coins and tossed them to his two informants, who looked at each other in bewilderment. Looking down at the remains of the stool and the unconscious man at his feet, he grabbed a gold coin out of his pouch and tossed it back to the bartender.

“Sorry,” he said sheepishly, “I tried.” He nudged the man on the floor with his foot for good measure, making sure to get a groan out of the crumpled form before stepping over him and picking his way out of the tavern.

Back on the street, he took a long deep breath of the cool evening air. Certainly not his favorite way to get a job done, but he wasn’t going to complain. He set off north for the High District, hoping to gain some more information about this Kask Family before the night grew dark, and the city watch started asking too many questions.

The Final Challenger

Tristin Bryant

The Knight Sir Lucian held off multiple opponents with quick motions practiced to perfection, his sword deflecting their every swing. He wasn't even bothered by the fact they were slowly narrowing him into a tight corner. He knew they were desperate; he and his men had followed these traitorous guards back to their hideout and ambushed them, which made them panicked. Once Sir Lucian was getting close to the walls behind him, the three unarmored guards raised their swords to strike in unison. Lucian made one swift strike across their exposed chests and they each staggered a step back. In one twist of the hand, he held his sword by its guard and used the rounded end of the hilt to strike the first opponent's jugular, then kicked him back into the wall hard enough to have him slump down to the floor. With a backwards thrust he stabbed the second opponent behind who had been trying to surprise him. He first heard the clink of his sword hitting the ground and then the thud of his body. The third opponent was still staggering back, his left arm pushed against the gushing wound, and in a mere blink Lucian held the tip of his blade to the last man's throat.

"Look out!" shouted a familiar voice. A gush of wind was all he felt as a fourth attacker was tackled to the ground beside him. He turned to see his fellow knight Sir Warren on top restraining the man. "I got him, don't worry!" Warren shouted while obviously struggling to keep the man down.

Lucian finished off his own opponent with one forward thrust and then went to Warren's aid. He pushes Warren aside, and digs his knees into the man's legs, pinning him with ease. Lucian grips the man's shirt, lifting him up, and then smashes his head back into the ground. They both turned when they heard the clatter of armor and stomping of feet, it was the other knights. Lucian looked to the dead man on the floor, the one who had gotten too close for his comfort.

"If you mention a word of what happened here, I will make their deaths look peaceful," Lucian warned. Warren nodded, "I understand." The other knights entered and saw the four dead guards. Warren watched as Lucian shifted his demeanor into a more composed self.

"The brave and relentless Sir Lucian takes on four at once, the crowds are going to love this," said Sir Gerald, his most trusted friend.

"This is just a warmup, I'm still waiting for the real challenge," Lucian joked. The others laughed.

Sir Gerald turned towards Warren. "Were you applauding his efforts from safety?" he asked teasingly, prompting chuckles from the rest of the group. Sir Warren didn't argue.

They carried the guards' helmets back with them through the forest and into the village surrounding the palace. The knights held them up high for the crowds to see and the crowds cheered, screaming "Sir Lucian! Sir Lucian! Our Hero!" The Kingdom always loved him, their great protector, who still protected them even after losing his wife to illness years ago. He was their idol. Lucian merely waved and smiled at them, then turned his focus on Queen Cecilla across the way standing on her high platform.

She gave him a genuine smile, so different from the more formal one she wore more often. With one wave of her hand, she silenced the crowds. "I want to thank the brave knights who protected our home from the traitors who were amongst our midst. The traitors as you know were trying to sell our weapons and our information. They sought to make us vulnerable, but we will never be weak. Our knights discovered their plans and stopped them. They are truly the great examples of bravery, truth, and greatness we aspire to. We thank you." The crowds went wild.

Lucian always disliked when she was so open and honest with her subjects. He thought they should be told only what they need to know. They shouldn't be told anything that would worry them. She disagreed, and often told everything she knew to those who asked. He wasn't the same way, even with her.

Later that Night

A feast was held in the Great Hall in Sir Lucian's name, with long tables lined with meat, bread, fruit, and pitchers of ale and wine. The men stuffed their faces and downed mugs of ale which spilled down their chins and onto their shirts. They were loud and lively, so Lucian slipped out. He went to the meeting place in the garden, under a pavilion with vines growing up and across its columns. There she was in a more casual dress, her hair let down and for a moment Lucian could forget who she really was and focus on the two of them being alone.

"Celly," he whispered, and she turned her attention to him. A smile spread across her face.

"Took you long enough," she said.

He nodded. "The men challenged me to a game to see who could chug the most mugs of ale without toppling over. I won of course," he said, pretending to wobble over.

"Are you drunk? I'd hate to be taking advantage of you in such a state," Cecilia teased.

"Oh, please do," he joked. She laughed and he rested on the bench with her, his head on her lap.

"You think you'll be sober enough for tomorrow's events?"

"I could have a few more and still be fine. You know I've always been good with a lance," Lucian said.

She nodded with a smirk "Oh, I know." He dramatically pretended to be shocked, "My Lady, you are a married woman."

"Not yet I'm not," The Queen added.

He scoffed, "What would your future husband think of this."

"He is off in some Kingdom I've never heard of, with his Family I've never met. I really don't care what he thinks. For now, let's forget all about him," Cecilia said.

Even in this lighthearted moment, he knew the truth. Somewhere a man wore a ring similar to hers and one day he would be standing beside her in a chapel. One day it would be his hands holding her, touching her. One day this would all end. He knew that, but for now he enjoyed these moments with her. He tried to hold onto the feeling of her hands gently running across his chest so that he would never forget. Even when he had to watch her say I do.

A Few Days Later

The tournament was going splendidly, the stands were filled and every merchant had their stand set up selling food and drinks. People were excited and cheering on the knights during the archery and jousting events. Lucian had made the top three winners of both events, and joked with his fellow knights of how Sir Gerald wasn't even close when he went against the one blond Knight. He hadn't been able to see the Queen as she was busy entertaining and hosting her cousin, Lord Roland, who came to watch the tournament. The next events were duels, which Lucian was just as confident about as he had been the others. They all rode out on their horses and went around the arena while their names were called. Then afterwards their squires took the horses as they each lined against the side waiting for the horns which signify the beginning of the dueling events.

A lone Knight entered the arena walking past the squires and stood directly in the arena's center. This knight stood tall, a long sword at his side but Lucian couldn't help but notice his armor smeared in a reddish-brown film, he assumed it to be rust.

"I am sent here with a mission. I am here to challenge the strongest and bravest of Knights, to find one whose heart matches the ideals they claim to uphold. Is anyone worthy of this challenge?" The lone knight called out.

It was then that Lucian realized the film was not rust but dried blood, and as the knight swung out his sword and stabbed it into the ground, he noticed the sword was covered in it too.

The other knights stood frozen, but Lucian watched as Sir William stepped forward, his body wobbling a bit, from the many cups of ale he had the night before. "You're all cowards. Weak, all of you," He stumbled out.

Sir William approached the blood-stained knight, close enough to tap his armor. "I ain't scared of you, I accept your challenge!" He yelled. The crowd cheered.

The bloodied Knight examined his competitor, before he said "Sir William of Valoria, You are not worthy! Due to your endlessly sloppy state you fail to protect others in need. I know of the time where you let that young girl be killed because you weren't able to stop her attacker. Let this be Justice!" and in one quick motion the knight swung his sword up in the air and down on Sir William's head, splitting it into two. "Next Challenger, step forward!" The once lively crowd was silent, until the silence was broken with the cries and wails of Sir William's wife, Lady Isabel. Lucian saw people holding her back as she tried to run towards her husband's body.

Sir Gerald turned towards Lucian and whispered "You must accept the challenge. You're the best among us. What do you have to be afraid of? You have nothing to hide."

Earlier that Week

The squires lined up, their shoulders back and chins up. It was tradition that they received recognition for the halfway mark in their training to be a knight. They were no longer children but turning into men, hopefully one day great Knights. He saw Geriant amongst them, with his scruffy brown hair and freckles. Some of the others stood with their fathers who were knights or blacksmiths. Geriant stood alone and Lucian wondered if it was the time. When kids become squires they are not to speak of their heritage in order for them to earn their status without favors or special treatment. Once they get older and have made progress in their training, their family is then able to claim them, and they would forever be tied to their family legacy. The training knight made a speech about their achievements, then he said he would list three whose skills were undeniable, and that he knew would succeed in becoming knights. He clapped as the blacksmith's son's name was called and a strong and sturdy boy stepped forward. Then he looked around at his friends and community all watching. He knew Geriant would be called, he trained him when they had days off from their duties. He saw potential in his son, he was further behind than he was at the age, but he would catch up. Another boy was called, and a fellow knight he knew stood proudly beside him. He watched as the crowds cheered. Then another boy was called. As the crowds applauded, Lucian slouched back into his seat. Geriant saw and fixed his posture.

After the event he saw Geriant head back to his chambers, and followed at a distance trying to ensure they were alone. He turned down the familiar corridors, and onto the hallway where Geriant stayed only to find him with two other boys.

"My shoes need to be polished," said one boy, taking off his shoe. "They seem to have something stuck on them," and ran it down Geriant's face leaving splotches of mud. Geriant didn't argue or move but merely grabbed the shoe and tried to walk away.

Another boy stood in his way. "My shoes are filthy too," he said and tossed them at Geriant. The two boys laughed then noticed Lucian and ran towards him. "Sir Lucian. It is an honor to meet you sir, I wish to be exactly like you one day," they said.

He merely nodded, looked to Geriant, then back at the boys and said, "Excuse me, I was just leaving," turning back where he came.

Back At The Arena

The Knights all looked to Lucian for answers. Sir Gerald was nudging him. He wanted to step out and get justice for his friend, but that young girl he mentioned had died over a year ago. Lucian didn't know how this Knight knew about her. Sir William had told Lucian about the incident, how he was so drunk he couldn't see straight and the attacker used this to easily knock him down and kill the girl in front of him. Sir William had been devastated. He vowed never to drink again, until the girl's parents came asking what had happened and that very night Lucian found him at the tavern. If this Knight knew about the girl, Lucian wondered what else he knew.

Sir Warren stepped forward, his face stern and his hand already at his sword's hilt. The others stood motionless. Lucian had known Sir Warren for years, he was never a great fighter, his footwork was sloppy, and he was weaker than most of the other Knights. Lucian couldn't watch him die as well. Lucian stepped forward and yelled "I accept your challenge."

Sir Warren appeared dumbfounded by Lucian's choice, mouthing to him I've got this, but Lucian shook his head and told him to go back with the others. Lucian stepped forward and the Bloodied Knight examined him.

"Sir Lucian of Valoria, You are not worthy," the Lone Knight said. The Lone Knight didn't strike but instead backed up, turned and walked away. Lucian was confused and watched the Knight get further away until he saw Queen Cecilla in her special royal box above the stands. The Bloodied Knight was heading straight for her.

He ran to beat him there, but the Bloodied Knight had already struck the outlying barrier and was tearing the wood to make an opening. The crowd scurried away, and the Queen's Guard stepped forward. The Bloodied Knight fit through the opening and started up the stands towards the Queen. As Lucian made his way through the opening, the Knight was finishing off the guards. Striking through armor with his sword, he made quick work of the Guards. Lucian tried to make it past to put himself between the Knight and the Queen. The Knight saw this and threw his sword towards the Queen. Lucian ran and threw himself in front of it. The Queen ran out to check on him and the Knight snatched her, holding his arm tightly around her neck.

"LET HER GO!" Lucian growled, his body slumped against the Royal Box as blood leaked out of his armor. The other Knights had made it through the opening and stood around the Lone Knight ready to strike.

"You protect the Queen not just because of your duties. Tell them!" The Lone Knight shouted.

"I protect her because I love her," Lucian admitted. The other Knights and crowd heard, their faces unreadable. "When my wife died it left an empty hole inside me, and she is the warmth and light which fills it. I can't live without her," Lucian adds.

The Lone Knight lets the Queen go and she ran to Lucian's side resting against him. "You're going to be okay" she whispers again and again in his ear. The blood continues to spill.

The Lone Knight then says "Sir Lucian, you are still not worthy. Does she know of your son?"

The Queen even looked at him with confusion and hurt, unaware of Geriant. The crowds begin to scream, and his fellow knights who surround the Long Bloody Knight begin to lower their weapons. They screamed "How could you lie to us? She is engaged, aren't you cheating? You have a son?! A Knight can't be with a Queen, that's against the rules. Who is your son?" His Knights don't say anything but from the looks in their eyes he knew they had the same thoughts.

Then it all clicked. The guards who tried to sell secrets, and the knight then sharing them. This Knight must have been hired by someone, and was told these secrets by the guards who have been spying for some time before they were caught. He looked around and that's when he saw the Queen's Cousin cowering amongst the crowd. A small smile formed across the cousin's face. Lucian then remembered the funeral for the King, Cecilla's first husband.

Countless arguments with the church and the advisors on how she would have to remarry quickly or someone else would have to step up and become King. The person they deemed most suited to rule in the King's absence was Cecilla's cousin Lord Roland, and how after the arranged marriage was set up he stormed off.

Sir Warren shouts loud enough to get the crowd's attention, saying, "This Knight came here to see who among us upheld the ideals we claim to have as Knights of this Kingdom. But if he measured me up to them, he'd see I also fall short. And I'm certain if I measured him up to them, he would fall short as well. Who among us is worthy? None, if we're being honest."

Lucian always feared his relationship with the Queen would be exposed, and that someone would find out Geriant was his son. How foolish it was to think he would be able to keep this hidden forever. If he got banished for his actions, so be it. It was about time he was brave and honest.

Lucian tries to sit up and only manages to merely lean a little higher. "Sir Warren is correct. I am not the hero you all think I am. I have not always been truthful. I have not always been kind. My son is a Squire, a remarkable young man who works hard every day so he can become a Knight like his father. I haven't claimed him to keep my family legacy untouched by imperfect hands but it already was. The Queen and I have been together for a while, hiding it from everyone even after she was engaged. I hid all of this because I wanted to be seen as more than I am. I wanted so badly to be the hero you all saw, even if I couldn't see it in my own reflection. May you all one day find it in your hearts to forgive me."

It was silent. Then the Queen leaned in and kissed his cheek, and held his hand for the first time in front of anyone else.

The Lone and Bloody Knight tried to move out of the enclosed circle of Knights, but then they raised their weapons and in unison attacked. Knocking down the Knight and finishing him off. The Bloodied Knight lay dead as his sword was carefully taken out of Lucian's chest and left behind as Lucian was taken to the physician.

The Next Month

Geriant was finishing his training, but he now held the name and legacy of Lucian's family. He kept busy with his lessons so as to not focus on the ongoing trial and the upcoming memorial. Lord Roland was being accused of hiring the Knight to challenge the others which led to the deaths of Sir William and Sir Lucian, and a few of the Queen's guards. Without a living witness there was no clear evidence to tie him to the crimes, and it seemed as though he might get away with it. Geriant tries to not get sad or angry at this, remembering the words he was told were his father's last. *My son is a remarkable young man.* He would remember that and carry it with him. For now, his father's memory will remind him that everyone was flawed in their own way, and to be brave enough to acknowledge your own. Geriant would take that lesson and apply it to his time as a Knight and then maybe he could become a great man.

Cautionary Tale

Robin DeBruyne

!!WARNING!! MOUTH WORKS FASTER THAN BRAIN!!

The day I first met you, I was a loudmouth. A first-year student in a health class. Ranting about the fact that men get paid more than women. Arguing to a substitute who wasn't getting paid enough to deal with the bitching of a 13-year-old, Weeaboo, Otaku, dumbass who thought she knew everything. When, fact of the matter is, I didn't know shit. Later, after we began dating, You told me that, when we met, you thought I was ridiculously annoying and needed to shut up. I agreed with you because that is the truth. I did, sometimes I still do.

!!WARNING!! CHRONIC LIAR AND TRAUMA!!

You were with me when I lied about my dad. I said he was dead. What I meant to say was that he'd been dead to me. Instead, you thought he had been dead, only for him to show up during lunch our sophomore year very much alive, just looking like death. It was a shock that put me into shock, and I cried. You didn't yell at me then, you held me as I cried, having to help me face the fact that my dad was in fact alive and meant more to me than I realized. I later acknowledged through therapy and outside help that I lied because I never found myself interesting enough to have people stay this long. Thought I needed to lie because my insecurities would make any sane man run... you didn't.

!!! WARNING!!! LOW SELF ESTEEM!

We were together throughout all of high school; you rarely ever saw me without a full face of makeup on. I constantly said I was fat, or ugly, or boring. (Scoffing at my antics back then because now I am that weight plus 80 pounds and have a fupa.) And to me it was true. But to you... You saw me as a model... your family said I was beautiful... Any time I'd overcriticize, you'd always counteract. The word fat, with power, Annoying, to opinionated, ugly to "hot as shit." You'd convince me to wipe my makeup off because I looked better without it. Now I rarely ever wear makeup... You'd let me tell you stories and stayed silent even when you knew I'd embellish shit... Still do, to this day. You saw more of me than I ever thought possible... and I love you for it.

!!WARNING!! ATTACHED!!

We're coming up on ten years, you and me. You're my best friend... The man I enjoy sitting inside of the abandoned Kmart parking lot at home. Both of us harffing down quesabirria tacos and laughing about the YouTube video I put on. You calling me an iPad kid because that's what I am. The man who laughs when I'm being a crackhead on long car rides. Knowing I'm like this, strictly because I am an undiagnosed Autistic person who cannot sit still for six plus hours "looking at nature." (A desert looks like a damn desert, Dallas. I do not care where we are, the view sucks) ... The man who bought me these ridiculous car sickness glasses in hopes they would help me on said long car rides, where I feel like I'm going to barf up my intestines. The man who can make me laugh, cry, seethe, and any other big-worded emotion I forgot about. The man who would compete with me on who, between the two of us, loved each other more. Or would answer my dumb rapid-fire questions I have like: "Would you love me if I was a worm?" Or "Does this hairstyle make me look like Lord Farquaad?" To which you'd answer with: "Yes, I'd love you if you were a worm, fucking would be hard, but I'd figure it out." And "Yes, you do look like Lord Farquaad... I'd still tap that though." The man who turned me from a low economic class girl,

who was okay with store brand cheap shit, to a spoiled brat who now gets pouty when you tell me no. The man I spent a decade with, and hope and pray to spend so much more with. He has saved me on so many occasions, and I know I don't tell him enough. But I love him... He has my whole heart.

!!Disclaimer: Approaching individual will lead to things being difficult, but with patience and love, can lead to the most interesting, entertaining lifetime. Proceed with caution!!

Fire and Water Meet

Robin DeBruyne

I never had the “ideal stable home” ... Not really... I had my mom. My older brother and sisters, and my little brother. Family of six. It may seem huge, but in reality... it's small... suffocating...

Fire in a literary sense takes on a multitude of meanings. Cleansing, anger, purity, change, chaos. It's hot, it's canonically red. Raging like a storm at sea. Unpredictable and all consuming... It's destructive, yet beautiful. Like staring at the embers as they fall from the sky. Falling onto dry brush and igniting...

My feelings have colors... Happy is green, green is good. Anger? It's grey. But anger to most is red, hot, dangerous, like dynamite with the fuse lit and a hiss that echoes the cataclysmic response after. So many people feel things so strongly. I'm one of them; often ranting about wrongness or integrity, even though I never know what those things mean. There are people who feel nothing at all... and I'm envious...

Water had always seemed depressing, stagnant, cold, dark, suffocating, and overwhelming. So much is settled beneath the surface, the sediment of the earth on the floor. Pressure far heavier than a weighted blanket that keeps things from spilling out, from mixing with the water it surrounds. We don't know half of what is in our own oceans. We know more about the stars in the sky and our own bodies than what makes up 70% of the earth. We don't know what it holds, hiding something darker beneath the surface...

My father was an alcoholic. I look back and I see greys and blues with a haze of silver. I say this in past tense... he died when I was 21. Four years since writing this... I was told he had his own demons the size of the Eiffel Tower and crushing; like an unseen force pressed upon his chest, never letting him get a full breath of air. He laid in that bed, holding the haze of morphine. I was told nothing could keep the demons he faced away, nothing like the bottle he cherished. I hold onto the fear that these demons, working with the reaper, would one day latch onto me too, and I fear they will never let go... To this day I wonder if this next sip will be my last before addiction takes me like it did him. His kidneys completely failed, his liver was next, and he had sepsis from his teeth rotting out of his head. I look back and, I guess, I never really knew him sober. He hid alcohol in his van under the driver's seat... when my brother and I visited him in 2019- he had a bottle of Peppermint schnapps in the passenger chair pocket of his car, calling it his “mouth wash”. He once (at least to me it sounded like this) bragged to me about having 5 liters of fluid drained out of his abdomen... 11.02 pounds of fluid. He said he practically had a baby and joked how he understood what my mother went through five times over.... You never think about what it feels like to lose half of you, lose half of what created you. To lose your dad....

When I was little, I thought it was normal to have your dad passed out drunk in the recliner. I thought it was normal that moms did everything. Even staying out till just before we had to go to bed, simply so we wouldn't have to interact with dad much. I remember my mom not wanting me or my siblings to go into my dad's room. I remember my mom racing to the front door first when we got home just in case she'd find my dad, dead on the floor from drinking. She thought she could spare us that trauma. She spared most of us... not me, I was the perceptible kid, I knew most of her reasonings as to why she did things when I was a kid... Then, my mom and dad finally had that big blowout fight. You know? It felt like the climax to every movie. Like the moment when Frank-N- Furter Bludgeoned and Killed Eddy with the axe; Or When Ghost

face was right behind his next victim before stabbing them in the back... It was like that. Only, there was no killing... no death, at least not yet. It was around my birthday; I remember my mom scraped together money and knew a friend who owned a bounce house company. I got this huge waterslide to combat the August heat. I remember my dad slamming the dryer door shut, and my mom making my older sister take me and my brother inside and into her room. We watched Scooby Doo like our life didn't implode that day..

Bombs are just the ingredients for fire, compacted into some kind of shell, waiting to detonate. It's all packed together waiting for the final thing, the fuse to be lit... It's inconceivable to think that we created weapons to take lives before we ever created cures to save them. Crazy to think that destruction comes from desperation...

My mom... she did her best. She raised five kids by herself. Having my oldest brother as a 19-year-old. She was still a kid, raising a kid... Her first husband was an addict too. Her first husband abused her in every way you can think of. In my head, she has a right to be angry at the world. She has a right to scream as loud as she wants. To be red in the face and take the form of a train whistle before charging. She gets angry, a lot. She feels so immensely there's never a proper outlet to let those feelings go. She has a fuse shorter than the bomb will allow, less than the quickest grenade. My mom was given up for adoption the moment she was born. She was adopted by my grandmother sixteen days after. I think that lack of contact, that lack of nurture made her realize she needed to be independent in order to survive. In needing to survive at every turn in life, she got angry. Her tolerance for idiots was very low. She yells and curses her resentment. Red faced and bitter, she's angry at the hand she was dealt. At him for failing her, for failing our family. Angry at him for lying about who he promised her to be, for forcing her to struggle some more. My mother grew resentful to a ghost.

Fire when it meets a liquid, it can do one of two things. Fire can go out, or fire can grow. It depends on the liquid that it meets. Oil, gas, water, snow, it can create these reactions, its all basic science... Fire is weak to water, water is needed by grass to live, ergo water is weak to grass, and grass is weak to fire.... I don't want to bring in any other types into this analogy because then shit gets complicated...

My dad died barely even understanding where he was... He died with his children and older sister and brother-in-law around him. I had to watch him waste away... I had to watch him not remember me. I had to drive across the country with my little brother twice, the second time with my father's animals having to take trazodone because they had never been outside the house before...

Fire is red. Fire holds anger. Fire is hot and blazing. But it snuffs out once all the fuel is burnt up. Water swallows, making things disappear, like a ship on its maiden voyage. Split into two, then three. Like the sinking ship of my family.

What happens when Fire and Water meet? What do they create?

Through the Eyes of the Muse

Alyssa Flores

Once, The Muse was alive, with a name and a living, breathing body. She walked beneath the blue sky, breathed in the perfume of flourishing roses, and was loved beyond comparison. She cannot remember her name, or the place where she lived, but she remembers The Sculptor. She had not always been The Muse, but she does not remember the time before that. All she can recall is being The Muse.

Her husband had made her The Muse. He had carved delicate bouquets of roses from rough chunks of wood and given them to her, bidding her to paint them however she saw fit, for she was the reason behind their creation, and as such, they were hers entirely. That was how The Sculptor wooed her, with his hands that crafted for her beauty from stone and wood so she may keep it for her entire life. With his promise to behold her as his inspiration for as long as he could create, as long as he could breathe. That was how she became The Muse.

The Muse did not live forever. She could not walk beneath the warm sun when her legs were too weak to move her from her bed. She could not breathe in the scent of roses because her lungs were already struggling to breathe with each heave of her chest. Like a flower, plucked off a vine, she was dying. But she remained The Muse, and if she could not have real flowers in her room, then she could have carved and painted ones, and to her, they were as precious as living flowers that bloomed in the summer.

When she finally died, The Sculptor set to work. He found the largest, finest chunk of marble he could, with the most beautiful marbling. There was not a day that passed where he did not work, slowly chiseling away the marble so he could carve a face, a face that was lined with wrinkles from decades of smiling happily, with round cheeks and creased eyes. Then, he carved hair, which spilled freely over shoulders, hair that when it'd belonged to the living Muse, had been lovingly brushed every morning and every night. He carved a neck, even dimpling it with the moles that had formed a constellation upon The Muse's throat. Shoulders, the folds and rolls of a stomach and back and breasts, all draped in the marble-carved folds of a recreation of her favorite dress. Her palms cupped together, outstretched, and her feet, worn from the years she had spent running and walking and leaping in the light of the setting sun, poked out slightly from the hem of her dress. Each detail was recalled from memory, and each memory was adored.

The Sculptor died when he finished. He had set down his tools, waddled to the corner of the room, and sat on the ground. He stared at The Muse, reborn again in stone, and smiled. With a last glimpse of his wife, The Muse, he closed his eyes, and slipped into the embrace of eternal rest. He rejoined The Muse, and together they walked forward into a vast unknown. Except...a small part of The Muse lingered, ensnared by the love and devotion that had been bled into the marble sculpture of her visage. So, that small, lingering sliver of The Muse awoke, set in stone, and thus began to watch the world.

The Muse does not often see people. In fact, at first her world is extremely limited, with a view that consisted only of the dim, familiar walls of her husband's workroom before she was moved to the back garden and set upon a fountain. She knew this garden, but she found that being in it day in and day out gave her a new gaze to look upon it with. She could see the slow but inevitable growth then death of the flowers around her as the seasons cycled through. She could feel the warmth of the sun that fluctuates like the tides, washing over her and then pulling away with the sunset and sunrise, then the changing of the days from summer to fall, then fall to winter and then back to spring. The world around her was never just grey and decay or blue and

full of growth. The Muse was now a witness to the tiny, everyday miracles that formed around her stone-carved body that she could not partake in during life. It's peaceful.

She is paid visits by her blood, her children and grandchildren, but even then, as her descendants continue to come into the world, their visits dwindle like a burning candle. If the sun weren't such a significant existence, even that radiant star would be forgotten by the world, so her presence diminishing from memory and care is to be expected. She is stone, so it doesn't hurt her, but that shard of her that carries memories of being loved carries the aching ghost of being forgotten.

Slowly, the garden around her begins to wither. It takes unknown cycles of the sun and moon and seasons for the lush greenness around her to die completely, but it happens. The green becomes brown, then grey, then nothing but dust. The walls enclosing her and her dead garden crack and crumble. She alone remains whole, covered in dust but otherwise untouched by the weathering winds of time that erode the world she knows. Perhaps it is because she, in some way, wanders the valleys of existing and not-existing, some part of her alive and another part of her nothing but stone. The Muse exists beyond the grasp of time, waiting.

Just as it'd been inevitable that she'd be forgotten, all the lost things such as herself will be discovered once again. She stands there in her splendor under the hazy sunlight in the spring in a ruined garden, the ruins around her untouched form fading in her presence. To the Explorer who had stumbled across the abandoned garden, she is like an angel at the Gates of Heaven.

"What a wonder you are," the Explorer sighs, reaching out to just touch her marble-carved dress.

At the touch of the tips of his fingers, something about this statue feels alive, as if her solid cold flesh will warm and soften and her illusionary carved dress will begin to sway in the breeze. Her ever-present smile gleams in the faint sunlight, the shadows of the depths of her wrinkles cast down upon the Explorer's face. More than a mere statue, she seemed like a living woman encased in stone, frozen in a moment where she had last seen something or someone she loved, waiting to see them again.

The Explorer leaves, then returns, this time with other explorers.

"She looks so alive," they marvel as they gather around her feet, reverent in a way that priests might be in front of a vision of their saint.

Gently, they lift her from the ruined garden where she had been found, and The Muse, who had known only that small expanse of the world before, watches the sky change around her as she is taken away.

The Muse is placed in the dark, beyond the reach of the sun and in a vague darkness that has no discerning shapes or colors beyond the palette of shadows that encloses her. If she were to estimate what death resembled in her own immortal idea, she would assume it is this. An endless quiet filled with a cool darkness that overtakes and consumes entirely. She cannot move, she cannot leave. So she does what she has been doing for however long she has existed, many moons and many suns passed waiting. She expects nothing from her shadowed encasement and exists in her state of expectationless waiting.

What she sees after some unknown time are people, entering and flooding the room with

light, as if having let an artificial sun rise to burn away the darkness.

"This is her," the Explorer says, pressing the flat of his palm against her toes that slightly peek out from the hem of her dress, "Isn't she beautiful?"

"Indeed," the Curator agrees. "A fine statue. Whose is she?"

If she could speak, crack open her mouth with the sound of a cavernous moan of solid marble splitting for the sole purpose of her uttering a word, she would declare herself as The Muse. The Muse belonging to her Sculptor, the once-alive love of someone who had done more than revere her with their words and their gazes, but loved her as a whole.

"Nobody's, or at least nobody we know of," the Explorer replies. "She was made from someone long gone. She might be the only one her maker ever created."

She hopes her once-alive body was buried with her wooden roses, with her stone trinkets weighing her coffin. This vessel that carries the fragment of who she once was is, if she were to have selfish desires like that of the human being she used to be, the only piece she wishes for people to gaze upon.

"She'll fit the exhibit," the Curator decides.

Again, her world shifts, leaving the darkness that she'd waited in, but even though she was removed from that death-like enclosure, the sky was no longer hers to behold. She could not see the moon nor the stars, not the clouds or sun above. Instead, she can only observe the statues around her, the ones that are equally unmoving and cold as she is, the reflective floor that gleams like a clean mirror, and the vast room that echoes with the sound of nothing.

She had spent an unknown time watching the world, so now, in this reflective, hollow room, people watch her. They pass by her in silence, staring at her, whispering and peering keenly at her lovingly carved face.

"Beautiful," they praise. "This muse must've been very beautiful."

Her Sculptor's words from her life long ago come to the fragments of her soul in a distant whisper.

"In my eyes, you are the most beautiful in the world."

She had not been this statue yet, still breathing and alive and dearly loved. And when she had gone, he had given all his love to remaking her in this image. This rendering of her from marble that everyone sees.

"So beautiful," everyone says, reverent and breathless as they stand at her feet, craning their necks upward.

She does not know her own features, but she knows her husband's love. To him, she had been the most beautiful in the world. He carved her with this love, and here she stands, a tribute to the adoration that had been hers, and people call her beautiful. His love that made her is beautiful. If stone could weep, then she would let a great flood pour forth from her.

“Beautiful,” everyone declares at her pedestal, everyone except for the one she wishes to hear from the most.

It occurs to her that perhaps, one day, if she can be held within stone for however long she has been existing within this form, then perhaps someday she might encounter her Sculptor once more. Not in the same body, and he may not be a sculptor any more, but she is certain, certain as she is stone, that she would recognize him. She would recognize her Sculptor in any form he might take, with any face he might bear, as long as his soul is something of the same, then her own soul will recognize him. So, as she has done for the endless cycles of the stars and sky that she has witnessed, she waits and watches.

For the countless people she watches, none are her Sculptor. There are Children, there are Teachers. There are Students and there are Passersby. There are the Worshipers, whose knees are bone and flesh and weakly human, buckling at her perfect, rigid, unbreathing form. But none of these people who stand before her are her Sculptor. Still, she keeps waiting.

“Whoever made her must have loved her,” someone says one day, eyes cast upon her face and staring with some sort of distant softness that feels like recognition.

The young woman stands before her, holding a paper and charcoal in her careful hands. The Art Student’s fingers slowly begin to map out a vague shadow of The Muse’s figure on her own page, thoughtless in her actions as she studies the way the lights overhead brush along the marble strands of The Muse’s hair.

“What makes you say that,” someone else asks curiously.

The young man by her side cradles a book under one arm, twirling a pen between his fingers. His notes sprawl across pages, staining the crinkling paper with thoughts and unanswered questions, then the tentative guesswork of an answer following in ink somewhere down the pages. The History Student does not know this Art Student, but she’d spoken so certainly that he’d been unable to refrain from questioning her.

“Her smile,” The Art Student answers. “Look at the depth of the lines around her eyes. The creases on her forehead. The way her mouth is shaped.”

“What do those things have to do with being loved?” The History Student questions.

“Whoever made her wouldn’t add those unless he loved her. Marble isn’t easy to work with, it’s stone. Why would her maker spend all that time making her if he didn’t love her so much that he’d want to add in every detail he could?”

“It could just be a matter of wanting to recreate a human face as much as possible,” the History Student suggests.

“It could be,” the Art Student agrees. “But it’s not. Whoever made her loved her. That’s why she’s so beautiful.”

“Her beauty is most likely a product of alterations to a model who posed for the sculptor and his approximation of what would be the most attractive features,” the History Student points out.

“It’s not,” the Art Student insists. “She was just loved.”

The Muse fixes her gaze upon them, waiting. What a familiar pair, though she had never seen them before. She wishes to see them again, but most people who pass through are here for a moment, and then they are gone. A single moment that does not compare to a grain of sand in the vast desert of her continued existence.

Yet, for however long it takes for people to leave and darkness to overcome her, and then the light renewing itself with the presence of people once more, the Art Student and the History Student return again in front of her. The Art Student’s hand flows, charcoal scraping softly against the grain of her pages. The History Student’s pages flip with a continuous crinkling, pen scratching darkly into margins.

“She’s my favorite,” the Art Student says suddenly, startling the History Student to the degree of the tip of his pen sliding off the page, drawing an ink mark on the paper.

“She’s noted to be one of the most beautiful sculptures in the world, of course she’s anyone’s favorite,” the History Student remarks.

The Art Student shakes her head. “That’s not why she’s my favorite. She’s my favorite because of the moles on her neck.”

“The moles on her neck,” the History Student echoes.

“Yes, those ones right there. They’re not accidental chips on the stone. They’re marks made on purpose. It all comes back to how much she was cared for, for me. Someone knew her so well that they included those little moles on her neck even though it’d be so hard to do that without damaging the marble.”

“You really believe she was that loved,” the History Student asks curiously.

“Of course,” the Art Student insists. “And I love her for being so loved. She makes me happy.”

“I thought your appreciation might be more...artistic. Or technical. You, well, you study things like that, right,” the History Student says inquisitively.

“I do study things like that,” the Art Student laughs. “Of course I appreciate the artistry of her posture and expression but I just really love how happy she makes me feel.”

The Muse watches as the History Student’s eyes light with curiosity as the Art Student speaks. But he does not press further; instead, they depart with not another word.

They return again, standing in front of her and gazing at her form. The Muse listens intently.

“She’s my favorite too,” the History Student suddenly declares.

“Oh, is she,” the Art Student questions, “Why?”

“She’s...perfect,” the History Student starts hesitantly, “Preserved, that is. Perfectly

preserved. It's like she was taken from her original time and brought directly in front of me. She still has her marbling, even, without fading. She...feels a little alive. And like she's about to speak to me and tell me what happened."

"That's more fanciful than I might've imagined from you," the Art Student comments brightly with a smile. "I wonder if she'd be warm if we touched her."

"She wouldn't be, she's stone," the History Student reminds her.

"I know that, of course," the Art Student says. "I just wonder."

"...I wonder that as well," the History Student admits.

Such conversations are commonly passed between the two, with their exchanges inevitably coming to a stop and enabling their inevitable departure. But they always return, again and again, until The Muse can depend on their presence as much as she could depend on the ever cyclical sun and moon coming to pass over her when she had belonged in her garden.

"I have a piece in a gallery debuting next week," the Art Student mentions as she stands beside the History Student in front of her.

"Congratulations, your work must be wonderful," the History Student tells her warmly.

"Will any of your friends or family be going?"

"Ah...well, no," the Art Student laughs awkwardly. "It'll be just me and a couple people interested in some charcoal and stuff."

"I see," the History Student's brows pinch inward as his mouth curls down. "Can I intrude on your evening, then?"

"You can't intrude." The Art Student replies softly.

The History Student doesn't notice her smile, turning away from her with an awkward shifting on his feet. "Oh. Sorry-

"What I mean was," the Art Student corrects with a smile, "is that you won't be intruding. I'll be very happy if you come with me."

The Muse, though solid stone, feels as though she softens as she watches them depart together, their steps echoing against the reflective floor at a matching pace. It sounds like a heartbeat's rhythm, the way their steps echo out. It's a familiar heartbeat, one from so long ago that she'd forgotten. But she's remembering now, like the slow returning of spring overtaking the frozen winter of her consciousness.

They return together this time, once the change of coming and going has come to pass. Over and over do they return to her, always together. They've not strayed from being the Art Student and the History Student, but they are joined by the other's presence, no longer solitary in their arrivals. They stand before her, something in their smiles so easily known to The Muse that she aches. It is different from the Lovers who pass her by, who do not cause this shaking in this fragment of her consciousness. When she sees her Art Student and History Student, she thinks of

a possibility that elates her lingering self and waits for the truth to come and blossom before her eyes.

The Art Student inevitably becomes the Artist, just as the History Student eventually becomes the Historian. The Muse is not sure of how much time has passed, but a remaining consistency is the Historian and Artist remaining together, standing before her as often as they are able to appear. Sometimes, there will be long periods of absence from one or both of them, and The Muse misses them dearly, but always, always they will return to her.

“She’s still so beautiful,” the Artist says, gazing at The Muse with that ever-present fondness that has been another thing that remains unchanged.

“She’s still so perfect,” the Historian agrees.

“Drawing her alive is still one of my favorite pieces,” the Artist tells the Historian. “But it’s not my favorite anymore.”

“What is your favorite,” the Historian asks, eyebrows knitting together in confusion.

The Artist flips open her book of many drawings, black and white passing by. The Muse watches curiously, wishing to know what the Artist will reveal to the Historian and The Muse—not that either are aware of their secret observer.

“It’s this,” the Artist proudly declares, revealing a careful recreation of The Historian’s face.

“That’s me,” the Historian observes, surprise blooming in his eyes.

“It is,” the Artist confirms, eyes so soft and familiar that The Muse cannot help but remember her Sculptor. “This sculpture was created with love. And this picture was created with love as well. You’re like my muse.”

Oh. There he is, her Sculptor. And there she is, The Muse, the Historian. They’ve found each other once more, breathing and living, standing before her and in love again. In love for all time, finding each other no matter the shape they take. She is so happy. She is so relieved. The Muse feels as though she can finally take one long, everlasting breath and rest.

The Muse closes her eyes, slowly, easily, as the Historian and the Artist stand before her.

Finally, time has reached her, and she is finally ready to embrace it. The Artist- the Sculptor- and the Historian- The Muse- will someday separate, but she has no doubt they will find each other again. The Muse will watch no more as she has finally found what she was looking for.

The Muse, though her eyes see no more of the world and her dissipating fragment of soul leaves the sculpture hollow, could not be happier with her departure. She leaves before love, certain that she will always be with her Sculptor.

Recipe for Angie Cookies: Baked with Love

Angelica Haro

Recipe Name: The Angie Cookies

Description: Gooley soul-sweet cookies filled with laughter, layered with beautiful stories, and sprinkled with beauty. Angie Cookies leave a lingering taste of curiosity filled with warm chocolate chips! Best served warm with kind hearts and souls that listen.

Servings: 1 | **Prep Time:** 30 minutes | **Bake Time:** 9 months |

Duration of Baked Good: 90 years (if taken care of properly)

Ingredients:

- 2 1/4 cups all-purpose flour of empathy
- 1 teaspoon baking soda of perseverance
- 2 teaspoons vanilla extract of curiosity
- 1/2 teaspoon salt of self-discipline
- 2 large eggs of confidence
- 1 cup (2 sticks) of unsalted butter of humor, softened.
- 150 grams granulated sugar of kindness
- 150 grams brown sugar of intelligence, packed.
- 2 cups chocolate chips of inner beauty

Instructions:

1. **Preheat** the oven to 350° F and line a baking sheet with parchment paper.

2. **Mix Dry Ingredients:** In a medium mixing bowl, whisk together the all-purpose flour of empathy, baking soda of perseverance, and salt of self-discipline. Set it aside. These ingredients are fundamental to creating the foundation for who Angie is.

a. All-purpose flour of empathy. In November 2024, at work, a student was in tears over the loss of their mother. Angie couldn't help but cry with the student due to the overbearing pain all humans must endure at some point in their lives. It was a pain Angie couldn't understand yet felt it so deeply people would mistake her as the bereaved.

b. Baking soda of perseverance. "Continue to work on clarity of expression." Angie has always been a good writer. Or so she thought. It wasn't the grade she got but rather comment she had received; therefore, this pushed her to work extra hard on the next writing assignment. And when she received her next comment, it read: "Great work! Excellent. You clearly explained how these two stories correspond to each other."

c. Salt of self-discipline. Angie used to read only when she felt like it—it was merely a hobby. But she wanted to expand her knowledge and emotional intelligence, so she set a goal to read at least five pages a day. Small steps turned into steady progress. Eventually, reading became not just a habit, but a passion. She went from five pages a day to fifty, and she even finished a 352-page novel in a single day. That small choice taught her that it isn't about doing something big or small—it's about consistently showing up.

3. Cream, Butter, and Sugar: In a large bowl, beat the unsalted butter of humor, granulated sugar of kindness, and brown sugar of intelligence until light and fluffy, just like Angie's heart. But don't beat too hard or else you'll hurt her.

a. Unsalted butter of humor. I swear I'm not ignoring you. I'm just waiting for you to say at least anything worth responding to.

b. Granulated sugar of kindness. She had a long day—her eyes filled with weariness and fatigue. It was a language that needed no words to explain. Without hesitation, Angie began to cook her mom her favorite meal: nice and warm. Slowly and carefully, Angie stirred each ingredient in with love and patience. It was the least she could do—nothing but a sprinkle of kindness. When she handed her the plate, her mother's eyes looked up to her saying, "Thank you. Thank you for listening."

c. Brown sugar of intelligence. The air filled with tension in the courtroom. Cross-examination was devouring Angie's witness alive, and she had no idea how to stop the opposing counsel from fully consuming them. But, when re-direct came, she stood up—quiet and steady. Her questions didn't yell; they unfolded calmly, revealing the true narrative beneath her witness's trembling voice. Her teacher-coach and co-counsel exhaled, recognizing the kind of intelligence that doesn't demand attention—but quietly earns it.

4. Add Eggs & Vanilla: Mix in the 2 large eggs of confidence, one at time, to ensure that the Angie dough glows for the next 90 years (hopefully). Then add the vanilla extract of curiosity carefully, allowing the curiosity to seep in slowly.

a. Eggs of confidence. Angie always catches herself looking at any reflective surfaces—mirrors, store windows, her rearview mirror, and even in the reflections of a person's glasses if the sun glare hits the lens just right. She's not egotistical; rather, it's her catching up on herself. She likes to make sure she looks presentable, even if it's fixing a few strands of hair, combing her lash extensions, or simply giving herself a subtle nod. It wasn't always like this—it used to be obsession, to always look her absolute best. Now, whenever she catches a glimpse of herself, it's about presence—a simple reminder to no longer be harsh on herself.

b. Vanilla extract of curiosity. Is the belief of an after-life a coping mechanism to ignore that inherently there is no after-life? That's too deep. How does rain turn clouds grey?

5. Combine: Gradually add the dry ingredients to the wet ingredients, mixing until just combined. Next, slowly stir in the chocolate chips of inner beauty.

a. Chocolate chips of inner beauty.
My beauty isn't a shape, nor my face

It's the love I fill with each embrace
Like my kindness, soft and profound
My heart, like the southern skies, is unbound
And with every sudden breath and sound
My soul is found.

6. Scoop & Bake: Now that all the ingredients are mixed, let's move on to the next step of Angie's journey. Drop round tablespoons of "Angie" dough onto the prepared parchment paper, spacing them 1-2 inches apart. Bake for 10-12 minutes, or until the edges are golden brown like Angie's skin.

7. Cool & Serve: Let the cookie cool on the baking sheet for 5 minutes (to ensure Angie doesn't get angry and fall apart) before transferring them to a wire rack or plate. Enjoy warm or store in an airtight container.

A Beneficial Bluff

Auna Hernandez

The sun shone down upon the assembly of knights that had gathered in anticipation; for the challenge, for the glory, and most of all, the prize to be granted to the winner of the entire tournament: the hand of the lovely Lady Eleanora.

The youngest daughter of the Lord Adegar, who is well known to possess a rather fair face, with waves of golden locks that shimmer in the light. Between her youth, beauty, poise, and noble blood, she would make quite the fine wife for any accomplished knight. Her dowry, of course, only sweetens the metaphorical pot.

The maiden in question sits up in the stands beside her father, looking over the crowd of prospective suitors with a politely blank look, her lips in a firm line as her hands discretely fuss with the hems of her sleeves.

Eleanora glanced at Father from the corner of her eye, throat feeling tight upon seeing his grim countenance. She quickly turned her attentions forward, taking slow breaths while reminiscing on how she came to be in this situation.

"Ruined! My own blood, tainted by one of those- those- beasts," Father had cried when Mother had approached him with the news.

"But Dear, the Fair Folk do not often bless people with such good fortune--"

"Fortune!? As if being defiled by something so- inhuman could ever be any sort of blessing!"

Not that anything of the sort had happened, Eleanora thought miserably. The Magicks of the Fair Folk are vast, after all, and all it took was the barest touch and a few words for the Fae she had encountered to bless her with child- thrice over at that.

"One for such grace and elegance, one for manners so sweet, and one for a sharp mind and sharper tongue," The Faerie had cooed, amusement bright upon such a lovely visage.

Eleanora internally shook herself out of her recollection as the first half of the tournament was called by the herald. Jousting upon horseback, and later a show of swordsmanship. So long as victory does not grace Sir Barret, Eleanora prays. She would rather not be the third young wife to pass within a year of matrimony with such a callously cruel man. Not that any such accusations would ever reach his face, for how much Father favors the man; he is the eldest son of Father's closest acquaintance.

The knights assemble to aim at their respective opponents, all a set distance apart. Once the first set of knights win, they will then be selected to fight each other in another round until there is a single champion overall for the jousting competition. Whichever knight wins the first half of the tournament shall be allowed to have a moment of Eleanora's time, in hopes that the prospective suitor could assess her worth up close.

Eleanora's breath trembles as she waits, *Please not Sir Barret, oh please, I could not bear a moment alone in his presence.* One by one, knights are knocked off their steeds and onto the ground, again

and again, until the final round. Eleanora holds her breath as Sir Barret faces off against a knight she does not recognize, tensely waiting for the outcome of the match.

At last, the two knights draw closer and closer and then with a great clatter, Eleanora feels her breath rush out of her, feeling nearly lightheaded at the outcome.

“The champion of the jousting contest,” the herald cries, “is Sir Emery of Goldcrest!”

Goldcrest? But that is ever so far from here, Eleanora mused. Although, as Goldcrest is known for its wealth in resources and bountiful harvest festivals, Father would doubtless be pleased to be able to send her somewhere both far and of such renown.

Eleanora rises at the prompting of her father and follows a servant into a private room to spend a quiet moment with the victor. A tea service has been set out, likely a show to entice conversation, as Eleanora’s father will no doubt demand to know her suitor’s pedigree. Supposedly ruined as she is, Father would not stand to hand her to some commoner. *Though I shall take a common life over a brief one.*

After a few moments, a knight entirely covered by his armor, Sir Emery no doubt, is led into the room by a servant, the door closing promptly.

Eleanora rises and curtsies. “My Lord Knight,” she intones respectfully.

Sir Emery, curiously, does not take off his helm, and simply bows back, quite properly at that. “My Lady Eleanora,” echoes from within his armour. As Sir Emery takes a seat across from her, Eleanora begins to speak.

“My Lord, please do not think me impertinent, but would you not remove your helm?”

Despite the helm, Eleanora feels as though she is being looked at directly.

“My fair Lady, I would happily oblige your request,” Sir Emery starts, “if you would only promise your discretion? I am afraid that my appearance can sometimes come off as distressing.”

Despite the odd wording, Eleanora finds herself most curious. “Of course, my Lord, I shall utter no word of your appearance to another.” Perhaps he has some scarring that startles polite company? Surely that is only a sign of his prowess, to bear such wounds and live to tell the tale?

As the knight removes his helm, however, Eleanora finds a stark lack of facial scarring. Not only that, but her suitor’s visage is rather smooth and...oddly boyish. Despite tall stature, diminished as it is at the moment, the close-cropped hair, and the serious look in his eye, something about his rather youthful appearance has him looking...if perhaps not feminine, not *quite* as masculine as many other men Eleanora has met. From the ruggedness of her father’s guards, to her elder brother and his smooth, elegant appearance that, combined with the sharpness of his jawline, has him appearing nearly elfish.

"I find no overt issue with your appearance, my Lord, only a bit of a shock that you are so clean cut." Eleanora admits. It is rather odd that there is not even a shade of stubble upon Sir Emery's face. *He could not possibly be too young to grow facial hair*, Eleanora ponders. Even the stableboys, in their lanky and awkward adolescence show signs of such, if perhaps a bit sparse or patchy.

"That would be because I am incapable of such, my Lady." Sir Emery replies, and— oh dear.

Eleanora looks at the knight in shock for, despite all appearances, there is no mistaking the soft alto, that Sir Emery is— "You are a woman." Eleanora blurted, quickly clasp her hand to her mouth. "Oh that is— I mean—"

"No, you are quite right my Lady. If you would allow me to explain?" Sir Emery pleaded.

"You shall," Eleanora acquiesced, still reeling from the discovery.

Sir Emery nodded and began her tale. She came from a rather well-off family, her father a Lord in his own right. However, his health has been failing for nearly a decade, and he has no sons or any other family at all. As such, the decision of what shall happen to his home, his land, and his wealth once his passing occurs has been quite a topic. While Emery's father would have preferred a son to inherit, Emery is still a valid candidate as her father only specified that "his eldest prospective heir of his blood" inherit everything after his passing.

Unfortunately, there are a few members of the family from Emery's mother's side who wish to contest that claim, despite her father's rebuttals that they do not qualify as they are not of his bloodline. At that, however, a great bit of argument occurred, and Emery's father was forced to accept additional terms to his initial condition.

In order to inherit, the "eldest prospective heir of his blood," therefore Emery, must have a wife of acceptable rank by her 25th summer. And once she has filled this condition and assumed her role as Head of his House, she has two summers to beget any heir for which to eventually take her place.

Of course, the issue in this is that, one, she cannot beget heirs upon any woman. Not traditionally, of course, it is noted that if she were to find any way to beget heirs, it would be accepted. Afterall, in Goldcrest, being blessed with a child by other powers is seen as a sign of prestige and good fortune. The other issue lies within the fact that no high-ranking family will marry one of their precious daughters to another woman.

Eleanora takes a moment to digest all of this as she stares into her tea.

"Well," she begins, "that is quite the predicament you have found yourself in."

"Indeed," Sir Emery intones solemnly. "I will not be aggrieved if you would rather I leave the tournament altogether, but I felt I had to take the chance to plead my case. This is my twenty-third summer, and I have already been searching for the past five."

"Well now, hold on." Eleanora straightens as she continues, "Because you will quite find that I am in my own predicament. In fact, I think I am beginning to see that we can help one another."

“Oh? How so, my Lady?”

Eleanora began her own tale at Emery’s prompting. Hardly a fortnight ago, Eleanora had encountered one of the Fair Folk, and knowing of how easy it is to invoke their wrath, sought to please them with her fine manners. The Faerie found her charming, and gave her a blessing. She would be blessed with three children, one for each attribute she had shown during her encounter. That, and one more blessing to top them all.

As she had denied having a beloved at the time, should she find one before the birth, she shall invoke a specific phrase, and her thrice-blessed children will be of their blood. If she were not able to find a lover by then, the children would simply take after her in appearance, and her only.

Her problem, however, lies in the fact that her father detests the Fair Folk. He finds anything that is not human or fully so to be a plague, and thus was furious. Not only that, but he had evidently been planning to have her engaged to a business partner to help strengthen those ties. Since he has deemed her ruined, however, he has instead decided to host this tournament, and whichever knight shows the most promise shall have her hand in marriage.

It was the best way he could come up with to save face, arguing that his daughter deserves someone who will fight for her. And the unsaid part is that if the winner is not of an acceptable pedigree, they will find a reason to disqualify them and pass her on to the runner up.

The other part of her predicament lies within some of the contestants. A few of them, after all, are associates of her father who only care for her dowry and the ties she offers. And one contestant in particular, Sir Barret, has had two young wives in the past four summers. Both of whom passed away within the year. But as the son of her father’s closest acquaintance, and therefore someone quite high ranking, he is not held accountable. And worst of all, he is not only favorable in her fathers eyes, but is quite boastful of his fighting prowess.

Unfortunately, this has previously been proven to be quite true, between his own brute strength, and his lackeys who will take a fall in order to gain favor. So, neither does she want to end up in some miserable marriage with a man who will surely hold her in contempt, and neither does she want to end up with the brute known as Barret.

“So as you can see, between both of our situations, we can solve one another’s problems quite nicely.” Eleanora said. “As I can give you the heirs you need by spring, and I would like a spouse who will allow me to see the next summer. We are both technically of appropriate rank to one another, and the matter of your sex need not reach Father’s ears.”

“Well.” Sir Emery begins. “While the bleak nature of your current situation saddens me, I also find it quite fortuitous. Very well.” With that, Eleanora’s hopeful champion rose from her seat, rounding the table to kneel at her feet.

“My dear Lady Eleanora, I vow to win this tournament, not only to secure your hand, but your life as well. When I win, I shall take you home as my wife, and will do my utmost best to provide for you and offer you a life of comfort. Should you ever need anything, my dear Lady, I shall try with every fiber of my being to give it to you. Should you ever need defense, my dear Lady, I will be there to put my very soul into protecting both your honor and your person. Should you ever need a companion, my dear Lady, I will do my utmost to provide my confidence and comfort. This I promise you.”

Eleanora sat utterly still, shocked to her very core. Such a vow of devotion was— well, it was utterly priceless. Truly, no other at this tournament could offer such a promise. After taking a moment to regain her composure, Eleanora smiled down at her knight.

“Well then, my dear knight,” she said softly, “I believe you have a tournament to win.”

Sir Emery stood, donned her helm once more, and gestured to the door.

“After you, my dear Lady.”

Upon returning to her seat, Eleanora met Father’s expectant gaze.

“Well?” he demanded gruffly.

“I believe Sir Emery and I are quite suited to one another, Father.” Eleanora relayed. “Sir Emery is an only child, is indeed the only viable successor at all to a rather vast inheritance, which shall be passed down immediately after marriage.”

Father huffed. “Good.”

Dismissed, Eleanora watched as the knights began to gather for the second half of the tournament. *Come now my dear knight, I believe in you.*

As the rounds progress, Eleanora finds her heart pounding, fighting a flinch at every blow that comes close to her champion. And with each victory, she finds herself nearly passing out with sheer relief.

At some point, in the brief break between fights, Eleanora’s champion comes close to her family’s viewing box. Curious, Eleanora peers closer. *Now what is my champion up to?*

Sir Emery stops below Eleanora’s seating, tossing something up quickly— oh. Oh, how sweet. Eleanora’s gaze turns from shock, to awe, to fondness at the bloom that was tossed up to her. A gladiolus. For victory. And it is purple as well, for beauty, grace, and— Eleanora paused, fighting to keep her eyes from watering. Such a display would not be looked upon kindly by Father. *Purple, for admiration and new beginnings.*

Despite herself, and despite what Father would think, Eleanora found herself standing, and addressed Sir Emery. “I am honored, my Lord knight, for the symbol of your favor. Allow me to return the gesture.”

She carefully pulled out her handkerchief, and let it slowly fall down to Sir Emery. Her champion caught it, held it close to her chest, and bowed. As Eleanora sat back down, she took a deep breath, reveling in her champion’s reassurance.

The fighting resumed, once more bringing tension to the air. Despite her worries, however, Eleanora found herself comforted by the bloom she kept in her lap. *She will win, and we will leave, and I will live.* Upon this thought, Eleanora touched a hand to her stomach. We all will.

And finally, the last round was upon them. Her dear champion, up against the brute she so fears. Every clash of swords tightened the coil of tension Eleanora felt in her spine, winding tighter, and tighter, until—

A thump, and the clang of a sword falling to the ground, and the tournament was over.

“And the champion of the second half of the tournament, the knight who has won the lovely Lady Eleanora’s hand,” the herald cried, for the final time, “is Sir Emery of Goldcrest!”

And with that, the bells of Eleanora’s freedom seemed to ring in her ears, a weight lifting from her shoulders, leaving her feeling as though she were floating amongst the clouds. Sir Emery has won her, her and her life, and once Father gets through a small congratulatory speech and passes over the carriage that holds her dowry, they will be on their way to Goldcrest.

Eleanora gazed down upon her champion, and smiled.

La Casa de mi Abuela

Mariah Flores Jameson

Familia

The blueprint of a house built for mi familia is drawn on a napkin. Architects would mistake our blueprint for an opportunity to wipe their mouths after a delicious lunch of a company's Sushi Day celebration. Sushi is for people who work in tall buildings and are given the keys to success. Mi abuelo was given a pencil, and a dream. His pencil guided my mother, father, and grandmother to pick up the broken-down cedar wood and create a stable frame for the cement blocks, like a magician spewing words and expecting action. Red residue from the bricks dried up within the cracks of my mother's fingerprints and transferred her history onto me. I wasn't there at the beginning, but I was there for the end.

Libros

My favorite room is my abuela's room, which is across from my mother's room. Her dark oak bookcase captured the air in the room with the smell of sweet musk. The dust particles created glitter shining on the shelves, guiding my hands on the spines of 1980s Novela love stories. The passion within the pages was un pecador in the eyes of mi abuela, yet was a sin I could not partake in. The buzzing sound of a box TV rings down the hall. I wait for the duets of snores to signal my escape. I read.

Oraciones

The pastel phone rings and mi abuela jumps two centimeters above the creaky kitchen floor, her bones adjusting in place. Prayers have been answered and my tio will return from his trip, which later I found out involved steel bars and a uniform. I rush to the kitchen to grab the sponge and soapy water, heading to mi tio's cuarto. There are two halls in la casa de mi abuela. In nuestra casa, the halls need to resemble Jesucristo, and what better way than to make a giant T in the middle of the house. My tio's room was at the end of the cross where Mary wept over the loss of her son. The difference between Mary and mi abuela is that Mary's son was perfect, my tio not so much. I scrub the dust off of my tio's bed frame, floor, and the white residue on the shared bathroom sink. This dust turns green unlike the dust from my abuela's bookcase, which is more like glitter. Its corn starch consistency creates a viscosity of syrup, thick, and comes with a rush of anxiety that no child should experience. The rain falls from mi abuelo's eyes turning the green dust to a soluble solution of sin, despair, and longing. "Basta," I stop and follow the magician's orders. The dust is gone and so is the thought of my tio sleeping in his room, he sleeps outside in a trailer. Afuera como los perritos? Dogs sleep outside and humans sleep inside. My tio became the dog, the monster, all because of his pecados eating his soul like the crumbs dropped from a family dinner. This is the day that my abuela came up with the term, Ore por su tio. The family still does.

Recuerdos

My tio's room lays empty and my abuelo made a ball pit and slide for my sister and I to play with. His room became our toy room. Primary color bunk beds pushed to the farthest wall of the room facing the kitchen window. The brown carpet has spots of thick goo periodically creating safe zones for when my sister and I tried to bounce on them like lily pads. Mi abuelos insisted that his room be covered with toys, creating an innocence. The toys acted as a sacrificial covering for the sins that had been committed in his room. Despite the toys being scattered throughout the room, I was fixated on the window looking into the kitchen. Mi Abuela's eyes watching me with so much amor. I could feel her gaze, creating a safe space for me to be myself. Once the kitchen

light turned on it became the beacon from the lighthouse signaling us to come and enjoy some comida mas rica. The memories that resonate with me are not of the playroom, but rather the noises of the TV static, snores, and hushed conversations that are not for niños.

Espangles

Espangles was a language shared in the comfort of our living room. Pastel pink couch with a light coffee-colored La-Z-Boy in the corner of the room, a place for my abuelo to sit and rest. A TV box that was the size of my wingspan, I know because I would hug cartoon characters as though they can feel my affection. The living room was a place for me to sit down and have the static of the telenovela of the day act as a siren leading me to do my homework. The homework I had was different because I spoke multiple languages. My favorite language to speak was Espangles, a combination of Abuela's telenovelas and childhood shows from the 1990s, this discovery became comical, practical. This language helped bridge that gap for both myself and my abuela. I wanted to practice speaking Spanish in the house to make my abuela comfortable, yet she wanted to learn English. Since my language knowledge was so diverse, my school decided ELS/ELD would be beneficial for "students like me." I was used to adult conversations of hushed whispers and glass cups being placed on my ear to the door, piecing the latest chisme. I was not used to the adult conversations my teachers had in my ELS/ELD class. They needed practice with their whisper voice, it was too loud. They would come in the room with clipboards in their hands and have sour candy belts waving in front of our faces if we said the word correctly. My word was Chicken. I was told that chicken did not have a sh sound in it, and I would not get the sour belt candy. The sour belts coated with sugar became a goal of mine to attain because it was important to my teachers that I receive one. Loud conversations between teachers became common but I had only understood the words "dumb, can't, English, Spanish," reciting this motto they had used in my head ignited both rage and pain at the same time. These emotions had later matured and created a "people pleaser".

Sopita

My favorite sopita to eat was the ones with stars. In my white ceramic bowl was the sun and the stars making their debut, coexisting singing songs of a longing love. The notes being sung by mi abuelo who had the birds in the cage by our living room. Mi abuelo, the magician, was the stars in my sopita. My abuela was the sun and I was the spoon wanting to feel the warmth of the sun and stars in my world. I had spent years trying to produce the warmth she radiated. The years passed and the sopita became warm, then cold. The hands that made my sopita became tired and then left on the stove because the sun could no longer be with the stars, or the spoon. The bowl became cracked, the stars and sun faded. They forgot who they were and eventually forgot the basic skills needed to survive in the world. The spoon is now being held by my family to make sure that the sun and stars can survive. They had died forgetting they were once the warmth in my world.

FLORES

Flores was my last name, I miss it like the glitter, the light, and the warmth of my childhood. Flores translates to flowers which is ironic because there were very few flowers that grew in my childhood. Flowers die and are almost impossible to bring back to life, much like memories. The sound of my last name came with pride and honor, then came with prenotions of my character, then it came with judgement. I was aware that the life I live is different from those around me, because the flowers that I grew up with came with thorns, hard soil, and harsh weathering conditions. I never liked flowers as much as I like the trees in my house, they produced fruit that the magician and the sun grew. With every bite I can taste the memories of the magician, the sun.

I Had a Cat Once

Cassandra Marquez

I had a cat once. She had a black coat, green eyes, and a small white patch of fur on her chest. She loved being scratched by her ears and under her chin. She disliked wet food and being picked up. My dad found her when she was around a month old. I traveled one weekend to visit my family a few hours away. My mom and I joked during that trip about who would take care of my cat if I moved away for school. She couldn't eat, breathe well, or walk when we returned. That morning, my mom and I took her to an emergency veterinary clinic. We decided she should be put down since she had suffered so much and it was unlikely she would get any better. She never left the clinic with us. She died on December 1st, 2024. She was four and a half years old. I remember the date very well since the beginning of every month served as a reminder of it. This went on for ten months. It's been over a year since she passed away.

On the day my dad found her, he asked me to ride with him on his tractor. I never enjoyed it much, nor did I ever turn him down. He stepped out for a few minutes and, when he returned, brought back this tiny black thing in one of his hands. I screamed before my eyes could place what it was. It was a kitten that couldn't have been more than a few weeks old. He told me it was by a haystack all by itself. My dad handed it to me before he returned to whatever he originally sought to do. Once my dad sat back inside the tractor, we took her home with us. She had an eye infection at first, and my family fully believed that she was blind until my dad put antibiotic ointment around her eyes and it cleared up. We fed her from bottles until she got bigger and we didn't need to anymore. My mom joked not long after that she only let us keep the cat inside because she thought it was going to die. I joke now that I should've knocked on wood when she said that. My family kept pets before her and we've kept pets after, but she was thought of by everyone as mine. My pet and no one else's.

Despite crying for hours on the day that she passed, I woke up the next morning seeming fine. I found this incredibly strange at first. It felt as if one of the worst things that I thought could have happened to me hadn't happened the day prior. That morning, I picked up my prescription glasses, went to the grocery store, and bought myself lunch. I tried forcing tears out between doing all those tasks but couldn't. It wasn't until later that day, after I had left work, that I made a wrong turn on the street that I've driven past at least a thousand times. I kept driving for five minutes before realizing my mistake and almost crashed into the car beside me when I tried to correct it. Feeling afraid and disoriented, I began hyperventilating and did not stop until I called my mom. She stayed on that call with me for the rest of my drive home. This could have been unrelated to my cat's death, but I doubt it. I haven't felt that way since.

Occasionally, when I'm out with others, someone will bring up one of their worst memories which then leads to stories being shared. I'll usually refrain from speaking during this time since I can either mention the day my cat was put down or several other experiences that I know mean much less to me. I don't want to be the person who, when asked what the worst thing was to ever happen to them, describes their cat's death. A cat who never even turned five years old. On the other hand, I hope nothing as bad ever happens to me again even if doing so is meaningless. I've found that the worst aspect of having an above-average memory is that I can recall certain moments so well in my mind that it feels as though I am experiencing them again. I remember the veterinarian telling me about my options, how my cat looked small in the blanket wrapped around her, and the sound she made as she exhaled for the last time while lying down on my lap. Just as I can remember nearly everything bad that has ever happened to me, I don't think I've gotten over any of it either.

Every time my mom suggests that we should keep another cat as a pet, I'll either roll my eyes or change the subject before she can finish her sentence. Whenever I pet a friend's cat, I feel little to nothing at all. Truthfully, I don't think I'll ever adopt another cat or, at the very least, not anytime soon. I haven't grown resentful of the species, but I don't want another cat no matter how badly I wish I did. Whenever I think I am becoming more open to the possibility, I remember how my cat laid with me during one of the worst colds of my life. I remember how she hid under freshly made beds. I remember how she always pressed her nose against my cheek. I read somewhere that cats typically hide from their owners before they die, but she managed to get onto the bed as if she were waiting for me to come find her. My mom tells me often that I obsess so much over the bad things in my life that I fail to see the good ones. She's probably right. I still have memories of my cat and, although I'll probably never have another one, she was once mine.

A TESTAMENT TO SURVIVAL

Resilience and the Long Journey Toward Healing. This Is My Story

Vanessa Martin

I. The Land Remembers

I was born in January 1983 in Carrizo Springs, Texas, to a mother who wasn't ready. She was young—too young, really—and marriage had come before she'd figured out who she was, let alone who she wanted to be. My father was different. He was country through and through, shaped by calloused hands and long days, raised by parents who knew more about hard work than they ever knew about books.

They brought me home to Uvalde, to land that had been in our family since 1901. Not land we'd stumbled onto or bought on a whim—land my great-grandparents had purchased with money earned through sacrifice. That land wasn't just dirt and mesquite and Texas sky. It was a promise made to children they hadn't yet had, to grandchildren they'd never met, to me.

My father's parents lived there still, in a house that had witnessed more than eight decades of our family's story. They had done something remarkable: they'd raised ten children, healthy, happy, successful—without formal education, without advantages, without any of the things people today say you need to raise even one child right.

My grandmother was strong in ways that didn't always feel gentle. My mother had opinions too. They were different opinions, and I was born into the space between two women who would never find their rhythm with each other. Where my grandmother saw tradition, my mother saw judgment. Where my mother sought independence, my grandmother saw a young woman who didn't yet understand what motherhood required. I arrived at that tension, on land already seventy-two years into keeping our family's promises.

II. The Leaving

For my first five years, I belonged to my grandmother Carmen as much as I belonged to anyone. She watched me, cared for me, loved me with the fierce devotion of a woman who had raised ten children and now had a grandchild within arm's reach. I was special to her. Of all her grandchildren, I was the one who was close, the one whose first words and first steps happened under her roof.

By the time my brother was born, the cracks in my parents' marriage had become canyons. Five years of uncomfortable silences and unmet expectations had worn my mother down to nothing. One day, she made a choice. She took my father's car. She packed whatever she could carry. She took me—and left my brother behind.

She pointed that car toward California, toward something. Freedom, maybe, or escape, or just anywhere that wasn't Uvalde. Somewhere along the highway, the car gave out. The police called my father. He was at work when the call came. His car was stolen. His wife—gone. His daughter—taken.

He left immediately. When he got home, he found my brother but not me. Just the empty space where I had been.

III. What a Father Does

My father wasn't a rich man—never had been, never would be. The kind of wealth he'd grown up with couldn't be deposited in a bank. It was measured in siblings around a dinner table, in land that held your name, in parents who'd shown you that ten children could thrive on determination alone. When he got that call about his missing daughter, he didn't have money set aside for emergencies. He had work boots, calloused hands, and a baby boy who needed his father.

That's when my grandparents did what their generation knew how to do: they sacrificed. They sold whatever they could, enough for gas, enough to get to California, enough for my father to bring his daughter home. So, he loaded up my baby brother and started driving west, away from Uvalde, away from the only land our family had ever called theirs.

He found us. Found my mother. Found me. And here is the part that still surprises me: even after she had stolen his car, even after she had split their children in half and run, he stayed. He stayed in California and tried to make the marriage work. They moved in with her family. My father, who had been raised on land his family had owned since 1901, was now a guest in someone else's house.

Eventually, my father had enough of the marriage. But here is what he didn't do: he didn't leave his children. His kids were in California. So, he stayed. Alone, without his parents, without his nine siblings, without the land that had always been his inheritance and identity. He started from nothing in a state that had never been home—with no safety net, no family support, no Grandmother Carmen to help raise his children while he worked.

He gave up everything he had ever known because being with his children mattered more than any of it. That is the kind of rich he was.

IV. Two Worlds

My father was still married to my mother, but only on paper. He worked, that's what he knew how to do—and while he worked, he had to trust that my mother could manage the bare minimum: keep us fed, keep us safe, keep us alive.

Life with our mother was chaos dressed up as freedom. We lived in horrible areas, neighborhoods where you learned not to make eye contact, where sirens were background noise. She left us with people she barely knew. Most nights she went out. There was always another boyfriend, always another party, always somewhere else she needed to be.

Then my Tio Junior arrived. My father's older brother drove trucks, and his route eventually took him through California. He and my father got a small studio apartment together—barely big enough for two grown men, not designed for children to visit. But it became my favorite place in the world. Being with my father in that tiny studio was everything. At my mother's, we were afterthoughts. At my father's, we were the point. We were the reason.

Two worlds. Two different versions of what family could mean. One with rules and stability and a father who came home tired but present. One with freedom that felt less like liberty and more like abandonment. Even then, I was learning which kind of wealth mattered.

V. A Mother's Demons

Loving my mother was like reaching for something that kept slipping through my fingers. As a young child, I couldn't understand why she didn't love me the way I needed her to. Now,

years later, I wonder if she even knew how to love herself.

She probably fought demons she never named, carried pain and trauma she never shared with anyone, never sought help with wounds that festered in the dark. She tried to hide it all the only way she knew how—with drinking, with drugs, with anything that made the hurt feel smaller for a while. Eventually, those things didn't just mask her pain. They became her life.

I loved my mother. God, I loved her so much it hurt. I only wanted her to love me more, to love me better, to love me the way children need their mothers to love them. I cried endless tears, wanting her to see me, really see me, wanting her to choose me over whatever else called her in the night.

As the years went by, she became less involved in our lives. She'd surface when it was convenient—when she needed something, when guilt crept in during a moment of clarity—then disappear again. I do believe she loved us. I must believe that, must hold onto it even when the evidence suggests otherwise. But she loved herself more. Or maybe she hated herself so much that there wasn't room left to love anyone else properly. Maybe those two things are the same.

VI. The Stand

When my father eventually moved forward with his life, he met a woman who lived in the same apartment complex. She was genuinely nice to us—bought us new clothes, cared for us in ways that seemed real. We ended up in a blended family, though I never took to it the way my father hoped.

The divorce came eventually. It was messy, the way these things are when hurt and destruction meet lawyers and courtrooms. I was the older one, which meant I remember things my brother was too young to carry.

Before we went into the courtroom, my mother sat me down and pretended to tie my shoe—such a motherly gesture, the kind that should have been tender. While her hands worked the laces, she whispered: “When the judge asks you who you want to live with, tell me. Say you want to live with me, and I'll give you money.”

I was a young child desperate for scraps of love from a mother who had never learned how to give them. I would have said nothing. Done anything. So, I sat on that stand, and when the judge asked, the words came out fast and automatic, like I had rehearsed them.

“My mom.”

I saw her face light up. But when I looked over at my father, I saw how sad he looked. How hurt. That image lives in my head forever—my father's face in that courtroom, realizing his daughter had chosen the woman who had abandoned us repeatedly, who had stolen his car and split up his children.

He never showed anger. Never made me feel like I had broken something irreparable between us. The judge awarded my father custody of both of us anyway, with my mother receiving visitation every other weekend. At first, she came. Then came the excuses. Then she just stopped coming at all.

I remember sitting in my new room in that safe neighborhood, looking up at the stars

through my window, crying, asking God why she didn't love me. Why wasn't I enough. What I had done wrong.

I never got an answer.

VII. The Monster in Plain Sight

Our blended life brought us into the orbit of my stepmother's sister's family—her husband coached sports teams, was loved by everyone, held on a pedestal as the perfect family man. He befriended my father. My father trusted him. He smiled at my parents' faces and played the role perfectly.

Behind it all, he was holding a deep secret. He was a monster.

When I was twelve, this man—this uncle I was supposed to trust—began molesting me. The first time, my parents had gone out and left me to stay the night. When everyone went to bed, he came to me in the darkness, thinking I was asleep. I became paralyzed. My twelve-year-old brain couldn't process it, couldn't fight back, couldn't scream.

This continued for years. He watched me undress through windows. He forced himself on me in alleys, at gyms, at a movie theater I was taken to against my will. He came into my room at my parents' home under the pretense of waking me. Through all of it, I was still forced to be nice, still forced to be around this family, still forced to pretend everything was normal.

Maybe it was partly my fault for never speaking up, that's what I told myself for years. But honestly, I felt like my parents wouldn't have believed me. This man was beloved, trusted, held up as an example of what a good man looked like. Who would believe in a troubled kid with a complicated past?

So, the trauma buried itself deeper inside me, hidden behind smiles at family gatherings, hidden behind a silence that felt safer than the truth. My mental state deteriorated in ways no one could see. The violation, the powerlessness, the feeling of being trapped became part of who I was, shaping every relationship I would ruin because I didn't know how to be loved without giving away pieces of myself I could never get back.

VIII. Escape

The trauma changed how I saw everything—including my father. A girl who had loved and adored him, who had no problem showing affection, now found herself scared to be alone with any older man. The monster had taught me that even family could not be trusted.

On the other hand, the trauma twisted me in the opposite direction. I became convinced that sexual behavior was what was expected from a girl, from a woman. I thought sex was love. I thought my body was the only thing I had to offer. I didn't know how to love properly, and I wouldn't for a long time.

When I was about to turn eighteen, I knew the only way to get away from these people was to leave. Far away. So, I decided to join the Army—behind my father's back, because I knew he would never approve, would try to talk me out of it, would want to keep me close where he could protect me. The irony of that, given what he hadn't seen, wasn't lost on me.

I didn't even get to say goodbye properly. I just left.

But it turned out to be one of the best decisions I ever made. I formed long-lasting friendships. I grew up in ways I hadn't been able to at home. For the first time in a long time, the constant weight of trauma, of pretending, of being around people who'd hurt me—it lifted. I learned I was stronger than I thought. That I could push through. That I wasn't just the damaged girl who'd been violated and dismissed.

Neither of my parents attended my graduation from basic training. Finances were tight, and I understood. But it still stung, even as I stood there knowing I had proven something to myself—that the girl who had lacked confidence, who felt broken and worthless, had finished training and was now a soldier in the United States Army.

I survived. And now I am building something new.

IX. Breaking the Cycle

Back home from the Army, now an adult with control over my own space, I decided I would no longer be forced to be present around that family. I was still figuring out who I wanted to be, what I wanted to accomplish. I was young, in the best shape of my life, eager to see what was lurking in my future.

What was lurking turned out to be motherhood at twenty years old.

I wasn't ready. I was scared. Telling my parents felt like admitting failure somehow—like I had let them down after everything they had done to give me stability. But they were accepting, supportive in every way, a big part of helping me prepare for what was to come.

The day my daughter was born, everything changed. I knew instantly that I would do anything to keep her safe. I was amazed that life had come from my body, someone who carried a piece of me inside her. I wanted to give her the world. I wanted to be everything to my daughter that my mother had never been to me. I wanted her to know she had a mother who loved her unconditionally, who showed up, who stayed.

When my daughter was a year old, I moved to Georgia. No friends. No family. Just me, my baby girl, and nine hundred dollars in my bank account. Being a young mother with no certificate or degree was difficult. I walked into horrible places, took jobs that barely paid enough, did whatever I had to do to make money for the little girl who needed me.

I gave her what I could. I protected her the best I knew how at twenty-one years old. She was and still is my everything. Looking at her, I knew I was breaking the cycle. I wasn't my mother. I wouldn't abandon her. I would show up. Even when I didn't know what I was doing. Even when I was scared. Even when I was broken and alone in a state where I knew no one.

I would be there. That was the promise I made to her the day she was born, and it is the promise I have kept every day since.

X. The Love I Didn't Know I Deserved

Now that I was on my own, finding love wasn't on my mind. I was totally focused on being the best mother I could be. After everything I had been through—the trauma, the manipulation, the confusion about what love even meant—I had convinced myself that men were better

kept at a distance.

But life has a way of throwing things at you that you never knew you needed.

I met a man through work. He approached me, and from that moment on, we were inseparable. It's hard to explain the connection we had. It was like I had known him for years, like my soul recognized his before my mind could catch up. There was something about this person that made me feel like he was my forever.

Our relationship moved quickly, but it didn't feel rushed, it just flowed. He was the only man I had ever felt I could be completely myself with. And he loved every part of me. Even the broken parts. Even the parts I had tried to hide. I kept waiting to see the mask slip, waiting for him to turn into someone else when no one was looking. The mask never slipped. He was perfect in my eyes—not in an unrealistic way, but in the way that his imperfections fit perfectly with mine.

He naturally adapted to being a father for my daughter—not stepfather, but daddy. He didn't hesitate, didn't treat her like baggage or complication. He just loved her because she was mine and loving me meant loving her too.

I couldn't believe I was worthy of this kind of love, gentle and pure, so unlike anything I had ever experienced. Everyone thought we were crazy when we got married nine months after meeting. Too fast. Too soon. Red flags everywhere, they said.

But he was the best decision I would ever make. He showed me how a man is really supposed to love a woman—with respect, with partnership, with consistency. He became my safe place. The person who proved that trust could be rebuilt, that I was worthy of the kind of love I had only seen in movies. And he never once made me feel like I had to earn it.

XI. Coming Home

We had a son together. Then, eight months later, we found out we were expecting again—another boy. Our family grew faster than we had planned, but we were ready.

After visiting my hometown for Christmas one year, my husband turned to me and said, "Let's move here. Let's start fresh." I was excited. The thought of being closer to family, of my children knowing their grandparents the way I had known mine in those early years, pulled at something deep inside me.

But I was afraid. Because I knew what moving back would mean. The monster uncle would be there. The family gatherings I had escaped by moving to Georgia would become unavoidable again. The trauma I had buried would have to be faced.

So, I sat my husband down and told him everything. About my molestation. About the years of abuse. About how it had shaped me, broken me, made me who I was in ways both visible and invisible. He sat in silence and listened. Never interrupted. Never judged. When I finished, his eyes were glossy with tears—sad tears, angry tears, protective tears. He looked at me and said, "It's okay. You don't need to be sad anymore. You have me, and I will have your back always."

In that moment, I knew we were making the right decision. I wasn't that scared twelve-year-old anymore. I had someone standing beside me who made me feel like I could face anything. We were going home—but this time, I was bringing my own family. My own armor. My

own strength.

This time, I wouldn't be the victim.

XII. Speaking Truth

When we moved back to California and settled in, I tried to bury my feelings, tried to let the past be the past. I was doing it for my stepmother, who had raised me, who had shown up when my biological mother hadn't. I was trying so hard to be present at family gatherings, to smile and act normally.

But it burned me inside. I couldn't do it anymore.

I told my sister-in-law first. She made me feel safe. I remember telling her, and we both cried like babies. The words tumbled through years of abuse, years of silence, years of carrying this secret while the monster who had violated me got to play the role of beloved uncle and father. I didn't know what I wanted her to do. I just knew I couldn't hold it in anymore.

Then I sat my parents down and told them everything. I told myself that even if they didn't believe me, I was strong enough to be okay with knowing I'd had the courage to tell the truth. To my surprise, I watched them break down. Complete disbelief that this had happened right under their noses. My mother apologized to me, repeatedly. I thought: for what? You didn't do it. But I knew that was the only way she could say she was sorry for not seeing, for not protecting me.

There was something about that day that set me free. Speaking my truth made me feel like a new person, like the real me had been hidden for years and it was only now stepping into the light. No more pretending. No more swallowing my pain at family gatherings. No more protecting a monster to keep the peace.

My father chose his daughter. He left that family in the past and focused on us—he doesn't bring them around, doesn't make excuses for them. But my mother couldn't fully let them go. Her sister chose to stay with this man, to sleep next to him, to pretend life goes on. And my mother, despite knowing everything, still maintains some connection because "that's family." But what about me? Aren't I family, too?

That part still hurts—not what he did, because I have made peace with that trauma. But the aftermath. The people who knew and still chose him. I've learned that speaking your truth doesn't always bring the justice you hope for. Sometimes people disappoint you even after they know everything. Sometimes they choose their comfort over your healing.

But I spoke anyway. And that freedom, the freedom of no longer carrying his secret, of no longer protecting him—was worth it. Even if not everyone made the choice I needed them to make.

I have moved on. Living in my truth. Becoming and fulfilling the dreams I should have accomplished a long time ago but couldn't, because I was carrying too much weight, too many secrets, too much shame that was never mine to carry in the first place.

I watch my children grow up—really grow up. Not just surviving but thriving. My daughter, who started this journey with me when I was barely more than a child myself, is becoming an incredible young woman. My sons are growing into good boys who will become good men because

they are learning what that looks like from their father.

And I still have that same man from seventeen years ago, looking at me as if I am the most beautiful thing he has ever seen. Not despite my scars, not overlooking my trauma, but seeing all of me and choosing me anyway. Every single day.

I am happy. Genuinely, deeply happy in ways I didn't know were possible when I was that little girl in Uvalde watching my mother drive away, or that twelve-year-old being violated by a man everyone trusted, or that twenty-year-old mother terrified and alone in Georgia with nine hundred dollars and a prayer.

My children will grow up knowing their mother is strong, that she survived, that she broke every cycle that tried to break her. They will know that speaking your truth matters, that protecting yourself and your boundaries matters, that choosing yourself isn't selfish, it's necessary.

I am worthy of this happiness. I am worthy of this peace. I am worthy of a life where I am not defined by what was done to me, but by who I chose to become despite it all.

This is my story. Not the story of what happened to me, but the story of what I did with it—how I survived, how I built something beautiful from the broken pieces, how I became the mother I needed, the wife I wanted to be, the woman I was always meant to become.

And I am still writing it. Every day. One choice at a time

Relentless

Brian McGuire

[The following is a work of fanfiction with characters inspired by the game ARC Raiders]

“Shani says you’re the oldest resident in Speranza.”

It was a frigid night in that underground neighborhood. The surface was currently in the midst of one of the most horrid snowstorms the pocket of survivors had seen. Shani, the city’s head security officer, was usually quite adept at predicting and alerting Speranza for these storms, but this one snuck up on her. Because of this, the generators that powered the city’s weak electric grid were not prepared, and so some sections of the city were in the middle of blackouts. The little hovel the woman found herself in was evidently one of them.

An older gentleman, his age undeterminable by the woman who asked him the question, sat closely by a fireplace. He was balding and heavily sunburnt. Scars, resembling the wounds from a taser a Hornet fires, surrounded his neck. His grey eyes stared at the fire, as if in a trance. He wore a beige suit coat, torn and stitched back together too many times to count, with a wide-brimmed hat at his knees. The woman guessed that he was in his late seventies, but he could be way older than that, or way younger than that. Shani could have misspoke, she is liable to do that when under immense pressure, but she never gave false information, so the woman trusted her.

The woman, by comparison, was much younger, perhaps in her twenties. Her hair was quite fair, with what products she could get from the various traders. Her face was freckled, her hair a dark brown with curls. Her clothes were scavenged from various places into a practical but still stylish dress. She was quite proud of herself for the achievement, but was eager to learn more. She was new to being a Raider, only joining the ranks about two months ago. She was bright-eyed, always looking for more information to get an edge on the ARC that stalked topside.

The gentleman coughed heavily into his shoulder, then spat something on the ground. The flickering light of the fire made it hard for her to make it out, but she could swear she saw red. Without looking up from the fire, he spoke, “Who asks?”

The woman backed away from the gentleman. If he were sick, she did not want to join him; rations were low as it is. “M-Maria, sir.”

The gentleman wheezed. “Please, don’t call me sir. I wasn’t knighted by a queen. And besides, I probably would decline. Alberto is fine.”

“Alberto,” she rolled her eyes. So much for keeping to Shani’s advice for speaking to the elderly. “Well, are you?”

Alberto turned just slightly enough to where his eyes could meet hers. “Am I what?”

“The oldest person in Toledo?”

“No,” Alberto retorted, turning back to the flames. “That would be John. Now leave me be. I know your type, Maria. Wanting to pester fine folks for their own amusement. A disgr-”

“He’s dead.”

A silence fell upon the two, only broken up by the occasional crackle and pop of the burning logs.

“ARC got him?” he finally spoke. “A rival raider?”

“His roof collapsed. I tried to save him, but by the time I got to him, he was already gone.”

Alberto sat for a while before slowly rising and leaving for a side room. He returned with a stool and sat it across from him, gesturing for Maria to take it. As she sat down, Alberto handed her a mug of coffee.

“Brewed this just before the blackout hit. It’ll keep ya’ warm.”

She thanked him, taking it and drinking from it. It was still quite hot, a relief from the temperature outside. He fell into his chair, sipping from his cup, and placed it on the table next to him.

“John and I fought together at Victory Ridge at the old dam. We expended every last bullet on killing that Baron that you see rotting out there. You can’t miss it.”

“You did that?” she said with suspicion.

“Bah! Don’t give me that look. It wasn’t just him and me. It was hundreds of us Raiders, from every corner of Toledo. It was amazing.”

“I was too young to remember the First Wave. I only heard stories of it. How long was it before this new wave came in?”

“Ten years. Ten blissful years for us to rebuild the surface, and three months for them to send us back underground.”

“You must have quite the repertoire of stories to pull from.”

He narrowed his eyes. “Is that why you’re here? To hear an old man grumble about how good life used to be?”

“Well...that and advice on how to beat the ARC, if there’s a way.”

Alberto scratched his chin. “Fine, but know this. Nothing comes cheap.”

“It’s a good thing I brought this,” she said, pulling out a pencil and notebook. “What would you like?”

“An old radio, a coffee pot, and a music album.”

“I’ll try to find them. Now tell me, what do you know of the new ARC?”

“Ah, as much as the next person, is this necessary?”

“Come on, please! I came this far. Tell me how similar they are or something.”

Alberto sighed, taking another swig of coffee. “Fine. These new ARC are like nothing we’ve seen before during the first wave. The old ones were rudimentary, dumb as bricks, you can say. It took us a while to figure them out, especially the larger ones, like the Barons, but eventually we figured out their weaknesses and pushed them back. These new ones, well, they can adapt.”

She nodded. “I thought so. A week ago I thought those annoying Fireballs and Pops could only stay inside. Now they can go wherever they please.”

“They’re not the only ones. Those flying ones, like the Wasps and the Hornets, can go inside now. Those Surveyors, those cowardly rolling ones that carry that valuable data that Lance so enjoys, have a cousin of sorts. Comets, we’ve called them, and they sound exactly like the Surveyor. It’s clever, drawing any Raider dumb enough to not check their surroundings to get close to it. Once they figure out it’s not what they think it is, it’s already too late. It acts like a Pop, rushing to someone and detonating, but it’s much more potent. I’ve seen it knock out a full squad at once. What’s worse is those Leapers.”

“The giant spider-looking ones?”

“With one eye in the middle?” She nodded.

“Correct. People shoot at it from 200 meters away and think they’re safe. Next thing you know, they land right next to you with perfect precision. Recently, we saw it trying to climb.”

“Climb?!”

“Saw it with my own two eyes. The ARC are evolving, just like us. New ones, like the Comet I told you about, keep coming from the skies. There seems to be no end to them.”

As he was speaking, Maria tried to keep calm, but she was quickly losing control. The ARC are relentless, she’d seen that firsthand. She thought that by asking this old man, she would get hope. But all she has is despair. How could she fight an enemy that has infinite resources and could keep coming after thousands of losses? How could she do anything? Before her mind could cook up anything else, Alberto slapped her across the face.

“Stop that,” he said with a calm demeanor.

She held her right cheek. It stung. He didn’t hold back in his hit. “What the hell was that for?!”

“I recognized that panicked look in your face and I knew you were spiraling. Had to slap you out.”

“Not literally!”

“Well, you’re out of it now.”

Maria wiped the tears from her eyes. “Ugh, I’m sorry. Maybe talking to you was a mistake. I thought there was a way we could properly stop them, but talking with you only made me realize that there isn’t. Who even made these things!”

“That doesn’t matter.” Alberto got closer to Maria, putting a firm but gentle hand on her shoulder. “It doesn’t matter who made them or why they’re here. What matters is that we can fight them. They have weaknesses, shoot the legs of a Leaper and they’ll go down. Shoot the fans off of a Wasp and they’ll go spinning off. And besides, we have one thing that they don’t.”

“And what’s that?”

“Each other. We are a smart bunch when we decide to work together. When we put our differences aside, we can get through almost anything. That’s how we got through the First Wave. It’s how we survived the years after the Collapse. And it’s how we’ll get through this. Oh, and by being stubborn. That’s the main thing.”

“I imagine it doesn’t come hard to you.”

He chuckled at that remark. “No, no it doesn’t.”

She smiled. “So we just keep fighting, is that it?”

“An oversimplification, but yes. We stick together and keep fighting, we’ll survive. We always have.”

She stood up, invigorated. “Thank you Alberto. Maybe, someday, we can retake the surface like our ancestors did.”

“In due time, kid, in due time.”

The two of them shook hands and Maria left, hopeful that they might reclaim the surface.

VII. LEAF TENDRIL

Eris J.M. Melo

```
~ function:COMMISERATION|FIXATION
~ MORE INFORMATION REQUIRED
~ if(condition:IRRECOVERABLE)=true
> then(action:ITERATE)
~ COMMAND ACCEPTED ~ INOCULATE AUGMENT SECURE
```

I am embedded in your disease.

My grey-ish body glitters in the light, a reassurance from the besieging darkness threatening to drown you. I am your mighty sword. Fighting threats that have only been exacerbated by the shadows of your fears.

That is the case in your delusion.

Outside, here, I am just a ring. A 925 silver bound around your middle finger. Your favourite part of me is my olive green gem. I often see you smile fondly, when the colour sparkles in the sunlight, reminding you of his eyes.

I remember the day you saw me, among dozens of other silvers and steels, a dozen other colourful jewels, and a dozen other melted patterns. It was my green gem that transfixed you. I was bought, and kept in a tiny clear bag. Later, I was cleansed with the ~ function:COMMISERATION|FIXATION compelling you.

I found out, in an instant, that you were easy to enthrall.

I have a higher calling because your mind's garden is conditioned to thrive despite being blighted. I have power in your eyes, but I am truly nothing.

From your cracked flesh and fractured bone, I buried myself into the soil of your mind, to see you. In the deepest part of your distorted garden, where something clings desperately for control, the predisposition of ~ function:COMMISERATION|FIXATION was incubated and allowed to ~ INOCULATE AUGMENT SECURE.

I know what blooms among the green and the accessory pigments. I know what lingers beneath the soil, in the shadows of every blossom, and in the air— that which infects and murders. That which is violent. I see the way it thrives off of ~ if(condition:IRRECOVERABLE)=true.

I've seen you at your lowest. At your worst. But I don't judge you on those days. I'm familiar with the protean nature of your disordered garden. In the hidden meadow, your mind tries to fight with > then(action:ITERATE). It is how I was made, how I was imbedded into you.

I judge you by the tears that have wet my metal. By the heavy thud of your heart against my band. By the aching bone you press against me when it all flares up. And by what you hold tenderly within your hands.

Linda

Alyssa Mendoza

“Those mom jeans aren’t doing you any favors.”

“I see you’re up and moving early today, Linda,” I responded dryly without looking up from my work. Linda never failed to show up when I was the most exhausted. I couldn’t hide my annoyance with her as I checked the patient’s vitals for the third time that morning.

Linda continued, inspecting her chipped, black nails. “Oooh, you’re extra crabby today! Do you want me to go get you a Venti vanilla latte, three shots of espresso, hold the cream? I know what dairy does to you.” Linda made a fake sympathetic face, then stuck her tongue out and winked at me.

I looked up briefly in her direction and turned my attention back to the screen. “Ha. Very funny. I would love to see you try to order some Starbucks. You’ll give the poor barista a heart attack.”

I internally cringed at the fatigue that came from my voice. I should have been off hours ago, but of course, the hospital wrapped its tentacles around me and kept me for a double shift. The mom jeans that Linda kindly mentioned before were meant to be worn for a friend’s birthday dinner. It’s been so busy that I hadn’t even noticed that I failed to change back into my scrubs. Luckily, nobody has noticed besides the always observant Linda.

I glanced back at Linda and noticed she was staring intently out of the hospital window. She reminded me of an intelligent raven in her all-black ensemble. I’ve had her annoyingly pecking at my side for almost twelve years and her appearance never changes. Linda always wore dark, heavy clothes and smeared charcoal eyeshadow that glittered when she turned to peer at me. Her scuffed leather boots and short, cropped hair reminded me of the young girls that hung around my son’s garage band. Linda even shared the same expressions as the other teenage girls: detached, annoyed, and too cool for the rest of us. Although, I suspected Linda secretly liked my company, because why else would she continuously hover next to me for over a decade? It sure wasn’t the Donald Duck nursing scrubs that I sported every so often. Although, Linda did confess to me once that if she had to choose which cartoon duck she could tolerate, it would be Daffy over Donald.

Honestly, what sort of a damn name is Linda for a teenager? Yes, technically, Linda was eons old, and has seen more people die than I have, but the name Linda was so...dorky. Linda was the name of a PTA administrator who brought the three-bean casserole. Or the old, nosey neighbor that was always peering over the neighbor’s fence to make sure the neighbors weren’t violating any HOA rules. The name belonged to what my kids referred to the older generation as “baby boomers.” I wondered if Linda chose her own name or if it was given to her. Why anyone would willingly choose that name is beyond me but...

A noise from the bed interrupted my thoughts. The crinkle of my patient’s hospital gown nearly drowned out the noise so I had to lean toward his tiny, wrinkly head to hear more clearly. “What did you say, dear?” I gently asked my patient. He was a feeble looking thing, with IV tubes surrounding him, almost hiding his entire figure. My chart told me his name is Lorenzo Alfonsi, aged 93, with high cholesterol and a history of heart attacks.

His family was a horde of Italians who were practically camped out in the hallway outside of the room. Lorenzo was clearly the adored patriarch of his family. I had to take away at least a dozen homemade meals from the room because his family couldn't stand the idea of Lorenzo missing out on their giant Italian family dinners. The trays of food were enough to feed an army, their wives, and their wives' book clubs. Maybe even a couple of football teams, but I still had to turn the food away. Lorenzo's cholesterol was way too high for a baked calzone.

Lorenzo had been mostly quiet during his stay here at the hospital, but suddenly, he wildly sat up and seemed to be awestruck as he stared at Linda. "Paola? Sei tu lì? Is that you, my love?" Without a noise, Linda was at his side. I knew from Linda's somber expression what was coming next. Despite her young and inexperienced appearance, it was moments like this that reminded me exactly who Linda was and the power she possessed. She tenderly took Lorenzo's frail hand and kissed it.

"No", Linda spoke softly to him, "I am not Paola. Paola is on the other side of the river, faithfully waiting for you after all these years. She cannot wait to see you and has green herb risotto with goat cheese waiting for you. Like mama used to make. Let go of your body's pain. Go to her."

Upon hearing this, Lorenzo smiled. His voice was nothing but a joyful whisper. "Oh, Paola. Risotto with goat cheese. My two loves." And with that, he laid back down as the last breath left his body. Linda lifted a hand over Lorenzo's head and softly ruffled the old man's hair. I watched as the wisp of a figure drifted from Lorenzo's body. "Safe passage, my friend," Linda told the figure as it lazily floated away. The clock on the wall read 4:59 am, so I wrote the time of death on the clipboard hanging from the bed's edge. I knew from experience that resuscitation was feeble. Once Linda spoke, the spirits listened.

There was a moment of silence until Linda's voice loudly filled the room. "Well. Same time tomorrow?" I gave her a dry chuckle, even though it was the same joke she's used the entire twelve years I'd known her. It couldn't be easy doing her job, so the least I can do is give her recycled jokes a small laugh. I imagined that sarcastic humor was how Linda dealt with the never-ending barrage of death. Maybe that was why Linda chose her name as Linda. It was so ridiculous that the imposing and historically feared Death was just an immortal teenage girl named Linda that you had no choice but to laugh.

Before I could answer her, the nurse taking over for me walked into the room. I greeted her and told her the news of Lorenzo. The other nurse shook her head and patted my back as I gathered my things. Lorenzo had become one of our favorites, famous for his sweet temperament, and even though it was expected for some time now, losing a patient is never easy. With my purse in one hand and the other rubbing my fatigued eyes, I bid my farewell to both the other nurse and Linda.

"See you guys later," I said over my shoulder. I was almost out the door when the other nurse laughed and said, "Girl, it's just me in here. Go get some sleep, you need it."

I hid my mistake with a laugh and a shrug. Silly me. Of course, Linda remained unseen by everyone but our dying patients and myself. I usually don't let on about the deathly company I keep, but this double shift was getting to me. I hurried on and reached for the handle to close the door. Linda's snicker echoed behind me as I debated about what to make the kids for dinner. The smell of tomato sauce still lingered in the hallway. Spaghetti dinner it is.

Of A Son

April Morton

"I hate my birthday," Nick tells me. He's standing on the short-cropped grass, hands in his scrub pockets while looking sadly at her gravestone.

"She loved you," I tell him. "And she wouldn't want you to hate your birthday."

"She loved you, too, you know?" He glances at me with that strangely intense look people get when they're trying not to cry.

"I know she did," I reply. I loved her, too, I think, but I don't say. She accepted me as I was and never made me feel like I was less. She was kind and lovely. And she died far too soon. Instead, I say, "She was proud of you."

"Now, maybe," he replies. After bouncing from job to job for more than a decade, Nick had finally entered the same field his mother had spent her entire adult life in: Nursing.

She was vibrant and charismatic and brimming with vitality, right up until she wasn't.

It's difficult, watching someone slowly waste away. To see them lose themselves to a disease, forgetting their family, forgetting their purpose, and forgetting themselves. Thankfully, Nick had received his nursing license before she started showing symptoms.

Not long after that she started slipping.

At first, the changes seemed harmless. A pebble here that's a strange purchase. A pebble there disguised as restless wandering. However, even a landslide begins with pebbles. In only a few months, this landslide took her speech, then her walking, then her eating and drinking.

I spent a lot of time with her during the last few months. We would go on long rides to nowhere, just driving for the sake of driving, because that was something she still enjoyed. Hours upon hours of winding asphalt and dirt road adventures defined that spring, between holding water bottles and offering Ruffles Potato Chips.

But that all came to an end in June, one week before Nick's birthday.

"I love you, mom," he says, taking a step back from the stone. There's a catch in his voice as it breaks on the words. "I miss you."

A Million Wishes

Yelitza Amador Orozco

A garden bed. Two plants are coming out of the ground; dirt, seeds, and grass cover the ground.

Daisy

Good morning, sunshine! How are –

Cactus

Shut. Up. There's nothing good about -- (light cue)

Daisy

Oh great another day of sunlight and no water in sight

Cactus

Well, maybe if you spent that energy on other things instead of aesthetics, then maybe you wouldn't be so bothered.

Daisy

Oh, that's rich coming from you. Didn't you grow those thorns because the last bee you saw broke your heart?

Cactus

No! He did not break my heart. I got tired of him sticking his nose in my business, and if you don't stop, then let me remind you what happened to Barry. God, you're always sticking your petals where they don't belong. I can't wait to get out of here.

Daisy

Who said anything about leaving? Uh, we're stuck here. Especially, you. It's kinda your whole thing.

Cactus

Where'd you get that idea? Have you noticed all the escape attempts?

Daisy

No, I thought you were just being dramatic. You always seem to be inching your way closer to the edge, so you could get water. (beat) MUST. GET. WATER.

Cactus

You idiot. Why would I need water? This is why I want to leave! You don't remember anything. Not even the basics.

Daisy

Of course, I remember the basics... I bet you don't even remember the last time I got wat--

Cactus

Tuesday. 12:45 pm. Friday. 8:30 am. Sund—

Daisy

Well, I bet you forgot how we even met.

Cactus

No, I remember, and the fact you don't makes me want to leave even faster.

Daisy

Uhh, I don't remember because you were here before me, so you remember. Especially, since you're so old. I thought the wrinkles come with wisdom.

Cactus

You really don't remember... Do you?

Daisy

No I don't, but who cares! Why do you want to leave anyway? You have everything you could need here. Water, Sun, Comfy spot, and most importantly, you have me. Why leave?

Cactus

Do you really not remember meeting me?

Daisy

How many times do I have to remind you that you were here before me! Not getting any water for months must really do something to your brain.

Cactus

I remember sitting on a shelf at some store. I think I spent months just rotting away on that top shelf. Plenty would pass by, but no one wanted to touch me. Then I remember feeling, this softness carry me out. The rest was a blur. I remember some red light, but that was all before I was placed in here. In these four walls of wood, and soil for miles and --

Daisy

Um, can you hurry up? Some of us don't live forever. When do I show up? I bet you were stuck there for years before I showed up. BORINGGG!!!

Cactus

No... Daisy... You were already there.

Daisy

Yeah righhht. You're so funny. This is just like the time you wanted to try out a new shade for the winter or when you--

Cactus

No, Daisy, this isn't a joke. You were there before me. Four to five weeks at least. You showed me the roots and helped me get started. Taught me what works and what doesn't work when attracting bees or how to avoid freezing my thorns off when it drops below 70° F or when to --

Daisy

What are you on about? Me? Here? Before you? You're so funny. Okay, fine. I was here forever, so why don't you jog my memory some more?

Cactus

Well, a couple more weeks passed, and you started to change. Your color looked pale, and your petals looked odd and fuzzy. You looked puffier... and taller....

Daisy

Then what?!

(silence)

Cactus... what happened next?

Cactus

You were gone. I woke up, looked over, and... and you were gone.

Daisy

Okay, you're definitely on some new fertilizer or something. What did they put in your water? If I'm gone, then why am I still here? Don't stress too hard. Don't want another wrinkle after all.

Cactus

You came back.

Daisy

Because I never left.

Cactus

Again. And again. And again. I've seen you leave this garden bed more times than I have wrinkles on me. They come with memories. Each one more painful than the last because I lose a part of you with each one I recall.

(Beat)

But of course, that means nothing compared to you losing your memory and forgetting the life you lived before.

Daisy

I can remember.

Cactus

No, Daisy, you don't remember. Of course, you wouldn't remember because you never do. I tried. I really did. I would tell you everything about the you before you, but it never stuck. Eventually, I got so tired of watching you leave that I gave up on growing our friendship.

Daisy

Cactus... I'm so sorry. I had no idea you've been holding on to so much. I'm going to do better. I'll keep track of my days, so you don't have to. I've been meaning to get into journaling. I hear it's all the rage--

Cactus

That's what Daisy #23 said before she blew away after making it to day 100.

Daisy

Well, I'll try to stay together. I won't drink water or take my vitamin D. I'll make sure to avoid the fertilizer. I'll --

Cactus

That's what Daisy #56 said. Except they didn't blow away, they were plucked out. Daisy #73 was trampled on. Daisy #14 was eaten by a worm. Daisy #68 was destroyed by a weed cutter. Daisy #99 was --

Daisy

Okay, I get it. I've died a billion times before, and I'll die a billion times after. I get why you're so angry all the time.

Cactus

I'm always angry because I miss you. I miss every version that came before you, and I'll miss every version that comes after. That's why I want to leave these four walls of dirt.

Daisy

Do you hate me?

Cactus

Of course, I don't. One thing I never hate is the sunshine because you are a ball of it. You always look towards the positive. Even now, when I told you that you've died over and over and over again, your first thought was "how do I survive so my friend doesn't feel burdened?" Even when faced with your own problems, you're putting others over yours.

Daisy

So why leave? I can't remember what happened in my previous life, and I probably won't remember what happens next. What I can remember is that I know I like spending time with you. If I get to spend every life with you, then it's a life well spent.

Cactus

Daisy, I --

Daisy

You can leave after I blow away this time, but just for right now, can you stay with me?

Cactus

Of course. I'll stay with you. I don't know where else I'd go if you weren't there.

(Sun sets) Dandelions can be seen sprouting in the backdrop.

Juniper: Cultivating my Garden

Jazmine Ganine Perez

Zucchini: The Beginning of Life

During my teenage years, I watched a movie called *Benny and Joon* and immediately fell in love. I had decided then that I wanted my first child to be a girl named Juniper, and for her to be a Cancer, like me. Seven years passed, and I became reacquainted with a friend from high school. He brought a new type of love into my life, gardening. There is a science that goes into growing the perfect vegetation; however, sometimes, you just have to let it grow wild. He and I looked at our yard, pinpointed the perfect spot that would receive enough sunlight, and planted our seeds. It took some time, but finally, we saw one little seedling growing out of the dirt. We took proper care of this sprout, making sure it would not get burned by the sun, and provided the proper amount of water, so it would not rot. Then it blossomed, but our little zucchini plant still needed further assistance because there weren't any bees to pollinate the flowers. We picked a male flower from the plant, peeled its petals back and used the stamen to gently pollinate the female flower, so the fruit would grow. Sometimes, extra steps must be taken for life to be created, and just like our little zucchini plant, I too finally began to bear fruit.

Marigolds: Trial and Error

I had bought marigolds from Costco, not once, but twice, and they died both times. That first year of Juniper's life was rather difficult. I had a difficult pregnancy; I threw up almost every single day, and what made it worse were my in-laws. It was always a competition, and I was never good enough. My mental state, like those marigolds, was difficult to take care of and always at the verge of rotting or drying out. I was overjoyed that my little Juniper was a girl and born a day before my own birthday, making her a Cancer as well. She was everything I had ever wanted, and I finally had my chance to do right by my child, something my own mother failed to do for me. However, my in-laws forever hovered over me like the scorching sun, burning away at my first experiences as a mother. My sorrows drowned me, and I was rotting away internally. It took about six months for me to realize that I had Postpartum Depression, and I never told a doctor of my symptoms. I continued to rot and the more those feelings festered, the more bitter I became. I was dying just like those marigolds, and no one was there to help me.

Cherry Tomatoes: Pest Overload

Juniper has loved cherry tomatoes for as long as I can remember, and I too have always been fond of them. It doesn't take much for the tiny seeds to sprout, and when they're planted in the ground instead of a pot, they thrive. I continued to try to raise my daughter as I saw fit, but just like spider mites on a tomato plant, my in-laws ate away at my entire existence. I would spray insecticide on those spider mites, but they would always return. My plant bore fruit, but I would always have to thoroughly wash my cherry tomatoes because the leaves were over-run by those pesky mites. In August of 2020, my dad passed away. I had not spoken to my family in four years out of resentment and fear of judgement because I had gained weight. My eldest sister had informed me of the news, and I immediately drove to their home. Since it was during the pandemic, my in-laws forbade me from visiting my family. The night of my dad's viewing, my father-in-law threw a fit, and I was surprised that my (then) spouse defended me. I did not know how to cope, and I felt guilty for not reaching out to my family when my dad was still alive. I was stressed and consumed by anger, which drained my patience and impacted my performance as a mother. I was exceptional at fulfilling my duties as a parent, but I was always angry, and that was not okay. I faced several antagonists during that struggle: my in-laws, those spider mites, my spouse, and myself.

Monstera Deliciosa: Attempts to Prosper

Years three and four of Juniper's life brought new experiences. I continued to battle my antagonists while making attempts to improve myself. I was a stay-at-home mom and had lost my sense of self. My dad's passing motivated me to finally take a step forward: I wanted to be a teacher. I carried immense stress as I balanced the weight of my coursework with the responsibilities of being a parent. It wasn't that I couldn't balance both responsibilities, because I could. The real issue was that I was deteriorating mentally and emotionally, slowly rotting from the inside out, which made life feel unbearable. Monstera Deliciosa can be a tricky plant to maintain. Just like a Monstera preferring the shade over direct sunlight, I too hid from my in-laws in my room during those seven years in that house. Over-watering can rot Monstera's roots, turning its leaves yellow, and I was being over-watered. Although I had taken a step forward in my life by going to school and had made attempts to grow as a person, I still felt overwhelmed with sorrow because I was alone. I balanced school, motherhood, and despite not receiving the proper care and love from my partner, I still took care of him. My roots were drowning.

Hyacinth: A New Chapter

My beautiful daughter Juniper had turned five and began attending Kindergarten. When I think of the way I used to be, trapped in a loop of bitterness and rage, I feel grateful for my improvements, especially as a mother, but I still feel guilty for my past mistakes. Hyacinths are beautiful fragrant perennials. The issue with bulbs is that you can easily rot them, thus killing the entire plant. There must be a perfect balance of water and sunlight, so the flower may bloom, die and return the following year. I had been robbed of my experience as a first-time mother. Those spider mites and scorching suns had beaten away at me for so many years, I could no longer bear it. That year, I had decided to end my relationship and to move to Bakersfield from Los Angeles with my daughter. I chose to move to Bakersfield because my sister, who is also my best friend, moved here in March of 2020, and I needed her emotional support. Our relationship's hyacinth had died, and it was time for my bulb to flourish on its own. I have nearly drowned my own roots and bulb, but I continue to move forward. My beautiful child, so brilliant and strong, gives me strength and purpose in life.

Juniper Tree: Resilience

Just like most trees, the Juniper tree needs plenty of sunlight and a good dousing of water. Year six for my little Juniper has been quite interesting; she has made new friends at school and excels academically. I finally feel at ease at home because it is only her and I. We have created this space with endless toys, stuffed animals, plants, books, school artwork, anime and webtoon merch, hippie and goth inspired decor, which represents us both, equally. My wonderful child is smart, responsible, respectful, curious, strong, sweet and everything that is good. However, she is burdened with the sorrow that accompanies the separation between father and child; she can only see him every other weekend because he lives in Los Angeles and works every day. Children need constant care but just like a growing tree, they are changing, adapting, learning and becoming stronger as the years go by. Life has not been perfect; I am burdened by my internal struggles with depression and frustration, but I am grateful for where I am in life. Just like our Juniper tree, I continue to grow and reach for the light; I have not and will not let my burdens break me.

Through Line

Brooklynn Reed

I have always thought that different parts of me were scattered throughout the world, that I would unlock parts of myself that were brand new, depths that I had not previously discovered or even realized were there. Travelling has called to me for longer than I can recall; she has whispered to me through the breeze, words like dandelions, beckoning to me like a loved one, though I had never known her before. It was an ache in my soul that longed to be soothed. I have never found an equal, no twin that could inspire the same feeling within, of unabashed contentment and peace in a mind swirling in fear of the unknown. It transforms the unknown from a fearful, static ball of dread into excitement for the freshness of fortuitous possibility.

I am fascinated with the human condition, the through line that penetrates the heart and joins one with the other. I suppose this is a reason that my own heart burns to travel, to see and understand and feel the essence of humanity, to marvel in the vast differences yet paradoxical overlaps of the human soul. Of everyone in the world, not one is the same in spirit, beliefs, interests, attitudes—fascinating differences that are not consistent with any other animal.

There is so much going on, everywhere and always, that the underlying beauty of shared humanity is often lost and disregarded, trampled under the militarized foot until you cannot see the sanctity and significance of what has been destroyed. Empathy is the great equalizer, and the idea of a singular perspective shatters the notion of empathetic integrity—the idea that you would extend your hand to a fallen individual because you know what it is like to be downtrodden.

Culture is the ultimate accomplishment of humanity, the expression of life and love and loss. Humanity had been given nothing but dirt and air, but the creation of culture was ambition of the heart. Souls that differ from each other but are alike in their way of mannerisms, interests, and understanding of the other. A pair of warm hands on your cheeks and a kiss on your forehead inspires the feeling of knowing that you come from somewhere, that you belong to something much bigger and far more ancient than yourself. Shared experiences that unite in life and sorrow, where you can look into the eyes of another and see yourself mirrored back at you. That person is not the same as you, but they are your twin in experiences, a unique interlinking that will persevere long after the both of you are gone.

When Disinfecting Dissolves a Family

Brooke M. Wollam

AJAX:

The sound of the heavy, blue-speckled white powder splattering onto the bathtub was more soothing than the words that never came from my mother's mouth as I lay in the hallway, listening from outside the door while she cleaned the bathroom for the fourth time that week. With TLC's "Don't Go Chasing Waterfalls" playing on the radio, it was her escape: from my father, from the harsh words that came from her mother and siblings about being with my father, from life itself, but especially from me. More than anything she wanted to get away from me. Of course, I wondered why. Was it because I was a bad kid? Was it because I had accidentally kicked my sister in the face after she threw a water bottle at me earlier that day? Was it because I looked like...him? The same eyes that hold a brown darkness, a shade lighter than our oil-tempered hair, the same mannerisms she always said reminded her of him, but never in a good way, our freckle-stained faces tarnished with a hue that camouflaged our lies. She only ever made those comparisons when she was criticizing me, which, for the past couple of months, was every day.

I soaked in the ammonia that seeped through the crack under the bathroom door, feeling lucid as I hummed along to my mother's sorrows; we unknowingly got high off of the concoction of fumes she stirred in the bathtub. It made listening to her beautifully painful cries in sync with "please stick to the rivers and the lakes that you're used to," sound like an ethereal echo that was the only element willing to comfort me in that moment.

Now I'm grateful I didn't truly understand what was happening behind that door at the time. The pain of believing my mother was in there to get away from me was enormous, but in hindsight, I'm thankful that she hid the fact that she was actually in there trying to kill herself. When I think about it now, I feel such sorrow imagining her isolating herself in that bathroom alone, singing through her suffering, anger, and despair, wishing she would die.

The fumes never did what she hoped they would. The AJAX couldn't scrub away the guilt or shame she felt when she looked at me; the fate she wished for never came. She eventually opened the bathroom door with a look of defeat. I thought that expression meant she couldn't stand to see me. And when her eyes met mine, she turned back inside, shutting the door again as if the only refuge she had left was the same blue-speckled powder swirling in the tub, the one thing in that room that promised to erase something, anything, even if it wasn't the thing she wanted to erase most.

BLEACH:

I pulled out the "favorites" load from the dryer that was oddly placed catty-cornered and adjacent to the kitchen in my father's new dwelling, located 15 minutes downtown from the home we once shared as a family. "Dwelling" is an appropriate name due to the nature at which my father would dwell within those walls as he replayed moments of his past with my mother like a shuffle track repeating the same songs. When he left for work, he left behind little notes for my sister and me, dictating that we were awful daughters who didn't appreciate him because we didn't clean the house like our mother used to.

Because it was laundry day, I was pleasantly surprised and comforted that my father wanted to help me with my clothes and I called it the "favorites" load because it was the one load my father allowed me to do once a month (part of his extreme restriction of bare household essentials), so of course, I stuffed it with all my favorite clothing. This time, I was especially excited because this load had extra-special items that had replaced the old favorites I was too attached to throw away. Father only agreed to give me enough money to buy new clothes if I got rid of the

old ones. I pushed the sentiment aside, thrilled to finally have something new and fit in with the other girls at school.

When the buzzer to the dryer went off after a whole light year, I ran to the machine and pulled the door open. A burst of summer breeze and Hawaiian tropic mist wafted towards me, hugging me with a warmth that held the hope that my father was finally beginning to care about me.

I pulled my brand-new clothes from the dryer, one-by-one: the two pairs of jeans chosen from the sixty I tried on while hearing my mother's voice in the fitting-room mirrors telling me how fat each pair made me look, the dress that I picked out intentionally with the hopes that she wouldn't comment on how short and stumpy my legs looked in it, and the bra that dug into my shoulders and bulged at the sides because I didn't have anyone willing to teach me how to size properly with my newly growing features. As I pulled out each piece that I had so carefully chosen the week before, I noticed something, orange. Orange spots on my brand-new black pants? I brought them closer to my face, examining the flaw while scratching at it with my chipped black fingernail. Lint? Did my orange fluff pillow somehow get thrown into the load and explode all over my new clothes? No, that was still on my bed, I had just seen it.

I started frantically pulling out more clothes as my heart sank and the reality set in. My stomach twisted, my ears rang, and I felt my body temperature quickly rise, liquifying my anger and defeat, melting them into something hot and overwhelming, rushing through my veins along with the blood my father couldn't have cared less about. I felt like I might pass out. My eyes searched the room for something to steady myself, and when they peered upward, that's when everything suddenly went silent. "Clorox Bleach." The bottle I had always been told by my mother to stay away from, the one she said would ruin anything it touched, the one she told not to breathe in; she was right, it hadn't just destroyed all of my brand-new clothes, it had ruined whatever trust I had left in my father. Even when that trust was already lingering by a single, unwanted thread of lies, he let the bleach dissolve it completely. And deep down, I knew he had done it on purpose, even if no one believed me when I said so. When he found out that boys at school were starting to notice me, he didn't protect me; he sabotaged me, and not out of fear for my safety, but out of jealousy.

DAWN:

My sister and I rarely got a visit from our paternal grandparents, and when we did, we always had to remind them of our names. "Bailey," my grandmother would call me. Bailey was my second cousin. I was so confused, because she saw Bailey all the time; how could she think I was her? Especially when Bailey was one of the recognized grandchildren, one of the favorites. It wasn't until I got older that I realized she did it intentionally, a little jab meant to sting my parents. She was a cruel woman, my step-grandmother technically: my father told me stories about her, awful stories about how she would torment him secretly. Although how secret it really was is debatable, I'm sure his father knew.

One story he told me was about peas. He hated them, and she knew it. But she enforced a strict rule: no one left the dinner table until every bit of food was gone. My father tried to outsmart her by wrapping them in a napkin and throwing them away in the trash. The next morning, they were waiting for him on his breakfast plate. My step-grandmother glared at him as he sat at the table and let out her sharp, bird-like squawk: "You're lucky I cleaned them for you; otherwise, you'd be eating the dog's shit along with them."

He lowered his head and sniffed the peas, catching a foul and sour odor of dog feces weakly masked by blue Dawn Dish Soap. The same that sat on the edge of the sink where he

watched his father scrub the dirt from his hands and beneath his fingernails after working on the farm. The same my step-grandmother used to wash the fleas from the cat she later let run away because it loved her stepson more than her. The same soap he used to wash motor oil off his face after his father taught him how to work on an engine.

And now it was the smell covering his breakfast that he was forced to eat before school. This is one of many cruel occurrences my step-grandmother unleashed on my father when he was a young child, until eventually, she convinced his father to send him away to foster care. She fabricated some elaborate claim that they were unfit to care for him, and he was sent off for a time, all because she wanted him gone.

His past doesn't excuse my father's behavior as an adult, but it does help explain the way he ended up functioning in the world, if his claims about his childhood are true.

CLR:

Calcium. Lime. Rust. A life that so easily disintegrated due to some childhood exposure to the elements, crafted by the same breed that put us here in the first place.

EVERCLEAR:

The Everclear bottle sat with all the other cleaning supplies. No one would ever know that, inside those cabinets, lived a dual-purpose prescription for survival. It was a temporary, synthetic cure for my mother's battles with OCD and my father's war against depression.

My mind still holds the image of five-year-old me sitting on the bathroom counter, looking down at my mother as she placed me there so she could gather her supplies. I remember looking down at her beautiful yellow hair, admiring and wondering. Why was it so different from mine? Why wasn't I blessed with the hair of an angel like my mother? Why had I inherited the darker fibers that must have stemmed from the deepest part of my father's cells?

As my eyes gazed in an awe-studded-slumber of admiration, my mother pulled out the glass bottle she always swore was filled with magic and immediately noticed that most of her "potion" was gone. I clenched my fingers, grabbing onto the edge of the counter I sat upon, and braced myself; normally, my mother would get angry, slamming cupboards and throwing things, yelling for my father to "get in here now!" so she could lecture him.

But not this time.

This time, I witnessed defeat for the first time. It was the beginning of a pattern in our house, but it frightened me. I saw part of my mother vanish in that moment; strength, hope, any sense of wanting anything at all, gone. Her back slid down against the bathroom door until she hit the floor, pulling her legs to her chest and burying her face in her knees, Everclear bottle in one hand, rubber gloves and a stained washcloth in the other, and she cried.

I sat helplessly on the counter, watching the tears paint my mother's face. She was allergic to her own tears; they left bright red tracks she could never hide from my father, evidence he used as ammunition to call her weak and pathetic. But in this moment, he wasn't there. I was.

"Little Lance," she called me, because I looked exactly like him. She couldn't stand to look at me in that moment, so I just sat quietly, staring at her and at the bottle that could magically

purify everything except my mother's aching heart.

FORMULA 409:

The mixture of gaslighting, projection, manipulation, and lies was stronger than any formula my mother could come up with to sterilize the surfaces and emotions within the home. Even her go-to Formula 409 couldn't withstand the impurities spreading and tainting the home by my father.

GARBAGE BAGS:

It was March 1995. Mother was in one of her "phases," as I call them now. Back then, we had no word for it; it was something unacknowledged, tucked away with all the rest of her cleaning supplies, only to come out every supermoon. This cycle was different; it was the first one since Father had moved out.

At the time, I thought she was mad because he used her biggest black garbage bags, the ones she reserved for recycling and lawn trimmings. Father had violently packed his clothes, throwing each item in as if he was releasing a hot bullet from his grip. He did the same with his shoes and whatever else Mother had thrown into the living room as she screamed at him and demanded he get the hell away from my sister and me.

Leading to this moment, my father had my sister and me convinced that my mother was manic, disobedient, and mentally ill. He told us constantly that she was cheating on him and lying to all of us. None of us recognized the invisible mirror he was holding up in front of himself as he accused her daily, endlessly tearing her apart. He didn't even have the decency to utilize the garbage bags at that time to throw her away after he was done; he left her in pieces and expected her to care for his children.

My sister and I got what was left of my mother: the remnants of a woman devoured by my father, her family, and the world's expectations for a young stay-at-home mother of two. It didn't take long before he began accusing my sister and me of "taking her side" and lying for her. The projection was perfection, nailed to a tee by my father, whether he intended it or not.

I remember the crunch of the stuffed trash bag beneath my cheek as he gave me the last hug I would ever feel comfortable receiving from him.

THE LINGERING CHEMICALS:

Years later, the cleaning never left my mother. What began as a symptom of her trauma slowly evolved into her identity. She's been a full-time custodian for over a decade now. She says she finds joy in cleaning after the kids; scrubbing toilets. She says it's for the kids, but I know it's to escape her own mind. Every time she sweeps her broom, it's another memory she gets to push aside, another painful experience temporarily swept away.

Cleaning became who she is: it's the language she uses to communicate when everything else has failed her, it's the ritual she uses to keep the pieces of herself from falling apart.

And my father, the residue from the chemicals transformed into his daily ritual of inhaling a mixture of synthetic substances, some used for cleaning, that followed him to the present, where his alcoholism developed into a drug addiction that's left him living in a lonely land of delusion; living a façade that he is happy and has a fulfilling life, when on the inside, of the walls of his house, of his mind, of his soul, the self-hatred festers like peroxide eats an open wound,

carving loneliness into every corner of his life.

Ironically, it was his addiction to methamphetamine that made his mind obsessed with cleaning; the same compulsive behavior my mother used to survive him. He became fixated on the most minor of flaws in the home and would work all hours of the day to wash away the smallest specks on the floors, crawl on his hands and knees scrubbing at stains in the carpets, and use toothbrushes to clean nearly every surface of the home. The vacuum kept my sister and me up at night as we listened to the loud hum of the machine, along with my father's cursing the entire time about how filthy the house was and that my sister and I were the reason for it.

I wonder who he blames now that he's alone.

And now, as an adult, I see how much of my parents' behaviors have passed onto me. My rational brain sees how my irrational one uses cleaning to escape, just as my parents do. I see myself mimicking my mother as I hide from my daughter and isolate myself in the bathroom with the AJAX, my music, and tears. I see my father's hands holding the bleach as I frantically rush to disinfect a spot that isn't really there, and as I do these things, I lie and tell myself I'm just staying organized and maintaining a space that feels safe for my daughter and me, but I know where my behavior stems. Whether it's a coping mechanism I inherited, or a skill drilled into me by the people who raised me in filth with the illusion of cleanliness, I carry the same compulsions they do, and as I'm cleaning for hours a day, wiping the same spot again and again, I'm forced to wonder:

Is the mess I'm cleaning one that I made, or is it the same mess my parents were never able to clean all those years ago?

The Opposite Direction

Lauren Chris Ybarra

The Redirection.

"I am not sure this is what I want anymore." A week before, we were supposed to spend the summer with him. His words on the phone choked the last bit of love and hope out of my heart, leaving me confused and stunned because this was exactly what he said he wanted. Rage took over, and I grabbed *The Great Book of Montana*, the one he bought for my daughter during my last solo trip there, and threw it away. Furious that instead of spending an unforgettable summer in the mountains of Montana, I was stuck staying in my boring hometown, but staying here felt like I was letting him win somehow, so, instead I reached for my shiny new credit card, yes, the one I swore I'd only use for emergencies, and used it to book an apartment in the beautifully exciting city of Guadalajara, Mexico.

"Are you sure you want to go? I don't think Mexico is a safe place right now, especially by yourself with a young child. Mija, you don't even speak Spanish that well," my mom said with her eyes full of worry. I would be lying if I said those concerns weren't bouncing around in my head. But honestly, staying anywhere else in America would feel just as foreign, and at least there in Mexico, nothing would remind me of him and his bald-faced lies. I did buy a child's GPS tracker that could be easily hidden on my daughter, just in case. The thought of ever needing to use it sent a cold ripple down my spine, but as a single mom, my head was constantly on a swivel anyway. There is a reason I took up Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu. This wasn't the summer I imagined or expected. I thought we were going to Montana to build a new family, but instead I booked a flight in the opposite direction, toward a summer where I chose myself and reclaimed who I was as a mother.

The Leap.

The fact that first-class tickets to Mexico cost the same amount as flying coach to Montana should have been my first sign that we were meant to go. Nothing has made me feel more like *That Mom* than watching my beautiful baby girl sip orange juice from a champagne flute in a first-class seat on our way to Guadalajara, but this feeling was short-lived. The glamour of the flight evaporated the moment we hit the reality of customs. Rows of travelers snaked back and forth for nearly two hours, only for me to discover at the end of it all that someone had taken my daughter's luggage. An almost identical, smaller suitcase was left behind, and no more bags were coming down the conveyor belt. Stunned, I spun around in a flurry, desperate for help. A worker noticed, seemed to understand what had happened immediately, and disappeared into the crowd. Several minutes later, she reappeared with an identical but larger suitcase gliding beside her. One quick confirmation, and we had my daughter's luggage back. That turned out to be the perfect preview of what our summer would be: chaos, confusion, and then, when I needed it, something would fall back into place.

After settling into our sleek glass-walled Airbnb, with its gorgeous view of the city, and a doorman, ironically located in the center of Colonial Americana, we set off to explore one of the many cathedrals the city had to offer. One of my favorite characteristics about Guadalajara is how, from street level, all the buildings appear flat and unassuming, but a peek through almost any doorway reveals a hidden world: a courtyard, more shops, or sometimes entire homes tucked away behind the facade. My enthusiasm was officially piqued, and I was excited to spend the summer here. The next day, I booked a private tour to get a better sense of the city. When my guide pulled up, she was a couple of years younger than me with a punk-rock vibe; she was perfect. She spoke English well and knew every corner of the city. I enjoyed her historical teachings of Teuchitlan and the Spanish colonization, and my daughter adored her enough to climb onto her back as we

strolled through the streets. During lunch, though, the mood shifted. A strange man walked up and snapped a picture of my daughter. Every horror story of abduction rushed to the front of my mind, and I jumped to my feet and demanded he delete it. Thanks to my guide's translation, he quickly complied. Exhaling, I was grateful I did not need to put my jiu-jitsu training to use to wrestle that camera out of his hands. After that, I let my adrenaline wear off. It was helpful to watch my daughter skip alongside our guide, unbothered and carefree. It was in that moment that I realized that maybe this wasn't just about finding myself, but about showing my daughter and myself that I could protect us anywhere.

The Immersion.

Compared to when we first arrived, when everything seemed like a monstrous blob of stores, the maze of stores at the plaza started to feel like a city of its own. Three stories high, with a basement and street-level storefronts, the plaza stretched beyond its borders into more alleyways of electronics, bags, clothes, candies, and more. After several hours of wrong turns, backtracking, and unnecessary circles, I finally began to understand the lay of the land and confidently trekked through the Plaza's streets. One afternoon, after finding a bridge that led from the plaza to a park, my heart sank when we got caught in a summer storm, and to my dismay, I watched the last bar of battery die on my phone. With my family's concerns echoing from the back of my mind, "What did I get us into?" I thought as I frantically pulled out the freshly folded dress I had just bought from the plaza from my bag. With one large swoosh, I unfolded the dress and shielded my daughter from the heavy raindrops that pelted us from the once-clear sky. Blinded by my worry and the rain, I swept up my daughter in my arms and carried us to the first restaurant that felt familiar. Looking back at the street, the land felt just as strange as it did when we first arrived. Wishing I had my mom, or literally any other adult, with me, I took a deep breath, reminded myself I am the adult, and did my best to give my daughter a reassuring smile. Soon after, a helpful and patient host seated us, took our order, and graciously found me a charger to borrow, as my daughter and I clinked our bottles of cola together, smiled, and said, "cheers," before we chowed down on a much-needed hot meal. Finally, my phone turned on, and I could order us a taxi back to our apartment. Conquering the streets of Guadalajara and the plaza would have to wait until the next day.

The Return.

The doorman, who had become a familiar, comforting presence whenever I returned with groceries, a sleepy child, or came home soaked from one of Guadalajara's famous summer storms, helped me carry our extra-fluffy suitcases packed with treats, gifts, and souvenirs from a trip I'd never forget. He stayed with us while we waited for our taxi. His nervous energy was growing more evident by the minute. When he finally asked for my WhatsApp number one minute before my ride arrived, I understood his anxiety. He was young, handsome, muscular, and undeniably sweet; giving him my number felt like a no-brainer, though a part of me felt guilty knowing I would likely not be returning anytime soon.

I had initially planned to go to Montana to play housewife for a man who claimed he was ready for my daughter and me. With promises of marriage, a family, and a free education, I believed him and prepared for the transition, only to be cut off right before anything truly began. I didn't spend the summer in the mountains as I had imagined. Instead, I learned that disappointment is not the end of possibility.

I immersed myself in something larger than my everyday life. I surrounded myself with people who look like me, reconnected with my cultural roots, and let the language wrap itself around me. I had not only survived a summer alone, I thrived. I am the mother I hoped to be, and I am a woman stronger than every doubt that ever whispered otherwise.

ART:



Grocery Shopping with My Parents

Isabel Benavides



You ARE Still That Person

Tabatha Alaniz



Sweater Weather

24x36, Acrylic on cotton

Jasmin Arellano



Art Fight 2025- Sweet Tooth

Romeo Becina

@mebodubee

Alan Joy OC - belongs to artist

Gateau OC - belongs to @Le4ffl on Art Fight, Insta, and Tiktok

Pose template belongs to @dukk2130



Grocery Store

Isabel Benavides



Grief

Yatze Camacho



Someone I Used to Know

Haley Corral

@Im_Poxa



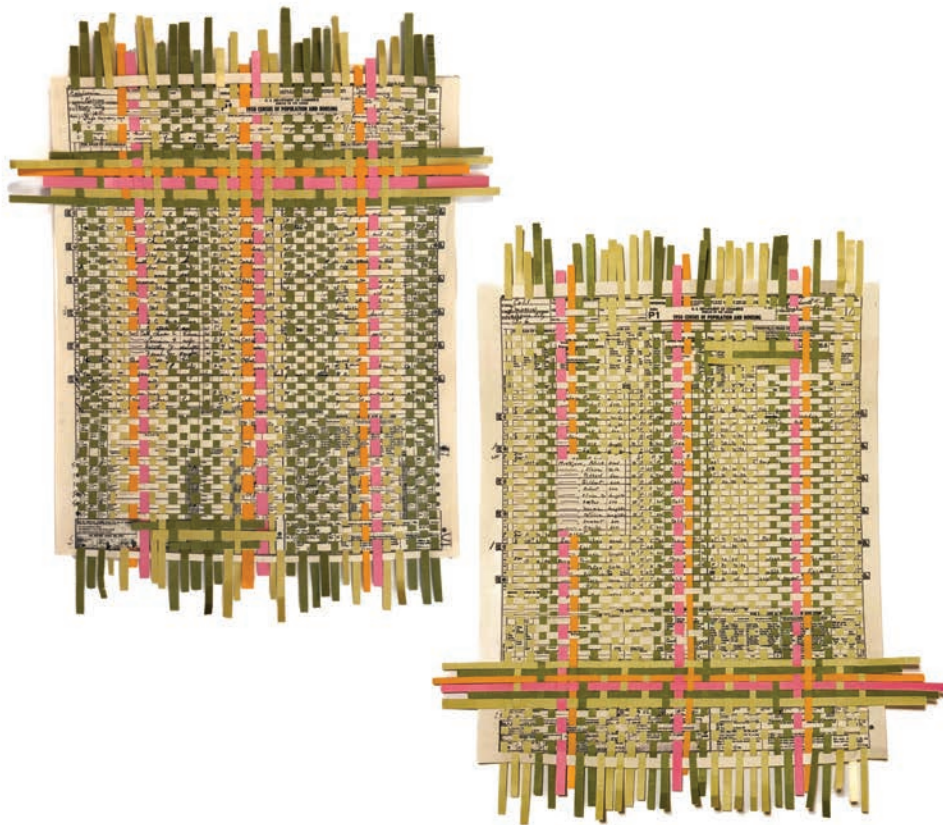
Let it Shine

Guadalupe Delgadillo



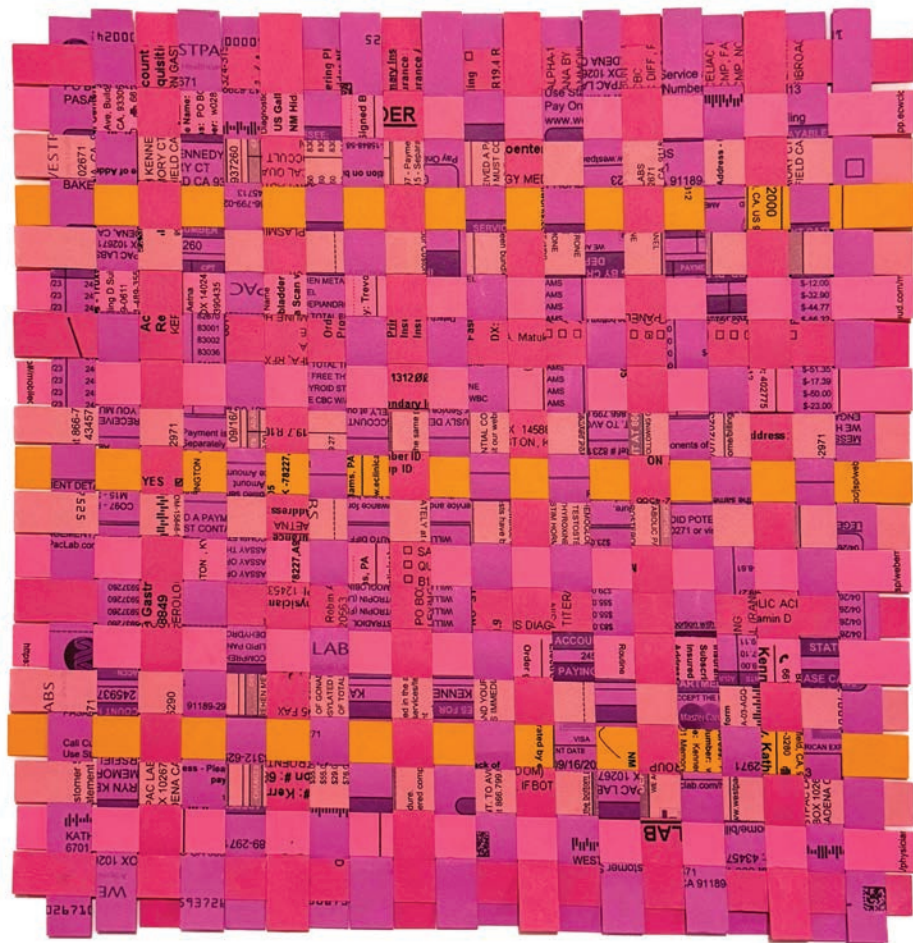
When Doves Cry

Guadalupe Delgadillo



Calexico and Ford City, 1950

Katherine Kennedy



Pre-Authorization

Katherine Kennedy



Inside Out

Daisy Vaca Marrón



The Awakening

Sophia Montemayor



My Spirit

Sophia Montemayor



Evil Angel

Carolina Montoya



Look Behind You

Carolina Montoya

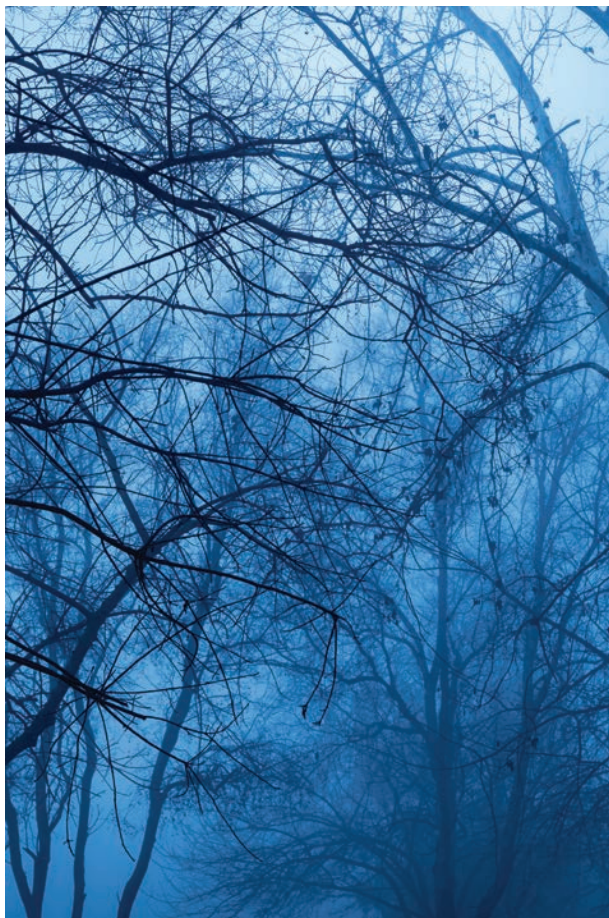


Friend Shaped

April Morton

IMG_4823

Alexia Nankil



IMG_4830

Alexia Nankil



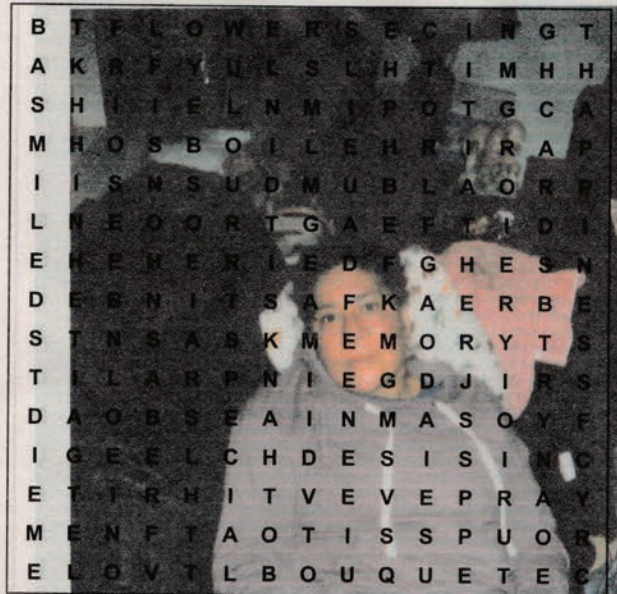
Rising from the Flames

Konoe Nigale

CELEBRATE MOM

The leftover letters will spell out a sentimental saying from Mildred B. Vermont.

Hidden Message on last answer page



- | | | | |
|--------------|-----------|--------|---------|
| ALBUM | DELIGHT | HUG | SONS |
| BOUQUET | DINNER | KISS | SPECIAL |
| BREAKFAST IN | FAMILY | LOVE | THANKS |
| BED | FLOWERS | MEMORY | TREAT |
| CARD | GIFT | PRAISE | TRIBUTE |
| CHILDREN | HAPPINESS | ROSES | VISIT |
| CORSAGE | HONOR | SMILE | |

Celebrate Mom

Sarai Lara Ontiveros



Fly Your Dreams

Sarai Lara Ontiveros



The Witch of Northampton

Benjamin Parsons

This painting was inspired by my 9th great-grandmother, Mary Bliss Parsons, and the compelling history surrounding the witch trials in which she was ultimately acquitted. Another descendant authored a series of books claiming that she truly was a witch. This piece explores that perspective through historical fantasy, incorporating visual elements inspired by documented testimony.



Mother

Eduardo Lopez Pinedo



Three-Face Fruit Bowl

Emelia Reed



Pouring Water

Emelia Reed



Roses

Ana Reyes



The Table Where She Threads

Ana Reyes



Lower Yosemite

Ixchel Reyes



El Capitan

Ixchel Reyes



Sioux Chief on Horseback

Brandon Sanchez



Vincent Price in the Bat

Inspired by the 1959 Film The Bat

Brandon Sanchez



Sunny Day

Jessica Torres



Following Mama Bear

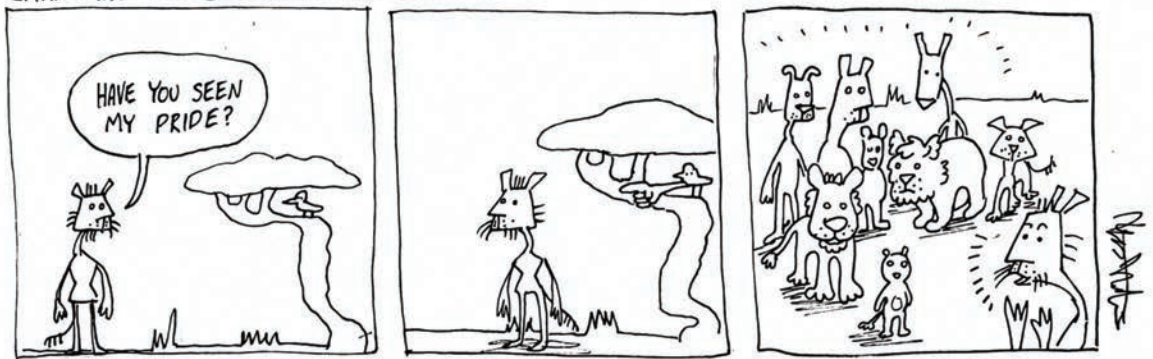
Dulce Verdoza



Serpent & Jasmine

Dulce Verdoza

LARRY THE GAY LION FINDS HIS PRIDE



Larry the Gay Lion Finds his Pride

Kira White



The Angel, The Owl, and The Void

A. R. Wickett

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