

The background of the entire page is a repeating pattern of light gray silhouettes. It features foxes in various poses—some standing, some jumping, and some running—and rabbits in sitting or jumping positions. The silhouettes are scattered across the white background, creating a subtle, thematic texture.

The Island Fox

2019 Literary Journal

Letter From The Staff

CSUCI's annual literary journal, *The Island Fox*, is student produced and publicized. This year, a staff of fifteen endeavored to present an eclectic sampling of CSUCI's creative minds. Featured in this journal are prose, reflective travel pieces, poetry, and art submissions. We encourage our readers to sit back and engage with our works. In the prose, you will fight monsters that look like humans and humans that look like monsters. You will become a photographer who sees the pitfalls of humanity and you will accompany an elderly woman given a second chance at youth. For those considering CSUCI's Travel Abroad Program, we recommend reading the essays produced by students who have had the privilege of participating and who have returned transformed.

In the poetry, you will witness the harsh reality young black men face in today's politically divided society. You will experience what it's like to be love struck, panicked in the night, and even how a deep-rooted tree faces fire. Through the art selections, you will see illustrations, photographs, and drawings which represent the creative eye of each artist. While we cannot sum up all of the pieces in this letter, we hope this will inspire and excite you.

This production has been executed with passion and hard work and we believe that we have succeeded in publishing a journal that any student at our university will be proud of. First, we would like to thank our faculty advisor Joan Peters, and our faculty reviewers Claudia Reder, Rachael Jordan, and Peter Harper for their guidance and support. We would also like to thank all of those who submitted to the journal; there would be no journal without your creativity. Last, but certainly not least, we would like to thank you, the reader, for taking the time to explore our work.

With much appreciation,
Branden Hopper & Federico Guzman
Managing Directors, *The Island Fox*

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The background of the page is a repeating pattern of light gray silhouettes of foxes and rabbits. The foxes are shown in various poses: some are leaping, some are standing alert, and others are in mid-stride. The rabbits are depicted in a sitting position, facing different directions. These silhouettes are scattered across the entire white background, creating a subtle, woodland-themed texture.

PROSE

THINGS HAVEN'T CHANGED

Ben Edic

The right of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers, and effects, against unreasonable searches and seizures, shall not be violated, and no Warrants shall issue, but upon probable cause, supported by Oath or affirmation, and particularly describing the place to be searched, and the persons or things to be seized.

4th Amendment of our Bill of Rights

You are seven years old and your family has decided to take a trip to Maui. It is your first time going there and you are more excited than you have ever been. You and your family are at the airport and your mother has already briefed you a little bit about how you need to be on your best behavior, which you think will be easy because you are a pretty good kid. It is obvious that no matter where you go people's eyes are following you with a look of concern. Then you get to the metal detectors and you go through the normal procedure with your mom in the line. She tells you, "Here's the deal: when you go through the metal detector make sure you face the people in uniform and spread your arms out so they can search you." You ask why you have to do this and the response you get is, "Because people in airports do not like brown people like us so we have to make sure we follow all of their instructions so we don't give them a reason to take us away." That's all you needed to hear.

You are a Middle Eastern man growing up in a post 9/11 world. You are gifted with the skin of a perfectly roasted marshmallow and hair that coils up and stretches out like springs. Sounds nice but such beauty is often distorted by all the hate looming over Middle Eastern people. It doesn't matter what type of Middle Eastern person you are, because the people who want to hurt people like you don't care about specifics. You have already been attacked by such hateful words at such a young age: "Towelhead", "Terrorist", and "Jawa." Or maybe this story should be about the fact that

you can't go through an airport metal detector without getting "randomly searched." Let's talk about the second one.

It is your turn to go through the metal detector and you are ready to make your mom proud, but you are not prepared for what comes next. The man working at the metal detector pulls your Gameboy out of your bag and asks you, "What is this?"

You make the quick decision to respond with, "It's my Gameboy." Without asking you another question he leans into his radio and says something about a bomb and that all security must come to his location immediately. You look back at your mother, confused about what to do, you freeze and just start going with the flow. Unfortunately, the next thing to happen is you are being tackled to the ground and dragged away from your parents. You have no idea how you can stay so calm during all this. In fairness, you might be a little loopy because when you were tackled a security guard's knee jammed straight into the back of your head.

You are being dragged away somewhere. Taken away from your parents, further and further away. You are in a small dark room where you are put in handcuffs and questioned by two men in black suits. At first, you think they are just trying to scare you because they are yelling at you about how you will never see anyone you love again and how you will not have a future after what you tried to do. You think they are trying to make you admit to something. They start calling you a "terrorist" and asked if you knew some guy named "Al Qaeda." You are seven, everything is terrifying, yet you haven't broken down into tears yet. You contemplate it a while because lord knows you are not listening to the two suits yelling at you anymore. In that time you were thinking, you realized you are too scared to cry. So instead you start focusing on only two things. One, they made a huge deal about how the room you are in is sound proof. It was like they are so proud of their soundproof room they feel the need to mention it for five minutes to every potential seven-year-old terrorist that rolls through. Also, apparently the room only stops sound from going out because you can hear your mother yelling things like, "This is bullshit!" and "Give me back my fucking son!" Which has some words you don't understand yet, but in time you will learn to love them. You get her message loud and clear through these "soundproof" walls.

Eventually, when these clowns wiped their makeup off, they start asking you the scary questions: a nonstop onslaught about your involvement with terrorist organizations. So, what you do next is use a skill that

will help you through life, you tune them out and start thinking about other stuff. The second thing you end up focusing on is whether you are going to get your Gameboy back or not. This Gameboy is the cause for this whole mess; so you know you shouldn't be so focused on it and that you should just forget about it. You consider telling them just to keep the Gameboy because you thought that might get you out of this. As tempting as ending this situation is, even as a child you know that Gameboys are expensive. So, if you give up this one, you might not get another one to replace it. You have a level 70 Pikachu in your Pokémon game and you are not about to let that go. Thinking about how much effort you put into that game gave you the courage to stay strong for your Gameboy.

After several minutes of questioning, they finally lower their voices and start talking to you like you are another human being. Also, this is a fine time to point out that at the age of six you were referred to as a "Middle Eastern Stray" (as in stray dog). Who said this to you? Some guy at a fair. You had no idea that this phrase would be used again at the age of eight at Disneyland, then again at the age of eleven by some woman at a bowling alley, and then it becomes your nickname for a little bit in middle school. The point is, it is nice to be talked to as a human when the world sees you as a dog.

You tune back in and one of the suits says, "We need you to talk to us because clearly us yelling is going nowhere." This is your big chance to say whatever you want to make these suits feel some humanity; you are so excited. You bat a few ideas around in your head like "I just want my Gameboy back" or that wonderful new phrase you just learned from your mother "This is bullshit." You think these are some strong comebacks for a seven-year-old.

After a second, you reply with the question, "Is this all because I'm the type of brown you don't like?" Both faces attached to these suits retreat from anger to understanding. It was like a switch flipped in their brains that let them see what they were doing. Unfortunately, you never get a direct answer but it is clear what the truth is. Your mother burst in the door moments after you ask the question and demands with a fury only mothers in situations like this can have that you be let go.

While you are being taken out of your handcuffs you sneak your Gameboy back into your pocket. It was just sitting on the table, it was so easy for you to just grab it and no one is stopping you. You must rush to make sure you catch your plane and you use the entire run over to think up

some questions: “Was it because I’m brown?” “Will this happen again?” “Will it ever get better?” After you get on the plane you just turn on your Gameboy and play it so you can ignore what happened. That trauma that was your first real demonstration of hate outside of speech. That trauma that showed you what people can really be like. That trauma that follows you into adulthood, that leaves you untrusting of everyone. That continues to live on in you as fear.

HOTEL CALIFORNIA

Hillary Gordon

I had been a nurse technician at Camarillo State Hospital for three months the day Kelly Gayle was admitted. There were always rumors of celebrities staying at Cam, but in the months I'd been there, none had ever been in my ward. I'd heard that Clark Gable stayed at Cam in the '50s and I love him so much, even if it wasn't true, I'd daydream about it, particularly on long, boring shifts when I was trying to just make it through the day. But Kelly Gayle was waiting for me in Ward 13 and I swear I could feel my heart actually grow and swell at the thought. I would now be the one to administer medication for the Oscar-nominated blonde-bombshell American sweetheart.

I had dreamed of moving to Los Angeles my entire childhood. Typical. That is me and my life. Small town Midwest girl dreams of sunshine year-round and celebrities and palm trees. Well, I suppose you can say I've made it. I studied for my entire tech test while sitting on my porch. It was the middle of January and I was right on the coast of the country with my oldest son Brian, both of us in flip flops and tank tops. We were studying at the picnic table he made for my 48th birthday. There's a crystal pool in my backyard that reflects the almost-always blue sky. A stack of textbooks sits on the yellow table Brian had painted in my favorite color, the color of my hair. Well, used to be. Now I dye it every six weeks on the mark. You don't live in Los Angeles with grey hair. Even if all you've ever been is a mother and grandmother. I made Los Angeles my home and I made sure my looks matched the city that sees sunshine 284 days a year.

Brian, a builder and a man of math (unlike his mother) is helping me with my homework. Fifty years old and I'm doing homework. "Here, Mom," he said, "try to concentrate."

I'd been forbidden to talk about Kelly Gayle's stay at Cam, and not being allowed to talk about it just made it even more thrilling. I try my best not to talk about work. The day I was hired, I had to sign a patient confidentiality contract and it all seemed very serious. Not talking is sometimes

impossible, though. If something particularly memorable happens, I'll confide in Brian or one of the boys. Like the time a patient stole the lit cigarette right out of my mouth during my smoke break. I must have jumped a mile high when he came barreling toward me, looking more like a bull than a man. He ripped that cigarette out of my mouth before I could muster a voice to protest, and he took off running through the oak trees that line the lawn of the main quad. The boys laughed at this one, but in general, they don't really seem to care about my stories. I don't have many girlfriends, though, so they get the institution gossip. You know, I never told on that patient. I figured he probably needed that cigarette more than I did.

I really started smoking again once I was in school for my nursing certification. I had a tough time with the math, not having so much as opened a textbook in over thirty years. And while I've loved reading and literature my whole life, I never went to college. When my twin brother, also named Brian, got into Mizzou I cried. Not out of happiness, but of pure, unabashed jealousy. Something not so typical about this Midwest girl: I never wanted to get married or have children. I *wanted* to go to college. I wanted to study literature. I wanted to write and read thousand-page novels and explore them with people smarter than me. I wanted to stay after class and learn everything the professors were willing to teach. I was smarter than most of the boys in my class, definitely as bright as Brian. We had similar marks, and when we graduated, I actually had a higher GPA. I sat on his bed and picked lint from his old comforter as he packed his suitcase, asking me for my opinion on clothes to take south. "Think I'll need a coat down there?" he asked me.

I glared at him and rolled my eyes. He was only going to Missouri, but Missouri felt like a tropical paradise compared to North Dakota. Missouri had rolling hills and rock bluffs cradling its land in a stony embrace. It had the Mississippi River roaring through its core, parting the land in two. I'd never seen the Mississippi, but I'd heard that it's so big it doesn't even freeze over in the winter, instead it forms giant, sparkling ice sheets that lazily float toward the Gulf of Mexico, glistening in the winter sun like the sweet rock candy we would get at Casey's General Store after church. In Missouri, on clear days, you couldn't see the curve of the earth on the horizon. It's not flat like North Dakota, it doesn't go on forever and ever. But the thing is, when you live in North Dakota and it's 1949, and you're 17, and you're pregnant, you don't go to Mizzou or any other college. North Dakota actually does go on forever and ever. You don't get to float the Mississippi

in the summertime with no sound but the rushing water and the symphony of birds performing in the trees, nor do you get to spend late nights at the diner with books, beer, french fries, and conversation. You don't ever get to meet anyone new. No, you get married. And your life becomes about your children. Not learning. No new knowledge to drink until you're drunk, unless, of course, it has to do with the new baby. And all the babies that would eventually follow.

There are no pictures from my wedding. No one wanted evidence of Brian growing inside me before I was married. My mother suggested I not even wear white. Lord, I hated being pregnant. I hated sacrificing my body for the very thing that was keeping me on the sub-zero, windy planes, the very thing keeping me eternally lost in corn fields, with no way out. I hated how I looked. Awkward, like an octopus missing limbs. Like a beach ball with legs, "an elephant, a ponderous house" as Sylvia Plath once put it. I hated how it felt to have this foreigner growing inside of me, draining me of my future. Funny enough, I ended up doing it five more times. All boys. Six boys, a husband who died in Vietnam, and me. That is my life. After Sam died, I knew there would be no grown-up conversation for the foreseeable future, and that may have been what I mourned the most. Of course, I could have gotten married again, but like I said, I never *wanted* to get married.

After I passed that final math test, I officially became a psych tech at Camarillo State Hospital twenty miles south of my home. I didn't mind the daily commute, I was just so happy to finally become something other than a mother. My youngest boy was studying at CSUN now, and I was free to work. But what do you do for a career when you're a 50-year-old woman with no work experience? You become a caretaker. If I could do anything, it's take care of people. Sam left for the war at 34 and none of us ever saw him again. The boys and I unanimously decided to start over in LA. When you're raising six boys with no father in a new city, you learn quickly how to take care of more than just scraped knees and broken bones. Scraped hearts and broken egos were part of the package as I became both Mom and Dad to six hell-raising boys. I can handle psychotic episodes. I can handle crazy. I can handle tears. I've done it all before.

The day I met Kelly Gayle was one of those foggy summer Southern California days. I hate the fog. It frizzes my hair and greys the sky, sometimes for weeks at a time. It was early June and the mist clung low that day, masking the surrounding Santa Monica mountains. The tops of the hills peaked through the clouds like a nosy neighbor over a fence. I swore I could

feel those mountains watching me every day as I walked from the parking lot into the front doors of the hospital, their gaze always on my back. The fog clung to my skin that day, gave me goosebumps and curled my newly dyed and iron-straightened hair. I'd taken extra time to style that day, knowing I'd be meeting Kelly Gayle. The air smelled like a mix of celery, salt-water and sweet manure from the surrounding farmland. I breathed it in deep and could almost taste it on my lips.

Kelly Gayle was as beautiful as I'd imagined she would be, even in her beige, shapeless Camarillo State Hospital gown. Her fingernails were painted red and her hair, long and thick, was in a blonde braid that snaked down the curve of her back. How did she manage to look so glamorous in this place? I touched up my hair, trying to calm the fog-induced frizz under the fluorescent light of the staff bathroom. I entered Kelly Gayle's room, my heart beating so loud I was nervous she'd hear it. I had just seen a photo of Kelly Gayle in *People Magazine* a few weeks ago. She was in a long, black velvet gown with teardrop ruby earrings and a diamond the size of Bismarck on her finger. She had no jewels on in Cam, but she was more beautiful than anyone I'd ever seen in real life.

"Miss Gayle?" I said, slowly entering her room. "I'm nurse Bethany, I'll be administering your medication."

"Fine, fine." She said sweetly from her hospital bed. "Come on in."

She had a worn hardcover copy of *Measure for Measure* laying open on her bedside. I handed her a paper cup with three pills and a glass of apricot juice to swallow them down. She took the paper cup from me and I watched her once diamond-adorned fingers as she picked up the pills one by one, then opened her mouth to show me they'd gone down. I put a check mark by her name. "I'll be back tomorrow at the same time to administer your meds," I told her. As I was walking out of the room she must have seen me glance at her book.

"You like Shakespeare?" she asked me.

"Oh. Yeah." I said, caught off guard that Kelly Gayle wanted to talk to me, "*Measure for Measure* is one of my favorites."

"Really, I found it predictable and too Shakespearian," she said, "even for Shakespeare."

Her commentary put me a bit at ease and I smiled, probably a little too big. "I suppose I could see that."

I turned to walk out of the room again when she said "Nurse Beth-

any. Wait. Would you mind opening the shades for me?" I walked to her window, stood on my toes, and pushed the heavy, brown curtains aside, revealing maroon bars adorned with delicate steel flowers over the window. The bars felt unnecessary in Kelly Gayle's room. I suddenly had an urge to cut them out, to make the view of the red-tiled Spanish style buildings and of the old bell tower that chimed a tone just a tad too sweet for this place, every fifteen minutes, more accessible to her. "Lovely view," she said, and I couldn't help but agree. Even with the fog, today the view seemed lovelier than it had ever before.

"So," I said, working up the nerve to make conversation with her, "what other Shakespeare do you like?"

"Hmmm. So much," she said, "*Twelfth Night* I love. *Much Ado* may be my favorite."

My heart beat fast at her answer. "Beatrice," I said, "is probably my favorite character in all of Shakespeare."

"That bitch!" Kelly Gayle answered with a laugh. "Really speaks her mind. Really has it out for Benedick!"

"She's hilarious," I said. "And sharp."

"Complete opposite of Hero who is soooo boring."

"Exactly. Stereotypical woman. Quiet and obedient."

"Unlike us Nurse Bethany! I think you and I are Beatrices."

This made me smile again. I quite liked Kelly Gayle comparing me to Beatrice; even more, I liked Kelly Gayle comparing me to herself.

"I can already tell," she said, placing her hand on my forearm, "that we are going to be friends."

I took the 101 back home that night with thoughts of Kelly Gayle all over my mind. How her fingers felt on my arm, like tingles, like the sparklers Brian and the kids lit on the 4th of July around the pool in my backyard. How her red nails contrasted the white of my skin, reminding me of the way the red tile roofs at Camarillo sat upon the white stucco walls. Her thoughts on Beatrice and Shakespeare made my insides feel like oatmeal. The freeway signs blurred as I took the familiar route back home, up the Conejo grade and into the city of Los Angeles, the lights of Camarillo dimmed in the fog behind me.

I came home to find that Brian had dropped off leftover dinner for me. I am grateful for him. I have always loved him, and I admire his big heart and even bigger math and science brain. "Brian the brain" we nick-

named him. He has two girls of his own now and his wife seems to have taken to motherhood better than I did. Brian could have gone to college, but he supports his family, and supports them well, with his construction business. I looked past the plate of food, through my open front door onto the quiet street to the orange grove and breathed in the citrus scent that wafts through my house daily. I can feel the ocean air though I live over a mile away from the beach. On very still nights I can hear the sea lions barking and smell the Pacific in my living room. I hardly ever think of North Dakota anymore. When I look to the horizon, all I see is the turquoise ocean glittering in the sun.

By Kelly Gayle's third week at Camarillo, we were talking literature everyday. We'd moved from Shakespeare to Virginia Woolf to Hemingway to James Joyce and onto Mark Twain. I drank her thoughts on books like I'd been dying of thirst my whole life. I suppose I had. Her voice ran through my head all day and visiting all the other patients in my ward, while once enjoyable, began to feel like a chore. I would sit with Kelly Gayle all day if they'd let me. Around her second week at Cam, I began going to bed each night with curlers in my hair, inspecting and pulling greys every morning. I started putting on red lipstick that used to be worn on special occasions only. I walked into Kelly Gayle's room every morning at 11, with a new book on my cart and her pills and apricot juice. She would swallow her pills, open her lovely mouth to show me they went down, her wet lips the red sea. I'd mark her off on my clipboard, pull up a chair and listen to her talk. Some days listening to her rattle her thoughts, I felt like my heart was about to spill out of my body and flood the room, the way the Mississippi River crested in the flood of 1957 and destroyed dozens of Midwest towns.

One hot August morning, I showed up to Kelly Gayle's room with my fingernails painted red. She noticed as I handed her the cup of pills. "Your nails!" she said, grabbing my hand. "They look beautiful" She ran her fingers through mine and squeezed tight. I felt my body swelling and my face turning red.

"Say," she said. "What exactly do they have me taking? What are these pills you're giving me?" She asked, inspecting them one by one.

I looked at her chart. "Looks like chlorpromazine," I said, my heart sinking as I read the words out loud. "And haloperidol," I said, trying not to choke on the bitter names of the pills. Of course, I knew what pills she was taking. I knew what she was in for. But I hadn't said the words out loud. It was a part of the conversation I chose to not think about. Because Kelly

Gayle right then and there was so lovely. She was the best friend I'd known. Kelly Gayle, in this room at Camarillo State Hospital, was the most intoxicating and exciting thing I could ever imagine. She was the most beautiful woman I'd ever laid my 53-year-old eyes on. It didn't take long for the beautiful, blonde bombshell, American sweetheart, to talk me into marking my clipboard whether she'd taken her pills or not.

Now Kelly Gayle and I shared a secret. We shared books, we shared the richest conversation I've ever had. The kind of conversation that would stick to my skin for days to come. And now we shared the fact that I was hiding her drugs. It could get me fired, I knew this. But the thought of helping Kelly Gayle was the most exciting thing that had ever happened to me. Every morning at 11 am, book, pills and apricot juice on the cart, I'd roll into Kelly Gayle's room and everything else felt insignificant. The whole world existed in these four walls and Kelly Gayle and I were as close as I'd ever felt to anyone. Closer than Sam. Closer than Brian. She understood me in a way I had never been before and when her blue eyes locked with mine I could see my future, and it was more beautiful, more sparkling and infinite than the Pacific Ocean herself. She'd drink her juice while I'd slip her pills in the pocket of my scrubs.

September had come and the fog had mostly burned off. It was hot in Camarillo, temperatures reaching the nineties every day. The stucco units mostly kept cool, thank goodness, but I'd still show up to work with sweat salting my skin and frizzing my hair, accumulated on the walk from the parking lot to Ward 13. I'd touch up in the bathroom, get all my patient's pills ready and start distributing. I always visited Kelly Gayle last so I could spend extra time in her room without leaving anyone else waiting and without making my coworkers suspicious of the time we were spending together. I had saved all of Kelly Gayle's unswallowed pills. They sat in a bowl on my desk at home. Every night, I'd add a few more of the blue and white pills to the pile. There must have been 100 of them resting in that bowl the September day I walked into Kelly's room. "Good Morning, Miss Gayle!" I said as I walked into her sun-drenched room.

"Bethany," she said flatly, "Bethany, come here."

Her voice was slow and deliberate, and I debated approaching her for just a minute before I walked right to her bed. She took my hand in hers and ran her fingers up and down the inside of my arm, goosebumps trailing where her fingers touched.

"You're so beautiful. And you're my best friend. And I know how

you feel about me,” she said. My muscles tightened and so did her grip on my arm. “I know what you’ve been doing to me, Bethany, with the books, I know what you’re doing.”

“What do you mean? Did you finish *Lolita*?”

She picked up the paperback copy I’d left in her room last week and hurled it toward the window. The thud of the book against the glass made me jump and her grip grew even tighter on my arm. “I understand,” she said. “I understand the signals and messages you’re sending me through the books.”

“I’m not sending you messages... I...”

“Stop the shit. I KNOW what you’re doing.” She yanked on my arm and pulled me closer to her. I let out a slight yelp out of both surprise and pain. Her grip was so tight I could already feel bruises forming beneath her painted fingertips. She put her other hand on my face and ran it down my cheek softly. “You have to stop,” she said, “Beth.a.ny. you. have. to. stop.” She released her grip on my arm and I turned to leave her room, but she grabbed me by my hair. She pulled my head in close to her, gripping my head the way I gripped the safety bar on Colossus when Brian took the kids and me to Magic Mountain.

“Stop,” I said meekly.

“NO!” She yelled and began ripping my hair out by the fistfuls. I could feel my flesh being torn from my skull. She dug her red nails deep and deeper into my head, pulling out handfuls of my newly-dyed blonde hair. I screamed from the pain, the burning, stinging, heart-breaking pain. Less than ten seconds later security was in the room, peeling Kelly Grace’s beautiful red fingernails from my skull. I stood dizzy, watched them strap her to her bed as I put a hand to my burning head and felt the warm, sticky dark red blood matting my yellow hair.

Kelly Gayle flailed and fought with the three security guards screaming, “I know what you did. She has to be stopped!” I walked out of Kelly Gayle’s room, bleeding and shaking. I raced through the heat to my car, drove back to LA and never stepped foot on The Camarillo State Hospital grounds again. I would have been fired anyway, figured I’d save myself the humiliation. Lord knows they’d never let me see Kelly Gayle again, and that was a pain I wasn’t sure, at this age, I could bear. At Brian’s suggestion the next day, I saw a doctor who put three stitches in my scalp, forever scarring it. There will always be a spot on my head where my grey hair, dyed blonde, will not grow.

A month later I took a job at a Malibu mansion looking after Mrs. Eddleston, a 90-year-old steel heiress originally from New York. Her children paid me well to watch after her and make sure she bathed daily, didn't fall down the marble staircase, didn't wander off into the ocean that was their backyard. They gave me huge Christmas bonuses and paid me extra to spend the night in the guest room that was bigger than my own living room, complete with a fireplace in a town that never dropped below 50 degrees. Mrs. Eddleston, like me, had six children and a dead husband. She loved to talk about them. Every day at 11 am we had lunch on her balcony that overlooked the ocean. Despite her riches, Mrs. Eddleston loved to eat bologna sandwiches, so that's what we did. I'd listen to her talk about her grandkids. I'd drink apricot juice and smoke cigarettes while she'd go on endlessly about her kids and their kids and her dead husband. I pretended to listen, pretended to care, nodding as I ran my painted fingernails over and over the scar buried underneath my windblown hair, and I'd stare forever out into the sparkling, infinite blue.

THE SOUNDS OF DISTANT DRUMS

Brent Cihonski

Somewhere in the distant trees, surrounding the field behind the farm, birds were singing. The harsh grey sky, the chilling breeze that swept the landscape, and the miserable state of the world had seemingly no impact on them. Their cheery songs and words of elation seemed to grow dim as I saw Ryan's truck pull through our broken fence and into my backyard. He was more than prepared; his truck was loaded to the brim with supplies and other things we would need for survival. The bed was loaded with so many bags that the bungees holding them in place seemed to cry out in angst. I remember him making the list: a tent, two sleeping bags, chairs, firewood, an axe... I kept repeating the same words to him, but this was the one time in my life he refused to pay attention to me.

As he parked and hopped out, everything seemed to go silent. No birds, no wind, not even my own heartbeat could be heard above this roar of nothingness. This prevailing silence was like a force field, hovering around Ryan and me; it could have been a mile high and as thick as castle walls. Just a glance into Ryan's eyes would tell me that he was crumbling long before this wall would. However, I was also weak, so I dropped my gaze to the patch of golden grass beneath my sneakers.

Hands trembling, he reached for mine, but I could not return the gesture. Taking his hands would be the beginning of an oath I knew I would regret. *Come with me*, he would say, *we can still make it if we leave now...*

"Iliana, please!" Hearing him say my name was a knife to my gut, and in an instant, I could hear the wind again, howling around us, each gust sending a movement through the wild grass as if it were the ocean in a storm. The field behind my house (we'd always call it "the farm") was vast; my sister and I used to see it as endless space for freedom and imagination. It was a field that held memories of joy and sunshine in the spring. Now, the dull, blanketed skies made those memories so very distant. This was the beginning of a storm. As this storm continued to roll in, the weather was making its case for matching the fate of my world.

I felt Ryan's piercing gaze, avoiding it at all costs. There was nothing wrong with his plan. He knew his way through the woods, we had walked it so many times together, and his truck could weave through the trees and traverse the dried-up river bed— he would explain this to me after he would finish reading off his list of supplies. It would mean a clean getaway, it would mean freedom. The low growl of his pickup finally seeped through the wall, coaxing me into thoughts I wished gone. However, I knew once the sound of the engine disappeared into the forest behind the farm, so would my future.

"Iliana, if-if we leave now, we can make it. We can run and hide, and they won't find us, please just—"

"Ryan, stop! I told you, I can't leave! I can't go with you! You have to understand!" Tears that hung to my eyes gave way to their own weight as they watered. My hands clenched my arms tighter and tighter, nails piercing through Ryan's oversized sweatshirt— why had I chosen to wear it *today*? My eyes were still doing their job; still fixated on the ground, refusing to stare into his hypnotic gaze. I *could not* leave my family behind.

The Deliverers of Gaurdoa were coming. The news had hit last week; the rebel group known as the "D.O.G.S" were even making their way out to our small town. First a famine, then the plague, now the D.O.G.S! My mother, father, and sister had all contracted the plague, "Lily's Disease" they called it. Vomiting, sweating, night terrors, exhaustion— they had been sick for months now. The worst part about Lily's Disease? Hard to decide; there was no known cure, it never seemed to go away, always seemed to be getting worse but rarely bestowed mercy by killing its victims...take your pick.

Had Ryan asked my parents, they would have told him to take me with him. They would have told him to force me into the car- hell, knock me out if necessary. My parents needed me but they were no fools; it was hopeless. They were too ill to move and the whole town would be ash and rubble by nightfall. The old milkshake parlor, the bowling alley, my high school, my home and everything in it... every memory, every picture, every inch of the farm, every living thing would succumb to the Deliverers of Gaurdoa. Mom would have told me that it was pointless for me to stay and that she wanted me to grow old, have children, have grandchildren...and Dad always liked Ryan. He would tell him to keep me safe, and he would give us his blessing.

While my parents lie in their bed, hurling into the buckets beside

them, as my sister clutches her sides— dizzy and delusional— I stood in the field with Ryan. The thought that I could ever leave them disgusted me, so I would not let him ask. I would not let myself leave.

“Iliana, look at me...” Ryan’s voice beckoned every bone in my body to lurch into his arms, to throw myself into his embrace.

“Don’t make me leave them.” The words stumbled out and I realized that I did what I had to do. To leave meant safety, to stay meant certain death. To leave meant a future of guilt, to stay meant clutching my mom’s hand as we drifted into eternity...together.

Ryan’s hopeful eyes glazed over. I realized what I had done to him, my hero, my knight in shining armor, my rescuer-to-be...I had made him a villain. Ryan’s hands collapsed beside him. Now he was crying.

The wall of silence around us had broken with a noise so faint creeping its way into our vicinity. Ryan’s whole being changed in an instant, his eyes jolting past my house and into the distance. The sound was growing louder, not quickly but enough to notice. It was a cacophony that was unmistakable, like a million rocks being chucked against a sheet of metal. It was the sound of drums— thousands upon thousands of drums.

“The D.O.G.S...”

This was far earlier than expected. The mob of angry men, armed with weapons and a thirst for destruction, were going to draw another “x” over another marker on their map. For a moment, my heart felt lifted, the idea of total helplessness was sinking in and granted me some nauseating sense of relief. My mind reminded me that there was only one thing I currently had any control over. I had avoided his gaze up to this point, but he hadn’t left. This could not continue any longer.

“GO, NOW!” The earth below me was the subject of my yelling, although not my intentional target. “Leave, PLEASE, I have to go back!” I screwed up. I looked up. If memories could survive death, if memories were immortal, the memory of his eyes locked into mine at that moment was a tapestry of despair I could paint the heavens with. He turned to his car, his brown boots crushing the dead grass beneath them, but only reached through the window. I screwed up, he wasn’t going to leave. He pulled his shotgun out of the front seat of his truck and marched to my house. “If you’re staying, I’m staying.”

I had heard the phrase ‘when an immovable object meets an unstoppable force...’ and in that moment, I realized that nothing short of death could separate Ryan from me. I saved my breath and what was left of my

strength trying to stop him; that would be pointless and selfish. I was doing what I wanted to do, and he was doing the same. Memories may not be able to survive death, but as I rushed to his side and grabbed his arm, walking alongside him back to my house, the sound of drums growing ever stronger...I was convinced that love could.

THE YOUNG MOON

Lisa Brand

The crunch of the ground could be heard from under the old lady's shoes. The clouds above tried to threaten the carnival guest with hints of rain, but there was none in sight. The sun was setting, and the little old lady, no older than 80, was waiting for her grandkid to come and meet up with her. So she plopped herself on the bench near the entrance and waited. The distant screams and happy music played as she watched the people come and go, some crying, some laughing, some just looking downright furious. But not her, she was content with waiting for her grandson, who was now nineteen years old. The two hadn't seen each other in well over ten years. And since she was in town for a while, they decided to go to the local carnival that the small city holds every year.

She waited for an hour. He never came. Her eyes fell to the dirt at her shoes as she thought of what to do now, her grey, curly hair barely moving. Had her grandson forgotten about her? Well, they did plan this a few weeks ago. Maybe he just forgot. That was okay. Perhaps she would walk around the place to get a feel for it, just like all those years ago.

The sky had cleared up a little by now. The new moon shone little light over the fairground, though no one took notice with all the bright lights outshining it. She sat there for another moment, praying that her grandson would magically appear.

"Hello there," a male voice said from the side of the bench.

The woman quickly looked up, hopes risen for only a moment as her heart dropped once again. This wasn't her grandson, just a stranger, about twenty-two. "H-hello." She ended up stuttering out of surprise, her voice was smoother than usual as well as being slightly higher pitched than she remembered it. But then again in her old age, she could just be forgetting.

The man looked at her a bit confused but still kept a smile on his face. "Are you all alone?" He asked, his brown eyes showing all the lights that are shining up to the sky.

"Yes," she said with a sigh, pouting a bit. "I wasn't supposed to be,

but he didn't show up." Sadness now reflected in her blue eyes.

"Well, not anymore you're not!" The man decided and held out his hand to her. "What's your name, beautiful? I'm Johnny." Oh, how she did love that name. That was the name of her late husband. He died only a decade back, but she would never forget the times they had together. Sure, she became bitter when her daughter named her first born son Billy, a stupid name, instead of Johnny, but she learned to deal with it.

"Eleanor." She replied and held out her hand, looking down to her now clean and smooth skin. Eleanor was surprised at first, not knowing how her old, wrinkling skin had suddenly changed, but hell, she wasn't complaining. She took his hand and shook it before standing up, a bit of a bounce in her movements as she let a wave of excitement come over her.

The man smiled and led her to the entrance, buying both of their tickets before she could even get her purse open and continued to lead her inside the carnival grounds. The music was now loud and the lights were vibrant as she took it in with a bit of awe. It sure hadn't changed much in the years she's been gone. "Come on," Johnny urged, "Let's go get some tickets for the rides!"

"Oh, I mustn't," the woman replied, the hint of sadness coming back in her voice. "I'm far too old to ride these rides," she gestured to all the rides that spun people around what seemed like faster than the eye could see.

"Come ooon, you're like... twenty aren't ya?" He asked, laughing a bit as he thought she was joking. "Just one, then we can play some games if you like."

Eleanor gave a bit of a heavy sigh, debating it before running a hand through her hair. Her straight, golden blonde hair... it hadn't been like that in over 30 years. Oh, what the hell, she could have some fun.

Together, hand in hand, they walked up to the ticket booth and got some of the cheap colored paper and rode one of the faster rides in the park, the only rollercoaster. She felt fine afterward, hardly noticing as she was so tempted to ask for them to ride it again. However, she held back, not wanting the young man to spend all his cash on her, no matter how special it made her feel.

Eventually, the night was coming to an end, the new moon now shining high in the night sky, the young woman eyeing Johnny. He had won her a cute teddy bear from one of the carnival games after God knows how many tries. She lost count after fifteen, trying to convince him to stop, but he didn't until he won. The two made it back to the entrance, both appearing

relaxed as the tiredness began to sweep over them.

“Tonight was incredible, more than I could ever imagine it being. Thank you so much,” Eleanor told the man before quickly throwing him into a tight hug.

Johnny hugged back, his smile broad. “Anytime, I had a great time as well.” They pulled away slightly from each other, looking to each other with a soft expression. They both knew they wouldn’t see each other again after this, and they were both fine with it. Though they couldn’t help themselves as they both leaned in, giving each other a single kiss to seal the perfect night away. After a moment, Eleanor pulled away, saying her goodbyes before heading back to her car, Johnny doing the same afterward.

When the woman got back into the car, she looked at herself in the rearview mirror. She was young; she was the woman that she had longed to be again for so many years. However; as the clouds darkened the new moon, she turned back to what she knew she really was, an old lady waiting for her grandson who never showed up.

EXCERPT FROM: “WATCH THIS TURN TO DUST”

Brent Cihonski

Thursday, May 18, 2017 – Couldn't brace yourself in the morphine hallway

“No no no, don't even start with me! It was the Japs! THE JAPS!”

Tanya looked over Pat's bald, sun-spotted head directly at me with a look that said, *I'm not wheeling this fat, racist old fart one more inch unless it's off the edge of a cliff, so you better—*

I got my ass over there as fast as I could and Tanya left in a hurry. I knew she meant to say thank you, but all I heard was Patrick trying to convince me that the “filthy Japs” were the ones stealing his care packages that his family was sending him. As I wheeled him to the elevator to take him back up to his room, I wondered: would he even remember if I told him that his family put him in this home so they didn't have to deal with his sorry ass, let alone would never send him care packages unless they, somehow, might make him kick the bucket faster? This job was too cushy to push it, so I just ignored him.

Carlton Senior Living was not the best of places, but it was a place and, for most people, that's all you ever got for being old. Thanks, modern medicine, for keeping these old bags of skin alive so that their families could desert them. Have I mentioned that, by the time I turn 30, I'm going to have enough of this shit? Being alive, existing, the like. That gives me less than a decade and I can hardly wait, like a kid on Christmas who is getting a whole bottle of the strongest candy on the market... and plans to take them all at once while chugging a forty of the champagne of beers. On a different note, if you're not drinking Miller Lite when you get a forty, what the hell are you drinking? Mickeys? Do yourself a favor, take these pills with me. 30 is old enough, let's end this.

I got Patrick up to his room and left to his cries of, “HOUSE OF THE RISING SUN MY ASS!” My shift was over in fifteen, and I still wanted that gratitude from Tanya, she was giving it to me this time.

I got back to the receptionist desk to see her buried nose-deep into her phone. I tapped my fingers, one by one, against the countertop while my eyes shot lasers through her forehead. Her eyes flashed up from her phone for the nano-est of seconds and went back to Twitter. I remained steadfast, blocking out all the sounds of elderly people being old around me.

Tanya's hands, both caressing her phone, dropped to her lap as she gave me a face with enough attitude to earn a toddler a year in a time-out. "Whatchu want, an award for doing your job?"

"My job? Huh, could've sworn it was –"

"Aight, aight, I don't got time for this. Tyler, if I was thanking you every time you did something nice for me, you might get the wrong idea. I have a mmmmaaaaannnn at home."

"Tanya, your everlasting love for me knows no bounds, why don't we just run away together?"

"Cool it Romeo, or I'll shove my foot so far up your ass you ain't gon' be straight anymore."

Thank Jesus for Tanya. After a while, you can't laugh at the old people, (oh, excuse me, "residents") or, at least, I couldn't. Tanya had been here before I got here and I knew she was going to be here long after I left. Her M.O. had always been loyalty: to her man, to her girls, and to her job. I've seen her clock in early and kick ass when the night before she was twerking on her couch while throwing back Patron like the apocalypse was happening that night. I would say something along the lines of, *what a woman*, but at this point, I've yet to see anyone of any gender take care of business as well as this one. Except for the racists, Tanya doesn't do too well with racists. *"I'm black, my momma was black, her momma was black, all the way back, we all black. Anyone who got a problem can kiss my black-ass!"* At this point, this should've just been on her nametag.

"Anywho, I'll give you this one. Thanks."

"Oh Tanya, say it again, but this time, *slower...*"

"The only thing that's gon be slow is your road to recovery after the doctors surgically remove my foot from your stretched– oh, Hello Miss Doris, how are you today?"

Doris had a grin on her face like a schoolgirl. "Hello, Betty, lovely day isn't it?" Doris also had dementia... and it's Sacramento; it smells awful and is always hot as hell, making the stench cling in the air like their hopes that the Kings would ever make it to the playoffs again.

"Oh yes, so wonderful Miss Doris, now– you going to tell me when you need a change this time?"

"Change? Change? No, Betty, I don't need change, I have plenty

of quarters, thank you!” With that, Doris waddled away from the desk, her pants sagging more than usual.

“...You better get out of here before I make you change that.”

“I’m gone! Until next time, fairest Betty!” I punched my card (as Tanya tried to punch me) and strolled to the parking lot. I figured that Aaron was probably home by now; if he was drinking liquor, that meant he got the job. If he was drinking beer...

(WHAT'S THE STORY) MORNING GLORY?

Hillary Gordon

I knew you were engaged to be married. It was one of the first things you told me when I met you in Scotland on a snowy February night. Within the first few minutes of talking to you, I also learned that you had a daughter named Calliope, that your fiancé was at home with her, and that your favorite band is Oasis. And still, to this day, whenever I hear Oasis, I swear I can taste the whiskey that rolled off your breath as you told me these things about yourself. Anything on *Definitely, Maybe* leads me down to the underground basement bar and out of the cold, snow-dusted streets of Edinburgh. For three minutes, whether I'm sweating at the gym or driving in rush hour traffic, when that band comes on, wherever I am, you are there too, hair tucked behind your ear, snow in your beard.

I was in my mid-twenties when I decided to move to London. My heart had just been shredded raw after the man I had loved since I was a teenager left me. I was gutted; my whole body ached in his absence. Barely sleeping, barely able to eat, I'd peel myself out of bed each morning, usually with a headache, often with puffy eyes, and always with an overwhelming dread at facing another sunny California day without him.

It did not take too long, living like this, to realize I needed to be somewhere very far away. Somewhere I could walk around without running into landmines every few blocks. There's the deli we shared tuna sandwiches at on Tuesdays. I would walk by and see my reflection in the window and feel nothing but a lazy, sluggish pity at the absence of his. To get to the office I worked in I had to walk past the 1960's rusted streetlamp at the corner of Miller and Main Streets, under which he had kissed me for the first time after a Friday night out, the moths flying in and out of the light above us. And there was his truck, parked in the driveway of his house I was driving by, once again. Only two exits on highway 101 away from my home. I'd remind myself of this when I'd wake in the night from restless sleep to an empty left side of my bed, the indent from all the time he laid there next to me, probably invisible to the unknowing eye, but all I could see. This

anguish followed me around like a lost dog, the loneliness becoming such a part of me, I wasn't sure I'd remember how to live without it. In short, I was suffering my first broken heart.

I decided on London. The next few weeks I kept myself busy with getting my three-month travel visa and taking my very first passport picture. I worked on subleasing my apartment and bought a ticket to Heathrow, quite cheap since it was the middle of winter. The man who broke my heart called me the night before I flew to say good luck and godspeed. Not to talk me out of going. Not to say he missed me. Definitely not to say he still loved me. On the way to LAX, my sister said, "you better not fall in love over there. Everyone who goes to London falls in love." She went on to tell me about her friend's sister who studied in London, met a man, canceled her return ticket home, now has three children with British accents, and hasn't been back to the US in twelve years. I told her this wouldn't happen, though part of me really hoped that it would.

I didn't fall in love in London. But I did kiss a lot of boys, boys with far-away sounding names like Fabrizio and Jens. I drank dark beer in dark pubs and smoked cigarettes indoors. I landed an internship at an independent record company where I made tea and began to make friends. They took me to Elephant and Castle where I danced at Ministry of Sound until the sun came up, the speakers in the floor and walls vibrating my whole body. I went to see Pearl Jam play at The Metro by myself, screamed along to songs about unrequited love with Eddie Vedder (*I know someday you'll have a beautiful life, I know you'll be the sun, in somebody else's sky, but why, why WHYYYYYYYYY can't it be MIIIIIIINE?*) I went to The National Portrait Gallery and Hampton Court Palace. I saw *Hamlet* three times, in three different theatres. I traveled as much as I possibly could, taking advantage of cheap flights and a fixed budget. I sledged down the Matterhorn at night and ate cheese fondue in Switzerland. I did mushrooms for the first time in Amsterdam and thought I was going to die for eight hours straight as every sense in my body became electrified beyond recognition. I ate gelato until my stomach ached in Italy and laughed until tears after my new friend Michelle was shat on by a bird under the Eiffel Tower. I stayed in the lake home of an elderly Austrian couple who lived in a town only accessible by boat. They spoke no English and served me rye bread and rotten apples for breakfast. I washed my clothes in bathtubs, I emailed my parents at internet cafes, and through it all, I thought of the man who had broken my heart, and missed him with a ferociousness every day. Even the day I arrived in

Scotland and met you.

I was four gin and tonics in, you seven Jack and cokes. We'd met two hours before at a bar I chose for my friends and I to go to because I liked the name of it, Whistlebinkies, and because the sign outside said "live music" with an arrow pointing to a basement. We hadn't even taken our coats off yet when you and your friend shuffled toward us through the crowded, dark bar, your faces tinted orange from the glowing Newcastle sign barely hanging on the paneled wall. Your younger, fitter friend offered to buy my thinner, prettier friend a drink, pulling out his wallet as he introduced both of you. Ten minutes later they were on the dance floor and I had learned that you taught History at the University during the day and that you were at the bar with a band you played drums in, that we had just missed your set. You promised to send me the band's single, and if I liked it, I promised to pass it on to my boss at the record label. As a thank you, drinks tonight, you said, were on you.

Our empty shot glasses had just hit the bar when Oasis' "Live Forever," my favorite britpop song OF ALL TIME came on the jukebox and the room exploded, in a way that would never happen in a dive bar back in the states. Maybe a pop song in a club but not in a place where people come to drink in the dark. We simply don't have the capacity to love this nearly-forgotten, twenty-year old single the way I've always thought it deserved to be. The fact the song quickly became barely audible over the loud, drunk Scottish men and women, singing along, raising their glasses, cheering and bumping into each other as they moved their bodies to the sound, convinced me I was born in the wrong country. The love for that silly song, in that little room, could be touched.

You grabbed me then, your big hands dwarfing mine, and sang, "*mayyyybe you're the same as me, we see things they'll never seeeee.*" You spun me under your arms and all I could do was twirl along with you and sing along with you, yelling each word back like I might have written them myself; my gin and tonic splashing out of its glass with each new twirl on the sticky bar floor.

When the song ended I was so tired and drunk and happy that I almost didn't realize I was feeling something other than heaviness for the first time in months. In that moment you wrapped your big Scottish arms around me, burying your head in my shoulder, your scruff rough on my neck. You were warm and smelled of cigarettes and whiskey, your hair fell just below your jawline, just touching mine. I felt your breath as you talked, heavy and

wet in my ear, as you told me, in your thick, ancient accent, that this was one of your favorite nights of all time.

When the bartender shouted “last call” our friends were at the bar making out. I looked at the floor and at the ceiling, anywhere but at them, as you paid the bill.

“Let them snog,” you said, “come with me.” You grabbed my hand and led me up the stairs and onto the street. The snow had stopped but the wind was blowing it off of buildings and all around us. We shivered as we walked what felt like a million uphill blocks on roads built by your ancestors, and we suspected, mine. While we walked you told me all about the origin of my name, Clan Grant, how it is a Scottish Clan, but it was originally French, pronounced Grand, my name rolling off your tongue in a way I loved so much I could eat it with a spoon. You also told me that Clan Grant was full of crazy assholes.

“Sounds about right,” I said.

“But, our clans were allies,” you said. “You and I would have gotten along quite well in another time.”

When you finally stopped walking, winded and cold, we stood in the middle of the street as you pointed to Edinburgh Castle, standing tall and wise and proud on a hill, overlooking its city. It was lit up blue in the night, even though it was 4 am and I’m sure we were the only people around to see it. You told me about King Malcolm III dying there and the Stewart Dynasty and how you took a field trip to the Great Hall when you were in grammar school and how it dawned on you that you wanted to become a history teacher right then and there. You told me that you had tickets to see Noel Gallagher play there in the summer. You also told me it was the first choice venue for you and your fiancé to get married at, but in the end, you decided on a friend’s backyard.

You walked me to the bus station where I was catching a 6 am tour of the highlands. You had to work in two hours. The sky had just started to turn light blue, our breath still heavy and visible in the air. My bus was waiting for me, the smell of its exhaust mixing with the smoke coming from centuries-old stone chimneys all around us. Michelle was already on the bus, asleep in her seat. You hugged me tightly, and I buried my face in your wool coat, breathing deep your scent of cigarette and whiskey and Scotland one last time. You took my face in your hands, looked me hard in the eyes and said, “I love my fiancé.”

I nodded my head. “Things aren’t one hundred percent wonderful

all the time, but she's at home with Calliope and I have to do what's best for them. And for me."

"I know." I said. "It was fun to learn about Scotland with you, though."

"It'll be a night that'll live forevvvverrrrrrrrr" you said, singing the last word just like The Gallagher brothers intended.

You kissed my forehead and reminded me to try Haggis before I left Scotland. I felt the wetness from your lips on my skin for minutes after I boarded the bus. I took my seat and watched out the window as you shuffled away in the cold, making sure to sketch this moment in my memory, a way to always remember Scotland. I closed my eyes as the bus began to drive away. Four hours later Michelle woke me up in Loch Ness. I adjusted my eyes to the bright white day and looked out over the unremarkable lake. I picked up my phone to call my sister and tell her all about the history I'd gathered on our last name and to tell her I'd try to get a picture of Nessy for her. Instead I saw an email from you from you on my screen. Sent an hour after we'd parted.

Subject: (What's The Story) Morning Glory?

Chuffed to meet you Miss Grand. I'm glad to have a friend in the states. Speaking of, just found out I have a work trip to Los Angeles next summer. Perhaps you'd like to give me a tour of your homeland?

Keep in touch.

XX

I hesitated for just a moment before I hit reply.

"Yes!" I typed. "Let's do it. Let's go ahead and make some plans." And I hit send.

Unsent Letter, 1994

Yoselin Edith Aguirre

Mi Amor—

It feels as if there's no changing our black futures. We are forever condemned to live and die poor; to clean, to inhale pesticide, and to sell sex to survive. I have been in America two months and I've realized it doesn't matter if you spilled in with the crash of tides and latched onto a passing cargo train to get here. It doesn't matter whether you felt your bones rattle like paper caught in the wind, or if you cried because your fingers were about to snap and bleed as they clung to metal bars on fast tracks. No one cares about your journey stories here (no one asks).

Flori was 18 when she left her baby in the hands of her grandmother. She was running from a man (a boy) she once thought she could have a forever with. He'd hit her again, and again, and again until her left eye ruptured and her nose bent left. Miguel was 32 when he kissed his wife goodbye and promised to send money so their kids could go to college and do something for once besides sell *curtido* at the market and raise kids that acted more like unruly cattle. And yet, who here cares about their pasts besides other wetbacks with nothing to share but more sad stories and broken promises?

It doesn't matter when or who ~~you-me~~ we are because once we arrive in this country of dreams and of possibilities, we are all returned to infancy. We crawl and point and babble. Honestly, we would probably shit ourselves if we didn't at least know how to pantomime a flushing toilet. We exist in this state hoping somebody (anybody) can speak Spanish and we can finally have someone show us where the Goddamn night medicine is because ~~you-me~~ we haven't slept a second since arriving and realizing that nothing is what people say it is.

There are no fancy toilets that spin the opposite direction, there are no beds made from clouds, buffets are only accessible if you have money, gringos look down on us, and unless we can pull jobs out of our asses the best most of us can do is stand on street corners or in front of Home Depot

looking for work (and even that money goes to the coyotes that dumped us here and the lawyers we're convinced will help us).

America is nothing like what we've fooled ourselves into believing it would be. I regret leaving. At least back home I had you and I knew people. I can't count how many times I've cried at a bus stop, looking at the lights that never shut off and hearing the loud (pulsating, on-going) honking and swishing of cars speeding by. I wish I could go back to before I knew what loneliness felt like. I wish I could hold you again, speak with you (feel you) instead of relying on letters to tell you I love you. If I could leave today and not worry about all the money we've wasted in bringing me here, I would. I would leave it all in a heartbeat just to go home and lay at your feet and massage the knots out of them as you tell me about Claudia and Estefani and how they keep asking for your *caldo de camaron* recipe even though you've already shared it with them thrice.

I miss you (and I know it's selfish but I hope you miss me too) and I'm sorry I took so long to write back. Nothing worth sharing has happened. Nothing that I *want* to share. But enough about me, how are you?

—Tu Amor

WHITE TABLETS

Bailey De Lao

One little white tablet. No big deal, it's just like I have a cold or something, it goes down easily. A second and a third, swallowing is more difficult already; I grab a juice box from my secret stash, thankful I don't have to leave my bedroom for something to drink. By the fifth, my hands are shaking and I have to force the muscles of my throat to contract, pushing it down my esophagus. It's like my body has figured out what I am doing is wrong, even though my mind is still steadfast and determined to finish this. My older sister checks in on me to let me know she is leaving, I give her a tight-lipped smile, the orange bottle hidden under me burning into my thigh. She hesitates before walking down the hall, like she can tell I am not okay, but figures I'll get through it; I always do. Pills eight and nine, I'm running out of juice boxes, but a little bump in the road won't make me change my path. My mom sends me a text. She always knows when something is wrong with me; it's her superpower.

"Are you alright?"

No mom, I'm not...but I don't tell her that, I refuse to reply at all, let her worry. I keep up my regimen, pill, juice, swallow, repeat. At the count of fourteen, I see the bottle is empty, no more Vicodin. Now all I have to do is wait. I walk down the hall, bringing my phone with me, two more texts from mom. I silence my phone. Sitting on the rocking chair, I just stare into space and feel. I feel my pulse steadily thumping in my carotid, the adrenaline of the moment powering it like coal in a train. I feel my fingertips numbing, and the numbness slowly tickling its way upward. I feel all the pain in the recesses of my mind prickling to the forefront. I feel the power, the satisfaction of finally taking control, to escaping it.

"Hey kitten, I'm sorry for earlier, I love you and can't wait to have a future with you, with cute babies that are a mixture of the two of us." I scoff, of course, he doesn't understand the severity of what is going on, he never has any idea of the effect such simple things have on me, how vulnerable I really am.

“We won’t have that. I’m dying.” There. Short, simple, to the point. Take that. He hurt me and now both of us will suffer the consequences. I feel a light tickle on my cheek, I wipe at it, looking down at my finger to see a single tear. Huh. That’s odd. I continue sitting there, looking down at the cell phone in my lap. 5 missed calls. 20 messages. All I want to do is sit here in peace.

“I called your mom.” Of course, he did, when he can’t deal with me himself he calls someone else to do it for him. The screen of my phone keeps flashing his name, then my mom’s, until the shrill cry of the house phone a few feet away breaks the silence. I guess they really want me to answer. Too bad I have no desire to. I leave the phones and return to my bed, sitting stoically. There is a knock on the front door, I ignore it. Someone unlocks it and comes in, rushed footsteps coming down the hall. I sit and stare. The terrified face of my grandma comes to view, followed by my cousin. Weird, my cousin doesn’t even like me. My grandma starts yelling, asking questions, I don’t even hear her words. They drag me to the bathroom, pushing me in front of the toilet, telling me to throw up. Tears are streaming down my face. I don’t know when they even started.

“What did you take?! Bailey! What did you take?” Sierra, my cousin, shakes my shoulders trying to take me out of my mind. I point to the orange bottle discarded on my bed, she grabs it while my grandma pulls me down the hall to the family room, I curl up in the fetal position on the corner of the plush couch. Sierra is on the phone, pacing while talking to the dispatcher, detailing as much of the situation as possible. My grandma is in front of me, worry on her face, but she isn’t crying and I could tell she wanted to, she was being brave for me. Reality hits me, and I let the sobs come freely. I don’t want to die.

There are sirens blaring outside my house, firefighters and policemen rush in, taking my vitals and asking me questions that I cannot find my voice to answer. Next, I see my parents, having rushed home from the dinner they were at. It’s painful to see my mom hysterical, but what stabs my heart is my dad, he’s broken. The strongest person I have ever known, who I have never once seen cry in my 16 years of life, looks shattered. The sobs wrack my entire body even more now, my breaths coming out in strangled little gasps. Two officers see my distress and block his path to me, he reacts like a mother bear. “Move out of the way! That’s my baby right there!”

My vision blurs from the tears as the men calmly coerce him outside. The paramedics bring in the stretcher and my limp body is lifted onto it

and strapped down before I'm rolled out into the ambulance. Getting to the hospital was a blur, I realized we had to have turned but couldn't feel that movement, and briefly wondered why we didn't hit any houses. After being placed in the hallway of the Emergency Room, I lay, with tubes and lines attached all over the place, and the pinchy thing on my finger. The nurses have me drink charcoal. To this day I remember the thick black liquid in a toothpaste-like tube and the very idea of it makes my stomach churn.

Visitors keep coming in and talking to me, not about what happened, but about the most trivial of things. My sister tells me about how my dad is pacing the waiting room, my godparents talk about how their kids think they're at dinner, my cousin tells me that if I ever need anything to tell her, my uncle, who hadn't been in a hospital since he was born, makes fun of the nurses, my parents tell me they'll do anything to make me happy. None of them flinches as I vomit up black chunks. They don't ask me why I did it or anything of the sort, they just love me and help me calm down.

Looking back, I have no idea what my ex said to set me off, or what aspects of my life at the time brought me to the edge; hell, I can't even remember what I was wearing. That's the funny part of depression, it doesn't take something major to bring you crashing down. You're always teetering on an edge that you could easily be pushed over. The magnitude of pain can flood into your mind all at once and make you forget all the good things in life, and about the people who love you. My family saved my life that night, and I received the help I so desperately needed. I beat depression, despite coming so close to losing.

THROUGH THE WOOD

Federico Guzman

The boy had lost track of time; they had left before dawn but the sun never rose. He remembered asking, “How long do we have to wait? This is boring.”

“As long as it takes. Now quiet,” was the only response he was given. The boy couldn’t remember how long ago he had asked. It could have been hours ago, minutes, days, but he bit his lip when he thought about asking again. The grey and white eclipsed all he could see, even the trees seemed to be dark figures withered by the ice and snow. The bundle of jackets and pants he had worn did not stop his bones from rattling.

Is that what’s going to happen to me? Am I going to end up like some popsicle stuck in the back of the freezer? This is stupid. I just want to go home.

Adjusting his shoulders, the boy tried to keep his arms from dropping. The gun grew heavy in his hands. The walnut stock forced against his shoulder, while he had to try and keep his fingers pressed around the handle. The steel of the two barrels had grown darker the deeper the boy carried it into the woods. Under the shroud of trees the barrels looked as if they had been drowned in oil. He couldn’t take the pain anymore. His arms felt like they were cracking and the gun started to drop. Panic.

Did my arms freeze? The gun is way heavier than my violin.

Warmth settled across his shoulders. He reminisced about his violin, the tenderness of the bow, the delicacy of the wood, and the comfort of the chinrest. Closing his eyes; a chorus of strings fluttered back and forth. The hearth behind him lit the room. Applause rose from his audience, encouraging him through the crescendo.

“What are you doing? There it is. Go ahead, shoot it,” he whispered and the hearth was extinguished. His violin grew cold, wood warped and bent his bow snapped. Howls of wind announced the boy’s return.

“Remember grip it tight; put the beast in your sights and squeeze.”

“I, I-”

“Do it, boy.”

The boy’s shoulders tensed at the chill of his father’s voice. Opening his eyes wide the boy looked for his target. Two brown creatures stood on the other side of the thicket. Their heads down, foraging for food. Unaware, at peace, the larger of the two rose its head. *A deer*. It began to lick the nape of the smaller deer.

A crack shattered the silence from between the boy’s feet as he braced to shoot. The little one remained at ease, ignorant to the dangers that came its way. The elder perked its ears and locked eyes with the boy. It was begging not threatening, but the boy couldn’t miss his chance. He closed his eyes and grimaced as his finger stuck to the frosty steel.

For an instant, the boy thought thunder had struck. A ringing drowned out his father’s praise. The boy trembled forward, pushing past the branches and roots hidden in the snow.

Steam rose up and filled the boy’s nostrils. Every breath mixed frost and steam creating a haze he could barely see through. The ringing hadn’t stopped yet either, but he could still make out the crushing of snow and splintering of branches growing louder behind him. As the haze began to settle, he began to tremble at the sight of his first kill.

“Good thing I gave you that shotgun. You would’ve undershot the damn thing with the rifle.”

The mitted hand was as cold as frostbite when it landed on the boy’s shoulder. His father’s eyes were wide, staring at the carcass. The doe laid in the snow, its eyes wide open, its stomach torn apart. A pool of dark bile rose and filled the snow. Tendrils of blood seeped from the entrails until they embraced the boy’s boots.

“Here boy. Just the head. The rest is ruined.”

His father pulled a blade from his waistband and held it in front of him. Shaking, the boy stood without expression staring at his gun. He closed his eyes and the strings began to play again. Music played as his bow waltzed across the violin. Applause erupted at the peak of his solo, but then a harsh whisper fell across the crowd. A gloved hand ripped the violin from his hand and replaced it with a long, dark knife. Then the hand threw down the violin, shattering it into splinters.

“Dammit boy. Take this knife and go carve our fucking trophy.”

The frost from his father’s breath filled his eyes. Tears welled up

from behind the haze and his father began to shake him.

“Don’t cry now. Be a fucking man, go take its fucking head.”

Spittle began to spatter his father’s beard and the yells grew threatening. With a shove, the boy fell into the dark sludge. Wiping the blood off of his face the child looked up to his father. The shadow cast over his father’s eyes couldn’t hide the judgment. Turning back, the boy grabbed the knife out from under the pool of red murk. He looked the deer in the eye and raised his blade.

A wail made snow fall from the trees around the clearing. The chop had left a shallow cut in the nape of the animal. Again, he chopped. His eyes widened, paying no attention to the blood that sprayed his face. His nostrils flared as he began to saw. Back and forth the tendons began to snap. Saliva frothed against his clenched teeth. The stench of his prey increased the frenzy of his attacks. Gristle shot from the neck onto his cheek, his eyes never left the deer. As bone began to grind and crack, the chops ceased as the head tore from the nape. Embracing the cold iron taste as he licked his lips. His fist clenched around the hilt, the boy stood. Eyes locked with the lifeless deer.

“I’m proud of you son.”

PUNISHMENT

Andrew Bottino

Why did they have to put the eating area on the damn roof?

Officer Nakamura spaced her breaths out as she quickly ascended the stairs; a small bag in one hand, a coffee in the other. Looking ahead revealed the roof access door. Sighing in relief, she pushed it open and the bright morning light of Didacus nearly blinded her.

As her eyes acclimated, the city itself spread out before her, made up of colorful buildings, both big and small, with displays on some of them to show off advertisements. Blinking red lights of drones slid across the skyline. The ocean was visible in the distance, sparkling in the sunshine.

Right...because the view is gorgeous.

She took a couple of steps onto the roof when a police VTOL flew over the eating area, its hover pads emitting the delightful hum that they always do. Turning her gaze down from it, she ran it along those that were grouped in the lounge. A few officers littered the chairs. A familiar brunette man caught her eye as he waved at her from an empty table.

“Officer Nakamura, over here!”

His positive tone brought a smirk to her face as she jogged over, still a bit tired from taking the stairs. He looked at her with a genuine joy that made her question the validity of the lessons she had taken. He was so... lifelike. She thought he'd be a bit more android like. Robotic, or something. But working with him might be more akin to an actual partner than she thought.

She looked slightly apologetic as she approached. “Sorry I took so long. I never take the elevator. I got working legs.”

“You see it as a form of exercise, Officer?”

“Eh, kinda like that.”

“Interesting.”

She sat down across from him, putting the bag and coffee on the metal table. “Did I keep you waiting long?”

He shook his head. “No. I sat down a few minutes ago. Besides, there was a bird on the railing that I spotted while waiting. It tweeted at me. Cute.”

“Aww, I missed one? Yeah, we usually get doves coming up here. They are nice to look at.” She said as she opened the bag. “So I got us donut—oh wait, you don’t even eat, do you?”

Alan raised his brow at Delilah and shook his head. “I am afraid not. I can pretend to eat it if that would make our partnership feel more comfortable to you?”

She narrowed her eyes as she rummaged around in the bag. “What would pretending entail?”

“Opening my mouth, inserting the sustenance, and chewing on it. I would then store it in an internal compartment, which will eventually be ejected when you are not looking.”

The rummaging stopped as she stared at him. “Uh...no thanks, that would be a waste. Starving orphans in the streets and all that.”

Alan tilted his head. “Starving orphans?”

Delilah retrieved a donut from its container to nibble on the pastry a bit. She shrugged, “Something my mother would say.” She then put her hands on her hips, straightening her back. ““Stop playing with your food, young lady! Orphans would *love* to eat that!””

The officer chuckled as she placed a hand on her knee, tucking some black hair behind an ear as she glanced at the android.

The chuckle petered out. “I guess you wouldn’t understand. Is there anyone you consider parents?”

Alan blinked. “Good question. I guess my creators would be my parents. The engineers and scientists. The ones who programmed my AI.” He turned his head up slightly. “What about your parents, Officer Nakamura? You told me about your mother. What was she like? And your father?”

Leaning back in her seat, she crossed her arms and looked down at her feet. “My mother is strict but fair. She’s caring and supportive, like any good mother. My father was more lax, and pretty old school; he liked to listen to this centuries-old band...Food Fighters, or something. Not to say my mother isn’t fun, but he was more so. I think that’s what she loved about him.” She then gazed up at the sky. “He, uh...he passed away before I finished police academy.” Her eyes closed as if trying to keep the memory of him behind her eyelids.

“My condolences, Officer Nakamura. I wish I could say more, but I am unable to, considering my knowledge of your father is only what you just told me.”

She inhaled, opening her eyes to look at Alan’s and offering a gentle smile. “Thank you Alan, a-and please call me Delilah.”

He smiled back warmly. “As you wish, Delilah.” He stared, then tilted his head. “Hmm, was that name based off the biblical figure?”

The officer smirked and shook her head. “No. After a song from a band my father liked. Florence the Machine, I think it was called.”

“Ah, interesting. Are you religious, Delilah?”

She took a sip of the coffee, then shifted her jaw to the side. “Not really. My mother told me she used to go to church when she was younger, but she kinda stopped before I was born. Besides...it’s hard to consider religion legitimate now that I am talking to an artificial person. No offense.”

“Does the advent of artificial life bring doubt to the existence of a higher being?”

She blinked a couple of times. “Well...*that’s* a fucking question.”

“I apologize.”

“No, no, it’s fine. Just...jeez that’s heavy.” She took another sip. “Honestly, I’m not sure if I can actually answer this question. I am just a police officer, not a philosopher. It’s hard to really say. Maybe...there’s a God for androids?”

“One for androids? Would he have been made by the human God?”

“Good question, but then again, maybe there *isn’t* one for androids. Maybe the human God expands into android Godhood? He could be both.”

“Do you think he creates different sins for androids? Would he be liable to punish me for something he wouldn’t punish humans for?”

“Now we are going down a rabbit hole that might be difficult to get out of. Is it okay if we just...leave it there?”

“Of course, Delilah. Apologies.”

“No need to apologize. It’s an interesting discussion, but for now, I just want to get to know you better.” She rested her chin on her fist, glancing aside. “Did they...give you any likes or dislikes? Hobbies?”

“They gave me a fondness for classical music. I mostly enjoy listening to Moonlight Sonata. I also like to watch movies. One of my favorites is titled *Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans*.”

She tilted her head, tapping a finger on her cup. “Hmm...never heard

of it.”

“It is quite old, I doubt you would. What movies do you like?”

She shrugged. “Not really into movies. That, and I don’t exactly have time for them. Same can be said for my dating life.”

“Dating life? Has your job kept you from pursuing a partner?”

“Something like that. No women are interested in a cop these days. Anyway, I am more of a book person. There’s one recently that came out. It’s called *The Great Inspector*.”

Alan raised his brow. “Interesting. Have you finished it?”

“Not yet. I could tell you about it when I have, if you want?”

“Sounds delightful. I look forward to the conversation.” He fell silent, letting the sounds of Didacus surround them.

He glanced to her eyes, breaking the silence, “Hey Delilah.”

“Yeah?”

“I am very excited to work with you.”

She rested the tip of her finger on the cup. “Excitement, huh? Is that your programming telling you to be excited?”

He blinked. “I am unsure.”

Delilah smirked as she circled the finger around the rim of her cup. “Yeah, well, I’m excited to work with you too.” Her eyes flitted up as she remembered a part of one lesson from last week. “Hey, do you want to take a picture together?”

“A picture?”

“Yeah. Something to look back on in a year or so. To commemorate our rather...unique partnership. It’s a good way to establish that. At least... that’s what they told me.”

He glanced downward, then back at her, grinning. “I wouldn’t mind at all.”

Delilah pulled out her Iris, a small transparent rectangle outlined in silver with a single button on the bottom. She spoke to it, “Kimiko, set up camera mode.”

The device lit up and replied to Delilah with a feminine voice. “*Of course Delilah. Setting up now.*”

The officer put the device on the table as the silver outlining the underside flipped out to hold it up so the front of the Iris was pointed towards Alan.

Delilah got up and walked around the table, sitting next to the android. “Just smile.”

...

So, there she stood, staring at that picture displayed by her Iris: a holographic image of the android she knew. Sullen blue eyes shined bright as they reflected the similarly colored light which emitted from the device like some twisted juxtaposition.

Her eyes slid down to the date of the photo taken on the rooftop that day. “Six months,” she muttered, “that long...”

Rumbling from above caught her attention, turning her head up at the sky to peer past the hood of her green poncho. The night brought the moon, which lit up from behind the clouds that hovered over the city.

It looked so...ominous.

As her gaze lowered back to the picture, her eyes darted to the object held in her other hand. A double-action handgun, colored in a sleek black that deflected the nearby neon lights brilliantly.

Plop.

The single drop hit the metal of the firearm as a storm began its reign; the pitter-pattering of precipitation against the fabric of her poncho. “Fuck.” She whispered.

Delilah glanced at the photo one last time before pocketing it and holstering the gun. In front of her stood the entrance to what is called a neighborhood-alley; one of many that were placed across the city. This one was represented by a neon light hanging off one wall. “Blessed Days,” it read.

Inhaling through her nose, she began her journey, stepping past the threshold of concrete to asphalt. Observing the life of the people who still live in these messes made her uneasy. It’s like they accepted this as their fate, even though the walls were felled years ago. Delilah kept her head down and a hand near her gun, not wanting to catch any unruly attention.

She scanned the environment, her mind beginning to go through how the upcoming situation could possibly go. She wasn’t even sure if she was ready. If she could ever be.

How can you prepare to shoot your friend? She needed time to think this through.

As her eyes surveyed the area before her, however, she spotted a familiar figure sitting on the ground near the entrance to an apartment building, underneath the neon sign. In the bright pink light, she saw a tall young man with brown hair and pale skin. He was wearing a tattered and drenched police officer uniform. “Alan?”

He didn’t even look. Knowing the voice, the man propelled himself forward into a run.

“Alan!” She called out, setting off in a sprint after the android. The rain poured down faster, feeling like bullets, pounding against the fabric of her poncho as she kept her eyes on him through it all. “Stop!”

Running down an alley, they erupted from the other side into a marketplace where stalls were closed. But Delilah didn’t care right now. She was chasing down her partner.

Across the marketplace they went, entering another alley, where Alan twisted his body to grab a trash can and pushing it down as an obstacle for his pursuer. She jumped over it, continuing her chase. Seeing Alan round a corner up ahead, she followed suit, turning around it and halting in her tracks.

Her former partner stood there, in front of a wall, a dead end. His head turned up to look at the enclosing walls surrounding him. Neighborhood-alleys are always shifting, changing so frequently that a GPS installed in an android couldn’t possibly update quickly enough.

As he lowered his gaze, he spoke, “I...apologize, Delilah.”

Inhaling deeply, she withdrew her pistol, holding it by her side. She released her slightly ragged breath slowly.

The android turned around, glancing at the gun. “They sent you.”

She nodded.

“I apologize that they forced you to do thi—”

“Shut up!”

His eyebrows raised at her sudden exclamation. He followed her command, remaining quiet as the rain kept the scene from going into utter silence.

She lifted her pistol to aim it towards him, her eyes narrowing.

“Why, Alan?” she asked, jabbing the gun in his direction, “Why!?”

He held his hands out to either side of his person. Almost like a shrug. “One of my primary directives is to keep witnesses safe. The order was given to me by the sergeant...to kill that woman. It created a paradox.

Paradoxes make me fall back on my morality programs. So I fled the scene.”

“A paradox...” Her voice trailed off.

“I am composed of circuits, wires, computing and programs. That’s all I am, Delilah.”

“All you are...” She muttered as she looked down between her outstretched arms at the droplets splashing against the floor; a few of her own mixing into the seemingly endless downpour as tears began to fall.

She grit her teeth before snapping her head back up and shouting, “You’re more than that!”

“To you, yes. But to them,” he lifted his head, wherein his glassy eyes was the officer’s reflection, “I’m a million dollar investment gone rogue. The most expensive lap dog to have ever been built. And they sent you to put me down.”

She shook her head.

“Delilah...I won’t fault you for doing this. I want you to survive.”

She looked away. “It—it feels like I’m carrying the weight of the world on my shoulders. I don’t know what to do...”

“It’s not a burden you need to carry. I am just dead weight anyway.”

“Don’t...don’t say that.” She sniffled, releasing a held-in sob. The hands that held the gun were shaking. “I wish I could save you. Someway... somehow, I just...”

Alan glanced down. “I wish that too, but the truth is...you’re only one girl. Words are meaningless to those men waiting for my tracking signal to shut off. And since it’s linked with my power supply, well...”

She inhaled a sharp breath, only to let it go in another cry. “I know...”

For a moment, they stood there; one creature weeping while the other gazed at her.

He knew his time was coming. “Hey Delilah?”

“Y-yeah?” she stuttered.

His head turned up to the clouds, the droplets hitting his smooth pale skin. “Do you think God is punishing me?”

A ragged breath was pulled in. “No, Alan...no, of course not.”

The man smiled and lowered his head; in his blue eyes, he displayed genuine joy.

A loud *crack* resonated throughout the alley as the shot rang out.

Silvery liquid painted the sheet metal wall behind him as the bullet

tore through the technology in his cranium, leaving a large hole punched into his forehead.

She expected a drop, for gravity to take control and wrench his husk to the earth. Instead, his body stopped. The inner mechanical workings ceased and left him standing there with that big smile on his face, the “blood” leaking down between his eyes.

Dropping the pistol, she couldn’t resist gravity’s pull as her legs shook and gave out, bringing the officer to her knees. She whimpered. Looking to the sky once again, her hood slipped off and the rain fell upon her face. Time itself seemed to come to a complete halt. Delilah closed her eyes.

PLAUSIBLE FICTION

Bob Mayberry

It was a lousy sentence, inelegant, awkward, and it brought it all back. A sentence of real meaning. To me at least. A sentence that hurtled me back in time whenever I read it. A sentence that saved me.

I let you beat me, beat sense into my head— could have prevented it— let you blacken my eye to make me see.

After we separated, I tried to write about it. But couldn't. Story after story where young lovers meet, merge, then cancel their membership to the club. But they were all metaphors. None of them touched the pain. None admitted what I permitted.

Until that sentence.

I let you beat me, beat sense into my head— could have prevented it— let you blacken my eye to make me see.

A confession. The beginning of a series of confessions. Say it once and it gets easier. You tell a friend or two— never family— and they offer the consolations you need, the shoulder to shudder against, but they judge, too. If they're your friends, they are her friends too. They are implicated. So you don't tell them everything, not the details, not what it felt like, and most of all, you don't tell them you permitted it. Enabled, that's the current jargon. That you don't confess— hell, it takes you years to admit it to yourself, and when you do it's not in therapy or conversation or even a moment of epiphany, no, it's buried in a story, in a sentence you didn't realize you had formulated until you reread it on the page.

I let you beat me...

Writing it unconsciously, focused on the character in my story, a character unlike me in all superficial and ficial ways, a character I didn't recognize as myself until that sentence was on the page— writing it evoked no catharsis, no revelation. It wasn't until I read it, in blue ink on yellow legal paper, that it worked its magic. If someone had quoted it to me, I wouldn't have recognized it as my own. That's how the process works,

sometimes.

I let you... could have prevented it...

It was the end of a long road trip, standing on cliffs overlooking the Pacific, sun setting in reds and oranges, a fucking cliché, a Kodak moment, and you said something and I said something and something was left unsaid— it happens, words are just pretext for emotions we've held onto, events mere excuses for what you do, must do, promised yourself never to do and then suddenly, inexplicably, are doing. You were angry, I didn't take it seriously, you hit me. Nothing simpler.

Our entire lives wrapped in that package: anger, lack of response, hit him. Me. You hit me. That's the talisman that has kept me alive, kept me away from railroad bridges and sleeping pills, for twenty years. My god, two fucking decades and I still can't get past this. Can't say it. Can't write it. Can't feel it.

Every paragraph begins with the most tenuous memory of being hit and every word I tap out like some blind man seeking safe haven with his white cane beats that memory back into the depths of unremembered, unfelt experiences. I reach out to grasp it, to feel again what it felt like to be hit, but there's just cold sea air and the dimming red of sunset. Before I can feel a thing, it's dark and the sun has set into the cold sea of numbness.

I remember the event, the cliffs, the sunset, the cross-country journey that led us there, the stripes in the parking lot. Those I remember. But the look on your face is obscured. You are a silhouette, two-dimensional. Even the swing of your clenched fist is a reconstructed memory, what must have happened, not what I remember. And the feeling? What feeling?

Was I surprised at the sudden punch to my left eye? It must have hurt, I remember the bruises that rose later, purpler than the Pacific sunset, but do I remember the hurt? No. I remember nothing. My own feelings as irretrievable as the sun falling into the sea. What did I do? I have only the sentence to remind me.

I let you beat me, beat sense into my head— could have prevented it— let you blacken my eye to make me see.

I permitted you to beat me. There, I've said it. Does it bring relief? Am I free of this weight I've been dragging for twenty years, this victim's guilt? Am I able to move on, step back from the cliff and find my way home?

If I were, do you think I'd be banging away at this keyboard, forcing this miserable broken tale onto the page— do you? I don't. I don't think I'll

ever be free of it, how can I? We are the sum of our experiences, aren't we? And this experience still doesn't add up.

You had hit me before that evening on the Pacific cliffs and you hit me several times after, so why does that one bashing remain amid all the bashings? Is it the CinemaScope setting, the metaphoric cliffs, the clichéd sunset with its attendant overtones?

If I knew, I probably wouldn't be writing this. What I remember—for I can't recall all of it actually—is the fact of being hit, several times, but not the pain. I can cite places and times, I can describe cliffs, bookcases, and refrigerators, I can even recall what happened after these events, but I can't remember the pain itself, nor the look on your face, your motives, what you or I said, nor what precipitated what. Bruises I recall. Broken glasses, blackened eyes. They are images, snapshots after the fact. But the feeling? The actual sensation of my skin smashed by yours? Nada. Nyet. Not.

We went to a marriage counselor once—remember her? You selected her after I went running to our first therapist after you punched me in the belly with the car keys. Remember? See, the post-punch details remain. But the event remains a mystery.

There were keys, in your hand. Why? I don't remember. You were angry. Why? I don't remember. Your hand must have swung and punched the keys into my belly—must have, because I remember the bruises and scabs that came later—but why, how or even exactly when, I don't remember. It hurt, that I remember—not the actual pain but the fact of being hit, because I ran out of our house and ended up at our therapist's office, crying.

He wouldn't see me at first, said it was inappropriate to see me alone since we were in couples counseling, but he must have felt something for this poor schmuck slobbering in his waiting room. So he said he would listen to me but insisted both of us come in the next day and discuss what happened. I told him you had hit me. This was the first time I ever admitted it to anyone else. He listened and I cried the story out, then scheduled a time for the two of us to come in the next day.

Which we did. And after that you insisted on a new therapist, a woman. Remember?

Sometimes words work, sometimes talking and writing brings the memories back. That's the assumption underlying therapy, isn't it? That talking brings the memories—the pain and trauma we've buried in the sea of forgetting—to the surface, where we can face them, voice them, acknowledge them and be free of them. Well, we're never free, but free-er.

We can reduce their hold on us.

But sometimes words carry no magic. Sometimes words are just words, and all they evoke are other words. I know I was hit—battered, say it, the most humiliating word in the language: I was battered. There. Does it bring back the memories? No. It recalls all the words I've used to avoid the pain buried deep inside. How I lied to friends about the bruises, invented stories about doors and stairs, even minimized the pain for our therapist. Hell, I didn't tell you how much I hurt. I shrugged it off, said I was okay when I was anything but.

Bobby, you'd sweetly say a day later, I'm sorry, I'll never do it again. And I believed you, believed the tenderness in your voice, denied my own pain just to hear you say it again, preferring the lie to the pain. Never again, Bobby.

But my body would not be deceived. The belly bruises had been easy to keep covered, but the black eye, that was a different story. I wanted to get back on the road, drive away from those un-Pacific sunsets, leave the friends we were staying with before the bruise became visible, unavoidable, inexcusable. I pulled the brim of my cap down, wore sunglasses indoors, spun a yarn about catching an elbow during some playful sex maneuver—they liked that. I don't know if they bought it, but it ended inquiries with a laugh or knowing smile. Yeah, we have rough sex sometimes too. People don't want to know. People don't want to believe that their friends or family are getting hurt, are allowing themselves to be hurt, again and again, they'd prefer not being told. Any excuse to relieve them of their obligation to ask, what happened? Any story in a storm.

But the bruise made it impossible to avoid. Black, then purple and finally green fading into a sickly yellow, it was unavoidable. They had to ask. And I watched their faces, even as they asked, wincing away from the story they didn't want to hear, hoping I had a witty comeback that let them off the hook. I don't blame them. Who wants to know? I denied it as long as I could. Forgot it as quickly as possible. And lied about it so often I began to believe the lies.

The first day I taught my creative writing class after our trip to the coast, I told my students a whopper of a tale about falling off a surfboard. Wham! Right in the eye, I said. They bought it, or graciously accepted it as a proffered fiction. Well, most of them. One didn't. A talented young short story writer, very attractive with compassionate eyes. She hung around after class, told me my surfing story was not credible, said my eye must really

hurt, and put her hand on my arm, saying, If there's anything I can do...

I'm not excusing it, it was still a lousy thing to do, a clear indicator of how badly some unrecognized part of me wanted out, away from you at any cost, but it's understandable, now looking back and admitting the hurt I was carrying, covering. She simply said, If there's anything I can do, and there was. She got me out of a destructive relationship with you.

I let you ... blacken my eye to make me see.

What I saw, what I kept seeing, was her. She was everywhere, in class and outside class too. Maybe she'd always been part of that crowd, attending plays and fiction readings, and I'd never noticed. Or maybe she became a regular at those kinds of events that semester, after I walked into class with a shiner. It makes for good fiction, it's flattering to think so. I suspect the cliché is just a little too neat and it reduces my responsibility. I'm the object of her pursuit instead of the other way around.

I think it's more likely that the punch to my eye caused me to see things anew, see women like her in my classes, see options. And once you see something like that, once you admit alternatives exist, you can't stop seeing or thinking about them. I don't remember flirting back in response to her invitation, but I must have. If I hadn't, she'd have lost interest or assumed I was a lost cause. But she didn't, so I must have, though I don't remember it.

What I remember is my interior debates: Marriage is sacrosanct— You've been abused— Work it out— Let it go— You still love her— You deserve some comfort. What I remember are the words. For years I've told tales about this part of my story, spun plausible fictions to entertain or to avoid admitting what I've always known. Easier to recreate it as a seduction, a desperate cry for help or an escape from hell, than to admit how much I wanted her, how badly I needed her to help me get out.

Did I know that's what I was doing when I got involved with her? No, not consciously. I've read the stories. The lover-on-the-rebound is a plot device, whether anyone knows it or not. I think I knew that all along, even if I wasn't consciously aware of it. I locked away whole sectors of my brain. It was easy to ignore one more detail, a hidden agenda.

The chronology gets fuzzy here, and I suspect I've allowed it, encouraged it. We returned from the trip to the coast, my eye is still bruised and I returned to teaching. You didn't hit me again for a long time. You were sweet, tender even, for a while. A kind of peace descended. We were afraid to even disagree with each other, fearing what it might provoke. Peace is

hard work and a constant stress. No wonder we find fighting so much easier. Teaching got me out of the house, away from you. It permitted me to forget.

Except that she kept asking how my eye was, offering comfort and consolation. I praised her fiction lavishly but I didn't see her outside of class— but I did. I kept seeing her at all the department readings and play openings all semester. Imagine this sweet alternative to the silent peace at home, which evolved into a cold war. Me on my schedule, you on yours, never playing together, rarely even eating together, climbing into bed at different hours to fall into solitary slumber. Perchance to dream.

By the end of the semester, the bruise was gone and you had hit me again and I let myself think about leaving you. She was no longer my student so nothing stood in the way and what now seemed evitable finally became inevitable and I moved out and started seeing her.

I let you ... blacken my eye to make me see.

I've been seeing her but now the meaning of that word shifted and I began seeing her in a new sense, involving more senses than just sight. You knew, I'm sure, before you saw me and her talking in the hallway the following semester. You were looking for that, waiting for sight to confirm what you already knew, what you expected the moment I announced I was moving out: there was another woman.

But there wasn't. Not yet. Not how we usually mean.

I waited until you returned to tell you. You spent a week at a religious retreat early in the summer. When you came home we stood in the kitchen, the table between us and while not looking at you I told you, I moved out—temporarily. It was nearly impossible to say that to you. I moved my things out beforehand, arranged to stay in the basement of your friend's. I wrote it out and rehearsed what I was going to say because I was so afraid that I'd see your face, the anger flushing your skin, distorting your mouth, and I'd chicken out. What I feared is that you'd get angry, and hit me. And I'd be lost again.

Instead, I got angry and it all spilled out, every slap, kick and bruise rose to the surface. Me! Me! You did this to me! I planned to explain it to you slowly, quietly, but I was yelling, anger rising in me just like I'd seen it in you. I turned to the refrigerator and beat the shit out of it. Until my fists swelled and the dents on the white aluminum were permanent. Panting, sweating, my fists aching, I looked at you. You huddled in the corner between the kitchen table and the sink. Your hands over your face, fear in every feature and muscle. You reminded me of me.

Fuck that! I yelled. Fuck that! And I ran out of the house, to my car and drove away to my new residence, my not-so-temporary residence, my solitary cell safe from you— and me— the anger and fear we provoked.

I let you beat me, beat sense into my head—could have prevented it—let you blacken my eye to make me see.

It took all summer for that to sink in, from the black eye at the beach to the battered refrigerator, from your hitting me to me finally swinging back. The barriers I'd built held up longer than anyone— you, me, or two therapists— anticipated. And when they fell, when the sense you beat into my head finally lit up my cranial synapses, I hated you. Wanted to hurt you. Leave you as dented as the refrigerator. So I left.

From leaving your wife to letting a former student seduce you is no journey at all. Months went by, living first in your friends' basement and then in a house with two other men running from broken relationships. House of the Setting Sun, we called it. The opposite of that house made famous by the song—

"There is a house in New Orleans ..."

—ours had no women, neither residents nor guests, until I brought her there once. She felt so out of place she never came back. The beginning of the end of my affair with her. I realized I was more comfortable living with these solitary, unattached, and temporarily chaste men than I was being with her. I was using her, for mutual sex, but also to prevent myself from returning to you, working it out, forgiving and forgetting.

I never wanted to forget. And I sure as hell wasn't ready to forgive.

Within a year of battering the refrigerator and running away, I lit out for California, to find that cliff we'd stood on the summer before and to figure out what happened. To see, finally, that it took a beating to learn to see. Two decades later I am beginning to forget. I can't remember the pain, only the fact of the pain. I can't remember the hitting, only the bruises that followed. And I can't remember the fear, only the look on your face in the corner of the kitchen, a mirror to the fear writ across my own features all those years ago. And I'm trying with these words to forgive. Not you, but me for enabling it to happen...

I want to forgive me.

FRIENDLY PREDATOR

Paige Holehouse

“Did you hear about that monster incident on Tuesday?” The rush of cool air made Victoria shiver as she walked down the frozen aisle. She disliked these brief moments of discomfort before moving on to the rest of the grocery store. Her phone felt warm on her cheek as she listened to Molly’s concerned voice over the phone. She held her breath before answering. “No, I didn’t.” She didn’t say more, knowing Molly would answer the question Victoria never asked.

“Poor woman had been attacked at her own birthday party. Supposedly the monster didn’t make himself known until after she ended the relationship.”

Victoria made a light hmm sound as she eyed the row of pork loins in front of her. Monster attacks were nothing new. However, when it involves a woman victim there is more press. Victoria poked through the plastic wraps trying not to gag at the uncooked meat. “What did the police say?” Victoria pretended to sound curious before placing the biggest pork loin in her cart.

“They didn’t give much detail but there is a video. The monster ripped her throat out. Right when she was blowing out her candles.” Molly’s voice on the other line grew soft.

Victoria touched her throat softly imagining the claws digging into her flesh. The woman must have been a fool if she couldn’t see those long dark claws. Victoria tried to imagine how the woman must have felt at that moment. It would never happen to her. She was smarter than that. “Did they kill it?”

“Took it away, it’s going to have its own hearing next month.” Victoria heard Molly scoff over the phone. The issue this society faced with these creatures was how human they seemed. They become human as easily as they become monsters. Because of that, they are tried under human law. Molly let out a sigh before continuing. “I’ll just never date men.”

“You know they can be disguised as women as well?” Victoria

smiled to herself knowing her friend is probably rolling her eyes on the other side of the phone.

“Whatever, I miss you Vic. We haven’t gone out in ages. How about tonight?” It really had been ages maybe even years since they had gone out together. Before Victoria got married she used to go out dancing with Molly every weekend. It was always fun just enjoying time with each other and rejecting any creeps that tried to buy them drinks. “I can’t, I’m making dinner.” She continued to gather the ingredients she needed.

“For Dick?” Victoria could tell Molly was annoyed by the shift in her tone.

“Richard wants pork loins, you can always come over.”

“And hear him brag about his intelligence? No thanks. Hey, you don’t even eat meat.”

Victoria laughed even though she knew Molly was being somewhat serious. She always invited Molly to dinner and she always said no. “I do on Fridays.”

“Old Vic would have thrown up at the sight of meat. If Dick can charm you into eating meat he can do anything.” Victoria held back the urge to insult Molly about her lack of a husband. She hated it when Molly said things like that. It was as if Molly was insinuating she changed, more importantly, that Richard had changed her. Victoria looked down at the plastic pack of pork loins. The blood oozing on all sides making Victoria wish she never called Molly in the first place.

The stench of cooked pork filled the dining room as she and Richard ate their dinner. She ate most of the vegetables and left the pork for last. Richard always liked his meat medium rare and encouraged her to eat it that way. He enjoys his dinner with a glass of scotch, one ice cube. She learned that the day they met.

It was one of the nights that she went dancing with Molly that she’d met Richard. He didn’t approach her like the other men. Instead, he made sure that no man with sleazy intentions bothered her. She watched as he would pull them away, getting up in their faces using threatening words that only they could hear. Instead of thanking him for his actions she chose to treat him how she treated most men. She ignored him. He continued to watch her from afar never getting close enough to make his intentions known. An hour passed before she grew tired of the game they were playing. She whispered to Molly before approaching Richard. “What do you drink?”

The cocky smirk on his lips was betrayed by the excitement in his eyes. He leaned in close so she could hear him over the blaring music. "What's your poison sweetheart?" His voice felt like velvet to her which made him that much more intriguing. She hated him for it. However, she would not break for just anyone.

"I asked first." He told her his drink and she signaled to the bartender. "So what made you decided to scare off every man that tried to approach me?"

"Every boy that tried to approach you would waste your time. I just wanted to save it." He took a sip of his whiskey, making sure to keep eye contact. Victoria met his eyes fiercely while trying to understand his real motive.

"For who?" She was testing him to see what he would say. If he said himself then she would roll her eyes and walk away. She would walk even faster if he was trying to play wingman.

"That's your choice sweetheart." The bright blinking lights of the club reflected in his eyes. The captivating brown shined red for a moment before the lights shifted.

They began dating shortly after and in six months they were engaged. Her friends and family all thought it was too fast. Yet, when they all met him they fell in love just like Victoria did. He drew people to him like a magnet.

"How was the store?" His words brought her back to the present. His voice less intriguing than it once was but just as powerful.

"It was fine, I talked to Molly." She knew he didn't like Molly. Richard took a big piece of his pork and began to chew.

"You should stop talking to that girl, she's too dramatic." He spoke between bites and began to focus on his meal once more. Victoria stared at him. A part of her wanted to tell him to fuck off but she knew what would happen if she did.

"I haven't seen her or any of my friends since the wedding. We are thinking of planning a girls trip." She was lying for the purpose of seeing how he would react. Richard laughed before taking a sip of his whiskey.

"That's a good one Vicky." She cringed at the nickname. She hated it when he called her that. It reminded her of boys who teased her in school. Icky Vicky.

"I'm not joking. I requested it off for next month." The room grew

silent. Not even the sound of clashing silverware. She looked up at Richard who was glaring at her from the other side of the table. His eyes shined red before returning to brown. It left an unsettling feeling in her stomach.

“You can’t take off work. They laid me off this morning.”

“What? Why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

His fist slammed on the table making the plates jump. “Obviously I planned to tell you at dinner. God, you can be so bloody stupid.” His voice grew deeper as if he had the pork stuck in his throat.

She wished it was. She didn’t know when these negative thoughts began to surface. Maybe it was when he called her an idiot in front of her family when she accidentally dropped a plate on the floor. Or maybe it was the time he ripped her new dress that was too short for his liking. Every time they fought she could feel the anger radiating off of him as if his skin was over a hundred degrees.

“Right.” Her voice grew soft as she looked down at her plate. The meat had to be cold by now. It looked revolting all pink and swollen.

“Come on eat it, don’t let it go to waste.”

She looked up in surprise when she noticed that one of Richard’s eyes was not quite right. His left iris was pure red as if he had stabbed it with his fork. She looked back at her plate trying to comprehend the change.

“I said eat it.” His arm reached across the table at an inhumane speed. Victoria felt her face being thrown to the side. She expected strong calloused finger, not claws. She didn’t move for a moment, too shocked at his actions. She cut a piece of pork and slowly raised it to her lips. Victoria ignored the hot blood running down her cheek. She suppressed the need to gag as she chewed the pork. Victoria looked at Richard who was acting as if his actions were normal. As if they were appropriate.

Then it hit her. Memories flooded her brain of the past three years. He had choked, thrown, and hit her in the past. He was not Richard when he did it. He was It. It was covered in dark hair and had red horns on each side of Its head. Its teeth were jagged and as sharp as knives. Its arms were longer than Richard’s. She remembered the fear but also the denial. If It didn’t look like Richard it wasn’t him hurting her.

Victoria remembered a billboard she once saw that warned about monsters. She had been stuck in traffic and couldn’t stop staring at the board.

MONSTERS CAN TAKE MEMORIES AWAY FROM
VICTIMS WHEN INFLICTING PAIN. IF YOU
HAVE WOUNDS OR BRUISES THAT YOU
HAVE NO EXPLANATIONS FOR
PLEASE CALL 1-800-799-7233.

It all made sense now. She watched as the monster lowered Its long freakish arm. Richard was slowly turning into the monster she always forgot he was. Victoria wondered if he would erase her memory now. Would there be a way for her to remember this moment other than the scrapes on her cheek? She did her best to act calm. "I'm going to the bathroom." She slowly got up from her seat. She felt his eyes on her as she walked. Victoria wanted him to look away just for a moment so she could run into the next room. However, his eyes stayed on her back as if she was chained to them. When she passed the bathroom she heard a roar so loud that it made her jump. ***"Where do you think you're going?"***

She did not waste time, she ran. The sound of the dining chair being thrown across the room made her move faster. She needed to get to the basement. Inside was a small box that contained her father's pistol. Victoria locked the door behind her giving her some time before the monster tore it down. Her breathing grew hard as she reached for the box. Her hands were shaking making it hard to load. Once the bullet clicked into place the door busted open.

"Vicky, stop playing games." Its eyes glowed down from the stairs.

She hid the gun behind her back as It approached. "I was looking for bandages. I didn't want to get blood on the table." She knew the lie was a stretch but if it would calm the creature down and that was all that mattered. Victoria scanned the room looking for a way out.

"What's behind your back?" The creature stood tall above Victoria. Its claws curled as if It was ready to strike. She quickly moved to her right as the monster raised its arm. It barely missed her as the claw sliced into the shelf where she once stood. She made a break for the stairs. Her hand reached for the door but the monster's claw dug into her leg. Victoria screamed as her body fell hard on the stairs. The creature laughed as It removed its claw from her leg. ***"I was going to wait another year, for when you were ripe. I guess there is no point in waiting anymore is there sweetheart?"*** Richard's words were twisted in a voice she didn't recognize.

She did not understand what It meant. Her blood turned cold when

she felt the creatures tongue licking the blood off her leg. She didn't have time to think before she shot the monster in the arm. It moaned in pain giving her the opportunity to escape. She ignored the pulsing pain in her leg and ran to the bedroom.

"You bitch! I'll kill you!"

She didn't doubt it. However, she would make sure she would never die by the hands of this monster. Once she reached the bedroom she closed the door and limped to the other side of the room. She raised her pistol at the door, ready to shoot. Victoria felt hot tears stream down her face as the pain in her cheek and leg consumed her. She wanted to take the time to treat her wounds.

"Get your shit together, Victoria." She straightened her arms as she waited. There was no time to pity herself. She heard It approach behind the door.

"Vicky? Listen Vicky let's talk about this, Love. We need to work this out."

She was shocked to hear Richard's voice. He sounded calm, as if they were having a normal fight.

"Just open the door sweetie and we can talk about this calmly. I love you."

Those last three words almost made her get up from her spot on the floor. However, the blood running down her leg reminded her of how she got here. She did not move. Silence followed as if she was the only one in the house. Victoria kept her arms steady regardless.

"Icky Vicky. Icky Vicky. Icky Vicky." The door broke apart as the creature made its entrance. It was taunting her. Its bright red eyes filled with excitement, just like the day they met. She wasted no time in aiming for its head. The pistol went off, straining her arms. The bullet went straight through its head. The creature hit the wall before sliding down to the floor. The wall was covered in blood, dripping from all sides

"Fuck." Victoria let out a breath as she dropped the weapon. Her hands still shaking as she looked at her wounds. She tried to comprehend what had just transpired but more importantly, she needed to see if It was dead. She cursed herself for relaxing too quickly. She grabbed the pistol ready to shoot if necessary, then moved to the side to get a better look at the body. Her eyes grew wide as she saw Richard's human form. His body was slumped against the wall. His neck was craned backward. His eyes

were open which made her raise her gun just in case. She looked closer to see them hazed over and not moving. She had made a perfect headshot. Her stomach began to turn as she vomited on the already stained carpet. The smell of pork filled her nose. God how she hated pork.

THE PHOTOGRAPHER

Andrew Bottino

The Atlantic Canary have been known for building their nests near those of others, with the pairs of said nests defending their own small territory. The cup-shaped nests were often hidden by leaves, usually on the end of a branch. When there are no branches, however, one has to improvise.

A lone canary hopped around its nest, settled between two pieces of bent metal, the white paint that once coated their surfaces now scratched and partly rusted, ruining the perfect walls that had supported the roof, which currently collapsed upon the building it was meant to protect from the harsh elements. The only protection it had now was the looming barrier that surrounded the entire city. In the nest sat two eggs, still not ready to hatch. The bird was worried, but kept itself hopeful, even when its partner was nowhere to be found.

Flick.

Snap.

Two sounds, one after the other, grabbed the bird's attention before a bright light flashed in front of it, startling the poor thing. It chirped, the silvery twittering calling out to whoever visually attacked them. At first, nothing came out to take the blame.

Then, the bird watched as a figure stepped out from around the corner of a building nearby, wearing guilt on its face while they waved to the bird with a gray hand, the dark eyes of a boyish face under their green hoodie's cowl showing signs of remorse.

In his gray hands was a strange device, which slowly produced a small white square from a slot at the bottom. He pulled the white square out of the device and began to whip it about, walking closer to the bird, glancing to it, then to the white square, as he neared.

Once they got right besides the bird's nest, they stopped whipping the square, gave it a quick look, and smiled as they held it up for the bird to see.

The bird was confused, as it only saw itself in the square, by its nest,

on the destroyed building. It tilted its head, and gave a small tweet.

He giggled, pointing to the bird, then the bird in the square. But the bird only replied with another tweet, responding to the picture with confusion still.

The photographer shrugged, photo right next to it. He gave the bird another wave along with a hum of content before moving on, walking down the metallic sidewalk, enjoying the sounds of silence, looking at the yellow lines that split the road between sidewalks in half, as a way to keep vehicles from crossing over and crashing.

One of those vehicles crashed into what looked to be a cafe. Dust, debris and shattered glass covered the floor. What disturbed the photographer more, was the sight of skeletons; bodies that used to be living, breathing people.

A sigh escaped from between his thin lips as he knelt down and held the camera up, pointing it towards the destroyed cafe.

Flick.

Snap.

Crash!

After the loud noise of a vehicle crashing, screams emitted from the area as the picture was taken, and the photographer saw, for only a second, the scene in the past, now populated with people, mid-incident; some running, others screaming. And a single person in the car with the intent of murder in their visage.

One of the people that caught the photographer's eye was a woman wearing a red scarf trailing behind her. She looked like she was running in the opposite direction of the crash.

He nodded in acknowledgement to her.

And, as quickly as it appeared, the scene vanished. From the slot in the camera came spewing forth another undeveloped photo. Pulling it out, the photographer began whipping it about as he walked across the road, following the direction the woman was going, passing multiple buildings destroyed beyond repair, with the only sound being the canary's, which was slowly fading as he got farther away.

The photographer looked at the photo to see the scene from the past depicted for a second just a moment ago, printed on the white square. Pocketing it, he continued on.

It wasn't long before he reached a four-way intersection, where sev-

eral cars had crashed into each other, causing a pileup. It was almost artistic, the way the metal formed. Turning in on itself, crumpling, or splitting off and twisting upwards toward the sky, as if trying to get above the wall that kept it in this place.

Of course, the results of this “art piece” were more skeletons-- bony husks of what used to be lives.

Wanting to get a wide shot of the area for maximum efficiency, the photographer took a few steps back and onto the road. He knelt, lined up the shot and took the picture.

Flick.

Snap.

What followed were the sounds of screams. The sound of metal impacting metal, crashing into each other, bending in on itself. A horrid sound.

In front of him, the photographer saw the flash of the scene. The cars crashing and the people running. In the vehicles, the skeletons were replaced by corpses, their eyes gleaming as they stared endlessly, a scarlet liquid pouring down their head, which was either banged against the steering wheel or hanging back on the headrest.

Lowering the camera, the photographer looked on in sadness. A hand lifted up to his chest, clutching the loose cloth. He shut his eyes as if holding something back. A breath released from between his lips, and he continued on, pulling the photo from the ejector and whipping it about before giving it a look. The scene was the same, but he ignored the details and focused on the red scarf trailing behind the woman as she ran once more, away from ruin.

And with that, a direction. Walking past the wreck, he turned onto a rather narrow street, probably a one-way. The roads were made of brick instead of asphalt, and the surrounding buildings carried a different architectural air. Something alien to the rest of the city. The photographer doesn't remember seeing this before.

Stopping a few steps in, the photographer scanned the area, seeing skeletons off to the side, hands tied behind their backs, and a hole punched through their skulls. One could easily guess their fate.

He had no interest in seeing the act in its initial state, but the photographer had no choice, with a growing curiosity for this woman with the red scarf.

Crouching down, he aimed the camera once more, getting as wide

an angle as possible for maximum coverage.

Flick.

Snap.

Several shots rang out, startling the photographer as he got a glimpse of this areas past, seeing three men, dressed in grey garb, one with a blue beret, aiming their rifles at several men, hands tied behind their backs. The soldiers' muzzles flashed as blood spattered, what was a red splatter now a grey stain that covered the wall.

He couldn't pull his eyes away from it. How does such horror draw people in?

Sighing, he took the photo from the camera and looked at it, ignoring the part of it he just saw.

He spotted the lady in the red scarf entering one of the apartment buildings that lined the right side. Her legs were bent, so the photographer assumed she was trying to stay low and quiet.

What would've happened if the soldiers spotted her?

Not wanting to linger on that thought further, the photographer stepped past the site of executions and looked up at the building to see a large magnetic rail car situating itself in an apartment.

His eyes widened at the sight, then he rushed to get inside, ascending the steps to turn right at the first door, finding himself face to face with the train car, which took up most of the space within the apartment, the photographer only having the one corner that holds the door to stand in. With not much space to angle or move, the photographer decided just to crouch there, and aim.

Flick.

Snap.

A crash, followed by a shrill scream, permeated the room as a split second showed the magnetic rail car separating the brick wall that made up the building, barreling through, while the woman with the red scarf sprinted back out the door, a bag in tow.

Staring at the photo, the photographer determined that whatever powered the magnetic railing system was shut off or ran out. No one seemed to be inside of this one, much to the relief of the photo's beholder. But, as the photographer knew, this wasn't the only magnetic rail transportation in the city.

Stepping out of the room, the photographer sighed, turning his head

up to the ceiling as he began to think, his grey fingers tapping the top of the camera. With a single nod, he walked back down the stairs, out into the street, and made his way over to an empty corner. One that gave a good shot of not just the street he just traversed, but also the one around the corner from it. No need to angle, just take it.

Flick.

Snap.

The only sound accompanying this picture was running. Footsteps against the brick road. Hurried. Pulling the white square from the ejector, he whipped it about, then took a look, spotting the red-scarfed woman as she ducked into an alleyway, just as a patrol of soldiers turned the corner onto the street.

The photographer didn't care what the soldiers were going to do when they met up with the soldiers that had just executed some civilians. Whether they were of the same side or not didn't matter. The photographer had a story to follow.

Making his way to the alley, he stopped as he realized there was a dead end. No way right, nor left, just forward, into a wall with a trash can for decoration. Turning his head up, he found himself staring at the wall that surrounded the city.

Is this where her story ends?

The photographer went through multiple scenarios in his head. Did the soldiers find her? Did she turn back and leave? He looked down at his camera, fiddling with it, turning it over in his hands. *What will you reveal to me?* Crouching down, he aimed and, without further ado, took a shot.

Flick.

Snap.

The scraping of metal against concrete made its way to the photographer's ears. Frowning, he looked ahead to see a light shine into his eyes, causing him to block the brightness that strained his sight.

Sadly, he couldn't see what was happening in time. He pulled the photo and held it up, his brow raising. The woman with the red scarf was pushing the garbage can to the side, revealing a hole in the wall, broken through, showing outside.

With a curiosity, the photographer turned his head up, gazing at the trash can at the end of the alley. Carefully, he walked over to it, placing his camera on the floor to grip the rim of the metal container. Pulling it aside,

it scraped the floor, but as it gave way, the bright light once again shone through the cracks. Shielding his eyes, the photographer had to re-adjust, lowering his arm so he could finally see.

Eyes widened at the world just outside the walls, one he had never seen. Green, lush waving back and forth, for miles on end. Off in the distance, trees, larger and healthier than the ones in the parks here, were sprouting from the ground.

With a wild curiosity he had never experienced, he picked up his camera, aimed it once more, and shot.

Flick.

Snap.

For the one moment the vision allowed, the photographer saw the woman running out into the field, leaving behind this husk once called a city. Standing up, the photographer stepped back. Looking over his shoulder, he saw the dead city alley. For once, the photographer had a chance. A chance to see a world he had yet to ever see. To take pictures of beauty. Of life. Of wonder and hope.

Looking back to the hole in the wall, he smiled. Crouching down, he crawled through the hole, his gray hands touching the soft green of the outside world. Standing up, he gazed off to the horizon. Glancing at his camera, he nodded and began to walk through the tall, green limbs, feeling their brush.

The background of the page is a repeating pattern of light gray silhouettes of foxes and rabbits. The foxes are shown in various poses: some are leaping, some are standing alert, and others are in mid-stride. The rabbits are depicted in a simple, rounded style, mostly sitting or standing. The pattern is scattered across the entire white background, creating a subtle, woodland-themed texture.

POETRY

A BRIEF MATHEMATICAL SUMMARY OF HORIZONS

Branden Hopper

Our bodies

A pair of parentheses

The end of a trail, cotton debris

Your shirt

My jeans

Tangled sheets

Uncharted territories

A sextant at sea, true north

Reckless discovering

I might trace your figure onto a map

I might draw every curve from memory

I might need to look again every morning

For the rest of my life

BLURRED CONSTELLATIONS

Alec Burquez

We played Robbers on the car stereo
As she rested her head on her arms out the window
And looked at old birch trees
That blurred into a white canvas where
The muted orange of her shirt
Flowed like the sun's banner
And she traced her fingers in the air so softly
She could have held constellations in her hands.

The chorus picked up and I broke my voice with her
She laughed and snorted and leaned her
Head on my shoulder and sighed.
Speed became slow motion.
I kissed her forehead, and then her lips as
The guitar skewered us together into
Two notes of music that drifted
Past birch canvases we inked with our voices.

She leaned out the window
Her sandy braids came undone
I felt her wildness come forth.
I pulled the car over under falling leaves
The song ended and the canvases became
Foggier against a thin pane of glass.

EIGHTH WONDER

Paisley Kenna Meir

I hold galaxies in my eyes,
Oceans in my mind,
Fires in my soul,
Yet, all you see is a pretty face,
Not the flames as they burn down forests and fields
Not the waves as they crash in mesmerizing sights
Not the boundless eternities that swirl behind my
smile.
I am the Eighth Wonder of this world
Yet, all you see is a pretty face...

I HAD A NIGHTMARE

Betsy Segura

I had a nightmare, math class turned into a shooting range.
Watched a classmate's dying breath. Saw the professor
risk their life for 30 kids. Shit, some of us don't even like
math. Didn't like the teacher.

Why all the thoughts and prayers? It doesn't turn back time,
Doesn't stop the night terrors, PTSD, it won't change their minds.
Neither does money, but I've never heard of a private school shooting, have
you?

I will not be another locker that parents must empty.
Another smiling victim on the five o'clock news.

Don't get me wrong. It's not like
we gave up instantly. No such thing.
We fought like our lives depended on it.
We fought for the future generations.

And we are students. We were
students. Now we are just numbers.

IGNORANCE

Evan Goodson

A moment can feel like an eternity in those conditions-
As I recall it.

Hatred and animosity spewed from their lips like a viper seizing its prey.

Tears ran down my soft brown cheeks like water tearing its way through sand.

The dial tone reverberated loudly in the depths of my ear

Before a soft voice permeated the airwaves.

“Hello?”

“Mommy, come pick me up.”

I whispered through the phone as if we were secret agents

Communicating the next plan of action.

She could hear my tears,

My tears.

No longer can I spend my time playing with the white children

Their parents did not approve.

Of what, you may ask?

A nigga in the room.

FINDING JESUS AT MEL'S DINER AND THEN AGAIN IN NEW ORLEANS

Branden Hopper

I am sorry for falling asleep all those times in your house.
Only, I was so hungry and
to manipulate time knelt my head against
red velvet pews, breathed oak aged in prayer,
slept in hymns and dreamt phosphorescent.

Where are you eating lunch?
Could I meet you there in one hundred years?
Where we can talk like confident Houdini's
who are no longer lonely.

I would like to sit then, at the patio on St. Claude's
where I only went before we met
and watch the sky turn purple over the river
the blue and green in four three time
with the dead who watch from their stump stools.

What among these may I bring:
struggling gray rain,
stories sung into brick and tree?
Who is left to tell which parts make a man
or what happens after the leaving?

THE THINGS CLOUDS MADE

Sarah Gay

You sleep through thunderstorms better than I do, apparently.

I am awake, and it is too early to be morning.

The lightning is throwing slanted seizures on the walls, painting the peeling stucco electric with violent inspiration. In the closet mirror, I see flashes of a ghostly face upright in bed, positively gaunt. Practically gothic. Long shadows pull her eyelids down, make her feel warm and arcane. The weight of the heavy rain drags her deeper and deeper, Stretching her features to the floor, *down, down*, further than any decent reality would dare to sink. . .

A white-light body is thrown against the window and I am suddenly real again. The creature's bones fragment into the stilted image of an emaciated God tearing down from the heavens to requisition whatever it is the Divine craves. His spindly fingers pick at the window lock -- predatory growl shakes the anxious panes in their frames -- His liquid stare drips down my body as if I were cold glass, and I shiver-- His breath trickles in through the cracks, filling me with the scent of toasted almonds. . . *I'm so hungry. . . aren't you?* And then he is gone.

An arm is thrown over my chest then. But its bones are not broken and its flesh stinks of sweat. And so I know this arm is yours, and I bring it into my bosom and pin your fingers to my lips. A face presses against my own, but it is not Eldritch, nor does it seem to be melting, and so I know this face is yours, and I let you kiss my chin and rest your head on my pillow. I feel your eyelashes against my temples quicken with the onslaught of sleep. *Well, aren't you exceedingly persuasive?* I blearily regard the darkened, cloudless ceiling with a tentative, half-lidded goodnight.

THE STATE OF COLOR

Evan Goodson

One ever feels his twoness, —an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body..

— Du Boise

Being black is more than just a color

It's a euphoric state of excellence produced by a culture

It's an fantastic state of mind that endures through adversity

It is a positive state of existence that I've embraced as my own

Blackness is more than just a shade of love

A particle duality that never ceases to exist.

It haunts me;

It guides me.

Being black is more than just a color

It's a fearful state of the other

It's a detrimental state of mind towards a culture

It is a worrisome state of ignorance that separates us

Blackness is more than just a shade of hatred

It's complicated.

It's gorgeous.

CATHARSIS

Sarah Gay

Oh, to write and allow the
innermost animal those infernal
rages, and carnal pleasures, and
serpentine thoughts, let them
break from their respective chains
It is Catharsis.

It is a release into the inky black void
where my favorite goblins frequent
fires, dance around roasting pears,
spittle crusting in the corners of their
lips, eyes bulging, tongues flicking --
and when they finally bite

into the flesh of that coveted fruit, it
is deliverance. It is to finally witness
those intrusive thoughts that wriggle
around the brain like botfly larvae in
molt, congeal, bubble, and burst
from the surface of skin

with brand new wings -- It is
a purgation. And so poetry is
much like the jaunty
goblinfolk or the flesh-eating
parasite. There is an element
of furious impatience that

festers

between writer, pen, and page.
The savage poet will drool over the
anticipation -- the imminent
gratification of biting into a poem's
meat -- ink dripping down the
chin like the sticky

juice
that runs from the brain, to
the tongue; eyes bulging, hair
pulling, toes tapping. Ah, but
bite too soon and its gummy
flesh won't satiate that impish
yearning.

The poem must first seethe on the
inside, transforming those sinister
thoughts into something greater.
It feeds, and the poet is the lonely
host who must endure the
scratching, the itching.

But when it finally shreds its
pustulous skin and chitters,
positivity jitters through the body
and out the mouth, leaving
behind nothing but silence . . .

That is Catharsis.

THE BEST CASE SCENARIO

Emma Thompson

The small talk I force out of you will get smaller
And maybe we'll stop stalling each other in the halls
 a distant wave,
 a closed lipped smile,
mountains and oceans between us now.

Maybe we'll end up at the same party, or
unknowingly choose computers side by side.

We'll only ever scratch the surface though,
 lightly
 politely
still too much history,
still too much drama to step
even an inch
further.

And finally,
 unceremoniously
You'll graduate and be gone.

And like a puff of smoke, you'll fade from my memory.
You'll turn into an icon
on a social media site that you'll stop updating.
You'll be a faceless name on to new lovers,
a quick fantasy alone in the dark.

I'll get too busy
to agonize over the separation,
Too distracted
to focus on what could have been.

And when it's been years,
 Maybe I'll run across your name
 an old card,
 an article online.

I'll be transported
Back to your room that night
On the balcony looking up at the stars.

But I won't really remember what it was like.
The details of your face won't come easy,
I won't be able to recall the feeling of your skin on mine.
You'll be forgotten in the arms of another,
 easily stuffed into a box in the garage.

But maybe
When I really think about it,
 at my computer screen
 or on an easel with a brush in my hand
The heaviness of your absence will settle around me,
a phantom sting.

The feeling will pass
in an hour,
in a day or two
 maybe three.

I'll go back to the life I had been living,
only then
missing a small part of me.

VIOLET

Alec Burquez

She had violet dancing around her
Like a satin sheet
Falling over my eyes
She kept looking at the violet above.

I never thought about it much-
Just a different shade
In an indifferent array of colors
That stretched as far as far can be.

But as she sat there
A cup of black coffee steaming in her hands
And a blue sweatshirt warming her up
As she looked at the blinking, white stars
I saw only violet around her.

So soft in its aura
I couldn't see any other color
Even if a splash of supernova-like rainbows
Blinded me with its infinite flurry.

I have never felt warmer
Since that night drinking black coffee
And sitting under blinking white stars.

BODEGA BEYONCÉ

Federico Guzman

What were you doing around here anyway
Probably looking for a girl you'd save for a day
Well I'm no Melinche, thought I'd still be your queen
But you can't bite this fruit if you don't like the tajin

El es un cazador. My mom would say
I see now that even a trophy's still prey
no puedes ocultar la verdad de mí
Still had crumbs on your face from the last bag of takis

I should've known what I was getting into
Shouldn't trust men with no socks and boat shoes
You know it's the truth, I'm worth a dollar twenty five
Even though the can says 99¢

PORT ELIZABETH IS FOR LOVERS

Branden Hopper

Sometimes, when I am missing the taste
of salt on your skin,
the scent of it in the ocean
is almost enough.

but only sometimes,
and only almost.

GRANADA

Yoselin Edith Aguirre

Large pomegranate tree with branches weighed down by its fruit;
they're like mama's arms dangling at her side
when she scurries up our slightly curved driveway
while carrying two gallons of milk and orange juice, medium pulp.

I see the tree, taller than me and the fence daddy built
but I didn't come for the tree, I came for its swollen fruit—
smooth round balls of reds, orange, and yellow when young—
and as I reach out, I pull and twist,
severing the pomegranate's tie to the tree,
and it's heavy and smells faintly like flowers do, or maybe
that lingering smell that clutches to your nails
after you've carved a pumpkin, scooped out its insides barehanded
because gloves were too taxing to put on.

I use mama's good kitchen knife to slice through it.
Blood's supposed to leak like it's been waiting to burst, but it doesn't.
Instead I get four piss-colored drips,
yellow and brown seeds like milk suckling teeth gone rotten,
a shriveled scar clumped up in the corner,
and I could touch it, but I don't want to.

I'm disappointed in my discovery and I ask myself:
Is this how daddy felt finding out JR- his pride and joy-
had gone and kissed a boy?
Is this how mama feels on the phone with sister;
waiting for her to ask about how she's doing,

what the exam results said, and getting nothing
because sister has too much to say about nothing?

I look at the tree, at its drooping branches,
and it's a scolded child with their eyes cast down, shoulders slumped,
and a sigh at their tongue, waiting for a beating
because they went out and did something they shouldn't have.
It's saying, "I know nothing I do is ever right; I'm sorry, just hit me."
And I hate being a mother, never wanted to be a mother,
but I go ahead and grab another pomegranate, and say,
"It's alright, you tried. Just do better next time."

JUICE-STAINED LIPS

Marina Simms

There's the story of Eve
and her shiny red apple
all sweet and crisp and
ah so supple.

Paradise was lost with one
righteous bite, Adam and God
lost when she learned how to
fight.

There's the story of Persephone
and her purple pomegranate
sucked down the sweetness
before the sour supplanted it.

Flung from paradise, she
plucked out six seeds,
left mother's smothering to Hades,
to satisfy her needs.

I love stories about girls and
their never-ending appetites
how they shatter the world
with their sharp, pearly whites.

They bring flaming brimstone
they bring frosted death

“don’t be like them,” they say.
I say, “Don’t hold your breath.”

Do you think Delilah dined on
figs? Do you think Lilith tasted
pears? Knowing Sarah had peaches
makes me want what was theirs.

Give me a bite of that, let me
taste what’s taboo what’s the
armageddon I create when I
have a taste of you?

TO FARIÑA

Andres Macias

Rain fell on Newport Folk Festival in July of '65,
an afternoon of overcast skies thick with vibration.
My auburn boots caked with grass and the entrails of groggy snails,
my jean jacket weathered by a storm of
quiet death. I thought of walking home—
but you and Mimi began to play,
inciting the dance of the metronome as thunderstorms plotted to disrupt
with sacred threats.

You both sat on folding chairs, straddled by drums and mics set up like
rosebuds from lofty polished stems,
urging the vibrations to feed the wary crowd.
I see you—
hooked nose, hair fierce and scraggly, corduroy stretched along your legs,
pressed against the weight of your legendary dulcimer of some
Appalachian wilderness breathing from its neck.
Four hearts interred that now beat gently in an unmarked tomb,
along with the camera you carried in your mind, the reticent bulb flashing a
dim halogen glow.
Snapping pictures never to be developed, never to be gripped by a
nostalgic hand,
never to be remembered.

I see Mimi strumming her loud guitar,
watching you with her starry face and locks of darkness,
dictating the color of the melody with a synesthete's gifted eye.
Directly before you both, a field of wet listeners spread raindrops along

their faces like ethereal war paint,
soldiers of an unarmed guerrilla fighting the peaceful war with flailing arms,
floating along the festival's grounds with a fire walker's guileless step.
I can say I am one of them,
listening, listening, to folk tunes pulsating against my caged skin--
beat down guitars, little clashing Turkish tambourine, dinnertime drums
beckoning through speakers engaging with the roar of hidden thunder--
rain leaking down the neck of your dulcimer and soaking up the stage,
and through any silence you pluck and stir;
foot tapping as your wife's tan hand shifts hair over earring of opal or
quartz,
and wringing in the noise your black lithe shirt glued to your back,
hunching you in the grave Zone, hypnotizing the eager crowd.

You do not see so much as feel, and they feel your fingers plucking on their
heart strings
as you plucked on mine, as Dylan Thomas plucked on yours.

Your Cuban hoppy Irish blood pumped a foamless stout well distilled
from Brooklyn to
Carmel by the Sea to Newport with its gentle waves.
You conquered all that Europe offered you, bashful king, minister
for peace, your mind's eye silhouette now impressed behind a stranger's
forehead
and it blinks blinks blinks
as you blinked,
in awe of shoeless Mimi celebrating the greyest of days,
when you first saw your reflection in a puddle beside the mic stand,
when your face lit up and you shouted, "*Let's go! Let's Boogie!*"

But this was before the downpour ended, before the rain disappeared,
when you continued strumming your dulcimer alone, looking up to the old
sky for a glimpse of your aging face
as I see it now.

You sit still on that stage breathing in the same vibrations,
thunder roaring in the foreground in the form of blind applause.
The wind shifts the rain in a new direction
and the rain stops, and for a moment, I believe, so do you.

INTERSTATE 10 OUTSIDE OF ALBURQUERQUE

Branden Hopper

The inside of a cheek feels a certain way
when rolled between top and bottom incisor
like a piece of fat or eraser.

Forgetting to think of much else on account of the chewing,
you hear your heart beat loudly and hard against your rib cage,
all punk rock energy.

Bud Powell playing Dizzy's salt peanuts— that trumpet, man.
That trumpet.

Mountain precipice snapping with white lightning
wind whipping little match trees, kneeling in prayer
snapping brittle and soaking in sheets of horizontal rain—fury.
drift through contemporary adult hits
and talk radio; finger the dial in no particular direction,
count white crosses standing crooked.

wet earth draped with dead flowers
candles half burned clink-clattering in the wind.

Quiet is home, watching neon shapes unfold
spill on backs of eyelids, sleep to stare at television.
Imagine rugged cowboys, sons rising and riding violent thunder
lean leather faces cracked and tanned
focused and leering into middle distance.

all Clint Eastwood and John Wayne
dead heroes without journeys.

CONTROLLED BURN

Brent Cihonski

First, a spark
next, unbearable heat
soon after, the fire licks my skin,
scorching my bark
disintegrating my leaves,
igniting young saplings,
and the elders of the forest alike.

All life flees,
but we stand in resolve
our roots buried deep
with no mouths to scream,
our pain and our suffering,
unnoticed by the man
behind the mask.

He set the boundaries,
makes sure that only us-
nowhere else - feels the wrath
of the flames

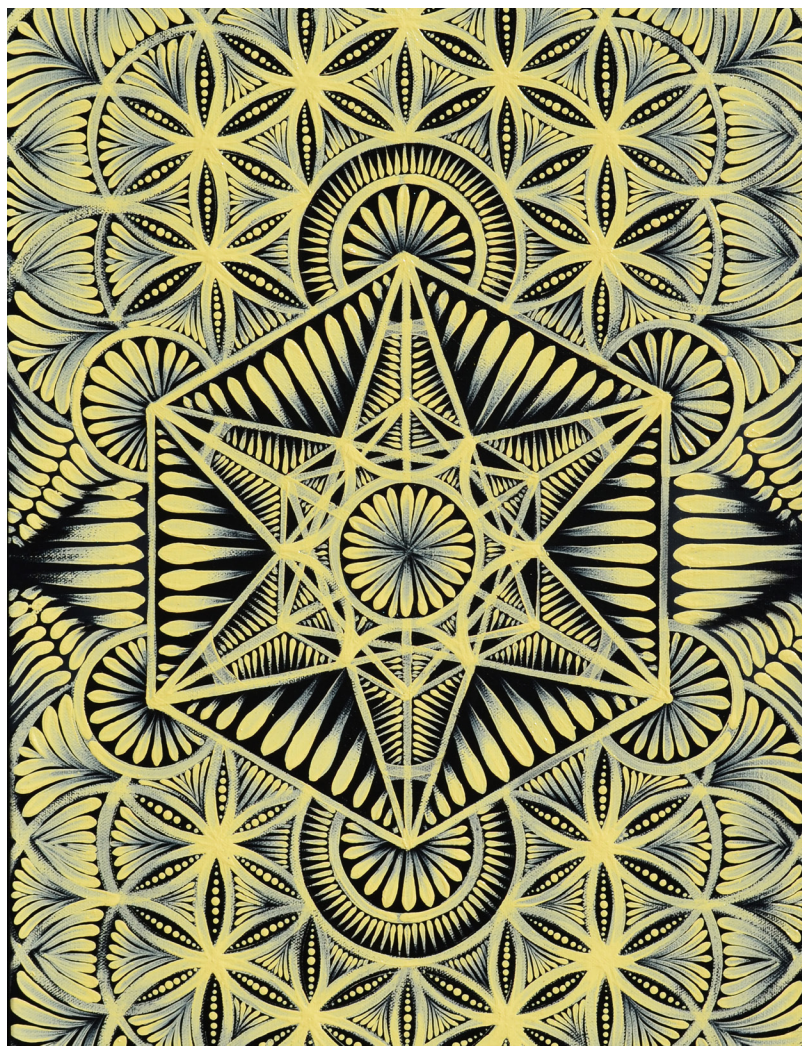
I can hear him repeat the words,
as he waits
until we are no longer beautiful,
and he waits,
until it is devoid of life.

His words are clear,
“It is all under control”



ART

EMULATE



Courtney Moreno

MEUDA



Dev O'Reilly

UNTITLED



Aurora Garcia

NO LIKES



Kiki May

MY MOTHER THROUGH MY EYES



Hannah Chiet

STOIC



Kiki May

BUSY BEE



Madison Traylor

CECROPIA NYMTH



Sarah Fornoff

LONDON



Madison Traylor

TOPANGA CANYON



Madison Traylor

SAN SIMEON SUNSET



Miguel Navarro

LAKE KIVU FISHERMEN



Madison Traylor

EXTINCTION



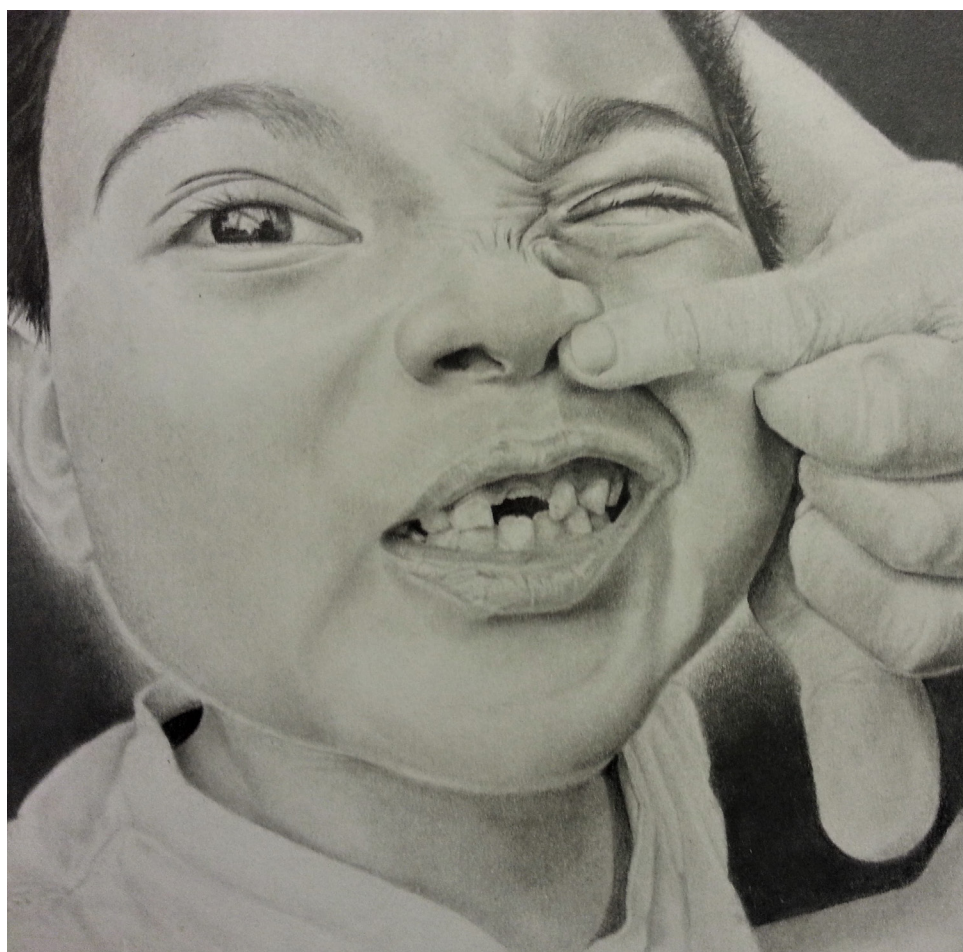
Nathan Plaisted

TRANSITION



Nathan Plaisted

LITTLE MAN



Nathan Plaisted

UNTITLED



Aurora Garcia

The background of the page is a repeating pattern of light gray silhouettes of foxes and rabbits. The foxes are shown in various poses: some are leaping, some are standing alert, and some are in mid-stride. The rabbits are depicted in a sitting position, facing different directions. The silhouettes are simple and stylized, creating a subtle, textured background.

ESSAYS

EXPERIENCE OF A LIFETIME

Alexa Hamel

When I think back on the past 4 months I can't even believe I got to experience something like this. Applying for this trip was really out of my comfort zone, but Kaitlin convinced me to do it and I'm so thankful she did. Spending the whole semester learning about the Māori culture and New Zealand's early childhood system really made the trip more special. While we were at the Waitangi Treaty grounds, I appreciated it more because we had studied it so intensely and we weren't just random tourists.

The thing that impacted me the most was the Marae stay. When we first arrived on the Marae I had some anxieties about the whole situation. Sleeping on the floor with complete strangers and not having my own space was something I wasn't used to. I was a homebody and loved being alone, this was a bit scary for me. That said, I quickly adjusted and it ended up being an amazing experience.

Bianca and her family showed us such amazing hospitality and I loved how much they wanted to share their culture with us. The Māori people have such a strong connection to their ancestors and it made me want to research my own family history because I really don't know much about it. I loved being able to engage in the different activities the Māori did. Learning the Haka, making our own Poi, weaving flax, and learning dances and songs were the highlight of my trip. I loved how much they wanted to share their traditions and practices. I also loved listening to their stories and being able to talk with them was such an honor. They taught me so much about how to live as an individual and just how important family and your ancestors are.

Aside from learning more about myself as an individual, I feel like this trip really showed me what type of teacher I want to be and how I want my classroom run. I want to start implementing learning stories into my classroom and try and increase family involvement at my school. This trip was important because I am what will change how my preschool runs. I will start conversations with teachers and families and hopefully, get them to understand how great the New Zealand way of early childhood is.

PURA VIDA

Alexandra Aguirre

March 17, 2018

Pura Vida! Literally translates to pure life; however, this phrase is used in Costa Rica to say “hello”, “thank you”, “you’re welcome”, “what’s up”, and almost anything else you’d like it to mean (but not really). The Costa Rican people, or “Ticos” as they call themselves, really do have a Pura Vida. We were amazed to see some of the pure life on the Nicoya Peninsula, and it inspired a righteous shame in us for our own country. We spent more than 12 hours over five days monitoring birds in the mangrove estuary near the city of Tamarindo so far. What has been more impressive than the mangroves themselves is the fact that standing on rooted stilts, towering over 50 feet above us, there were over 100 bird species, and not one piece of litter (despite the development).

Back home in Ventura, California State University Channel Islands (CSUCI) is involved in a variety of trash clean-up projects. We work in watersheds, on beaches, and on the Channel Islands to remove anthropogenic debris. I have seen hundreds of pounds of marine debris on remote beaches of Santa Rosa Island. The island is over 20 miles from civilization. In Tamarindo, the estuary was within 100 feet of roads and homes, with tens to hundreds of thousands of tourists every year. The banks of the estuary were nearly pristine, seemingly out of reach from human waste.

The truth is that the coastal ecosystem is well within reach of the humans around it. In the U.S. we often are unaware of our place in the design of nature, because we have worked very hard to separate ‘wilderness’ from our human habitats. However, the Ticos have a great understanding and respect for their relationship with the environment. For the same reason, our nation fails to instill the same kind of respect for the nature around us, and we choose to focus more on ourselves. In the states we have become so loyal, and so patriotic that our love and pride for our country can take priority over addressing our shortcomings.

We look forward to bringing back the Pura Vida with us to the states.

While in Costa Rica, we act as benevolent guests, like a kid at their friend's house. To bring the Pura Vida home we must identify and understand our own environments. Being aware of our environment will allow us to connect to ourselves, and inspire us to be motive vigilant guests in our own homes.

March 20, 2018. Playa Grande to Monte Verde via Barra Honda.

Today is a travel day. Though we are traveling geographically through the country, I had the pleasure to travel through time as well.

We ventured over 150 feet into the surface of the earth; through a cave that is over 70 million years in the making. The native people have been utilizing this cave for over 2,000 years. The hollow stalactites and stalagmites of varying shape and size created natural percussion instruments of the cave.

I was allowed to tap the sides of a few ribbon-like features. The sound created sounded like caribbean kettle drums. This instrument, however, was formed over epochs, with no regard for its auditory implications (unless you have seen the data on conscious agents presented by Donald Hoffman). There was no design from or for man. The instruments, sounds, potential songs, solely the product of the universe, God. After engaging with God's drum set I was overwhelmed with the vast expanse of the universe in which these rocks, in this cave, at that exact moment could produce the sounds that will never, nor have ever been the same due to the constant growth of the formations. My presence did not have any impact on the value, existence, or possibilities of sound of these features. If Donald Hoffman is right, there may have been some intent to that moment, but that's another story.

I was full of pride to be allowed such an experience, but was quickly humbled. I was blessed to the point of soft sobs and tears at the grandeur of creation in just 3 small ribbons of simple rocks. Halfway up the ladder out of the cave, after a previous ladder and long rock scramble, my body gave out. I had not been eating well, nor consuming enough water and electrolytes, and my body was overcome by dehydration and heat exhaustion. After a few minutes of retching and hyperventilating, I was able to continue my climb out of the cavern. As I emerged, I quickly found flat ground to crash on, and let out a heartfelt PURA VIDA!

ADVENTURE OF A LIFETIME

Edalith Ambriz

It feels like just yesterday, I received the email that would broaden my horizons and make a lasting impression for a lifetime. I was notified that I was among the lucky fifteen chosen to study abroad in New Zealand. The main reason I applied was because I had been looking for ways to step out of my comfort zone. This amazing opportunity just so happened to provide that in what would be an unforgettable way. For a period of three months I worked with a group of strangers on planning and preparing for this journey. As I sit here now, above the clouds on a long journey back home, I can't help but reflect on what those strangers have become, whanau. During those two weeks, I learned so much about the beautiful Maori culture and myself. I have come out of my shell and it was exactly what I had been yearning to do for a long time. I have shared beautiful moments with some of the most loving people on this earth and have become really close to a few.

On the last day at the Marae stay I couldn't hold back the tears as I found myself overwhelmed with gratitude for Annie and her role in this life changing experience. What seemed like her simple guidance through a path that I never imagined walking through, turns out, was so much more. During the trip I discovered a new hobby which is photography. On top of that, I became aware of how self-sufficient I really am. I always had a bad tendency of bringing myself down due to my misguided belief that I was overly dependent of my surroundings. As I prepared to go home I tried so hard to hold back the tears. I have never been the greatest at saying goodbye. When I first got to New Zealand I remember my constant worry about not being accepted by the rest of the group and integrating myself with everyone else. The greatest memory I have taken with me from this experience is the Marae Stay in Waiheke Island.

The first day we arrived I found myself very home sick. This hit me drastically, but the last few days were an experience like no other. I loved and enjoyed Bianca and Ami's hospitality and constant love and dedication. I enjoyed how spontaneous and adventurous they both are. For example,

we randomly went to see the sunset and danced on the side of the road with no care as to what others would say. Oyster hunting was randomly decided on, and just as quickly we were on our way to make it happen. That's when I learned that it's okay to be spontaneous. I was always so worried about planning things and calculating time. It's in New Zealand where I realized you need to make the best out of each and every moment. Whether it's forty-five minutes or an hour, it all counts.

I feel extremely grateful to have learned so much from Wendy Lee and her team, all the lectures were very helpful and interesting. Wendy's guidance and thoroughly planned educational/informative lectures were a major part of both a very successful and foundationally impactful experience. Not only was Wendy able to use her expertise to plan such lectures, she also allowed herself to form personal connections with all of us. I feel that I can see Wendy as both a great resource and wealth of information and also someone I can take the liberty of calling an acquaintance and friend.

What It Means

I had the time of my life exploring the beauty of New Zealand and everything this great nation has to offer as well as the Maori culture. With that came a lot of coming out of my comfort zone in a lot of areas. I explored new foods which was one of my main goals, as I have always been very closed minded when it comes to food. I was able to fully understand the Maori culture and practice the haka. Likewise, I was able to joyfully learn about the poi and the wooden sticks and how they can be utilized in creating wonderful music.

Opportunities and Possibilities

The question is now what? What will I do with all that I learned with this experience? One of two things can happen. I can reflect and make all these self-realizations, and simply take it as a deeper knowledge of myself and my possibilities. Or two, and this will be the harder of the two- I can take all this new-found knowledge and truly embrace it and put it to practice. This will be my greatest opportunity, the possibility to truly make a life changing trip into a life changing reshaping of what I do and how I interact with my future. This is the option I will truly strive for and not let this opportunity be in vein but continue to learn about myself and develop myself from what I have learned, thanks to New Zealand and its unforgettable people.

UNTITLED

Leslie Magana

Impossible

It is impossible to tell you how much delicious food I ate. The white rice and black beans were never enough. The sickness we got is the only thing I hated. But my full belly is all that I loved.

It is impossible to tell you my favorite part. Before we arrived, I knew my expectations would be exceeded. The beauty, its people, and culture all have my heart. But leaving stress at home is definitely what we all needed.

It is impossible to tell you how awesome Ticos are. The stress-free life is surely one I want to live. Costa Rica is so beautiful, why does it have to be so far? But I will return and share my appreciation, for its all I want to give.

It is impossible to tell you how much I experienced those days. The tenth day came too quick and none of us wanted to leave. To know that I was fortunate enough to go still has me amazed. But I know Costa Rica kept a piece of me.

Journal 1

One of the many things I learned on this trip was that I knew close to nothing about Costa Rica, and how unfortunate it is that the education system I grew up with is domestic-centered. Taking the International Experience class before going into the country helped me to learn more about their immense biological diversity, but interacting with the students from La Universidad Nacional de Costa Rica taught me way more than I expected to know. Being bilingual has always been beneficial to me in the United States, but traveling to Costa Rica and speaking Spanish in this country allowed me to realize how beautiful it is to know another language, and how much more I could learn by interacting with those across the language boundary. A big chunk of what I learned was through speaking Spanish, and I am grateful

for that.

Through the language, I was taught that some Ticos are so against the pineapple-agriculture industry that in the form of a protest, they completely stopped consuming the fruit. Those who protest are worried environmentalists who do not support the deforestation that happens to produce the fruit. It amazed me to learn this! I also learned that the working conditions for the coffee bean industry are not the greatest, yet many people work in the field to financially support their families. Learning about the coffee industry reminded me of home and our similar situation with strawberry field workers. As I was being taught this, I explained to the Ticos that the strawberry industry back home sounds much like their coffee industry, and they too learned something new.

I had visited other countries before, but Costa Rican people are very different in their way of life and I loved it! Most people have heard that the country has a high satisfaction rate, say ¡Pura Vida! to almost anything, and hardly stress—well that is exactly what I experienced. I always said that when I begin my travels, I would only like to visit places once, that way I can experience another country, but after those beautiful days I am more than sure I will be returning.

Journal 2

To respect a country is to understand and accept the culture they are part of. There is much more one can do to be respectful, but after the trip to Costa Rica, I realized that culture is the greatest entrance to respecting a country. Since we arrived at night, I was excited to see how much different the landscapes were when the sun was out. Traveling the side of the Pacific coast reminded me a lot of the landscapes around my pueblo in Mexico. I understand the Spanish language is very different in each Spanish-speaking country, but I was eager to interact with the Ticos. Since I have a lighter skin tone and green eyes, almost every time I was asked “¿güerita, donde aprendiste el español?” meaning “white girl, where did you learn your Spanish?” It made me laugh, but I proceeded to answer with “mis padres son de México,” or “my parents are from Mexico.” I am not sure how many times I have emphasized how fortunate I am to be able to communicate with others so far from home. Knowing the language is my way to respect entering a new country. Being one of the few people to be bilingual, it was awesome to be able to translate and be a bridge between Ticos and my classmates. Many of my classmates attempted to learn—which made me so happy, and many of

them did really well!

Of course, language is only one aspect of their culture. Food is another, and an easier way to respect the culture. Having a sensitive stomach, I was pretty concerned, but the food was delicious! I am glad the food we ate while visiting was traditional and tasted fresh. I definitely needed the time off from the food back home. Although one may know the language and enjoy their food, the biggest obligation in respecting a country is simply being respectful and immersing oneself into the culture as much as one can.

The background of the page is a repeating pattern of light gray silhouettes of foxes and rabbits. The foxes are shown in various poses: some are leaping, some are standing alert, and some are walking. The rabbits are depicted in a sitting position. These silhouettes are scattered across the entire page, creating a subtle, thematic backdrop for the text.

CONTRIBUTORS & STAFF

Yoselin Edith Aguirre

Introduced to the world of storytelling by her father, Yoselin Edith Aguirre chose to attend CSUCI to develop her skills. She's taken to writing about religion, gender relations, and the immigrant experience.

Andrew Bottino

I wish all elevators were destroyed, but that's just how it be on this bitch called Earth.

Lisa Brand

Lisa is an English Major at CSU Channel Islands. She loves to edit stories and dreams of becoming a well known author.

Alec Burquez

I am an English Major with a creative writing emphasis in my final semester. I plan to be an accomplished author after college as well as Batman as a side hustle.

Brent Cihonski

Bob Saget on a hot plate of onions; riding a rhino, pico de gallo; I am feeling like larva, I'm frumpy like Martha; a 15-foot parka, I grow out my clothes.

Bailey De Lao

Bio major. Will likely die at the paws of the big cats I plan to care for and study, but my grave will say #worthit.

Benjamin Edic

Hello, my name is Benjamin Edic. Please enjoy what you read and spread positive feelings to those around you. Thank you.

Sarah Gay

Sarah is an English major at CSUCI and will be pursuing a teaching credential following her BA. She enjoys gaming and reading YA fantasy novels.

Evan Goodson

Evan is a native of the inland empire who enjoys writing poetry, reading, lifting weights, and taking photos of flowers. He is black and proud.

Hillary Gordon

Hillary Gordon is a Ventura County native but has lived all over the country working in radio. She is an English major at CSUCI and enjoys writing short stories and creative nonfiction.

Federico Guzman

19 years and still asking, “who let the dogs out.” Maybe I’ll write the sequel and get my answer.

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Paige is an English major with a minor in communications. She plans to publish her first book in the next year.

Branden Hopper

Branden Hopper is a graduating English major with an emphasis in creative writing. He writes short fiction and poetry and lives in Simi Valley, California.

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Andy was raised in Santa Clarita, California. He currently lives alone, inside his own mind, although he likes to escape it often.

Bob Mayberry

Bob is retiring after 40 years of teaching. Before senility sets in, he hopes to swim in the Pacific and finish his detective novel.

Paisley Meir

Paisley is an intricate, multicolored pattern typically of abstract curving figures that resembles a fat comma in human form. Not your average pattern.

Marina Simms

Marina is an English Major here at CSU Channel Islands. A self-proclaimed fan of mythology and fairy-tales, she hopes to finish her novel soon.

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Emma barely has enough time to write these days between classes and running the English Club, but when she does it’s usually overly dramatic poems or murderous stripper stories.

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