

Coastlines

Spring 2025

Masthead

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Faculty Advisor Stephanie Anderson

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Editor Mia Perez-Agramonte

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Letter From the Editors

Dear readers, writers, artists, and *Coastlines* supporters,

As co-editors-in-chief for the 55th edition of *Coastlines*, it has been our honor and pleasure to continue the long legacy of this literary arts journal and help shepherd it into a new era. From its origins as a small print graduate literary journal to the multimedia undergraduate publication it is today, *Coastlines* has transformed with each new generation, capturing and immortalizing the lived experiences and perspectives of our student body and the communities we serve. Much like the shores of our subtropical home, this publication has been shaped by time and history, and we are excited for you to see our collaborative contribution to its future.

To our contributors, thank you for trusting us with your artistry and creative works. We hope you are just as proud to be a part of this collection as we are of this final product. Our goal was to capture the essence of each piece and allow them to shine individually and collectively, weaving together a coastline of voices, each one a unique wave contributing to the ever-evolving shore of our creative community. Each poem, story, essay, and artwork serves as a testament to the power of creative expression, and we are honored to have played a role in bringing them together.

To our readers and supporters, thank you for allowing us to champion the voices within its pages. Your curiosity, passion, and encouragement help keep *Coastlines* alive, ensuring that creative expression continues to flourish at our university and beyond. We hope you enjoy the fruits of our labor and will continue to support *Coastlines* in the years to come.

-Madeline S.

-Alexandrea H.





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When

by John Boutin

Petals and leaves fall in an autumn faux,
Dreaming of a spring that will never grow,
Endless frost, waits for dew that never glows.
The twilight eternal, grips the shadow of the land's soul,
Greatness, surely, came to them the first,
Who upon the path, had only tears to quench the thirst.

Liberty has lied, asleep in hearse,
A statue paraded in her place with flowing curls,
Attached at her side, a golden purse
Filled with those great coins of Others work;
From Emerald Isle to East of Rheine,
From Erytha Land to Erytha Man,
Greatness, surely, manifested for all.

And all the odes from the conqueror's "partner,"
Surely tell, that Greatness, gave its part to her.
Now we cry for the preambled promise,
Hoping our dead fathers, shake in their grave
Stirring the earth to force Mictlan's maw open,
Giving breath and air to a wind now honest.

But words from there, like air in pumice,
Sound hollow, only to die, in starless conquest.
That cave, as dark as Liberty's Coffin,
Eats the light to hide the rotting.

Wolves oversee the chorus of baaing;
Sheep in wolf fur cry out salvation,
They pledge allegiance, to Lie, our nation.

And the Great Dream, not dead, reveals
Its faces, beneath the statue's mask
Look and see: nothing, nothing, nothing…

Molasses

by Nina Moubarak

Pomegranate molasses, sticky and dark,
Coffee served in little cups,
At least three times a day
Paired with a cigarette on plastic chairs
In the gravel alley.

Teta's grapevine ruling the backyard
Leaves to be picked and preserved
For warak arish
Blue bucket to wash my clothes,
Stealing a grape,
Sour and crisp
Lint on my shirt
Evidence of the harsh detergent.

Fig tree the father of the jam Teta will send me soon
My name scribbled in elusive letters on the jar lid.

I feel the thread of the floral bedsheets
Hear the rhythm of the broken ceiling fan
See the knots on Teta's arthritis-stricken fingers
As she beats the darbuka.

Guests enter and leave as they wish,
Waves of pineapple juice and petit four flash on the table
I see my eyes in the faces of the people.

Proud church bells wake me
From my light summer sleep

A photo of Saint Charbel protects every home
In the village
Rosaries tucked in and out of shirts
Deep devotion I am desperate to be surrounded by.

Rose-water booza stretches from my tongue to the cone
Hiding in the shade
Huddled next to my gossiping cousins
Wrinkled freckled tan skin of my distant relatives
Generations of raising fruit from the land.

Babies born into the cycle
Missing birthdays to hide underground
As the sound barrier is broken above.

The sea grows wider every day
Blood on my hands
As I try to climb the barbed wire fence around my home
Blood on the hands of militant groups.

I hear it all in Teta's voice when I call her,
Laughter like the ceiling fan
In between sips of coffee,
Grainy voice from a lifetime of smoking
Thick, like the molasses.

Untitled

by Maria Bettis



Blackbirds Soliloquy

by Naomi Grandville

Non-fiction

My experience with literacy is unabashedly selfish in nature. I write to describe, to remember, to experience, to re-live, to reflect, to feel. I write for the me who has passed, the me who has yet to come, and the me of today. I write, if only, for myself. I have decided my audience, and that audience is me. This is not a vehicle to express myself, not a paper to address the masses, not a wordy convoluted narrative. I do not wish to express myself in latent terms, for my writing is not a puzzle to be solved. My writing exists for me, created and taken back by the hands that forged it. The opinions of friends, family, teachers, professors, and even you, the reader, will no longer drag me down. My art is a fire, a storm, a surge, in which cannot be contained.

Music dances through my body, runs through my hands, cradles my head when my neck can't support its weight. I am a vessel for rhythm, bound by the coda that forces me to repeat. I believe that I was born from the very winds that created song, the very trees that shaped and whittled the first flute. Music is a feeling, an experience. Music has colors, sensations, flavors—that of which you can't linearly interpret. Sometimes, and often, I come across the indescribable. The flavors and feelings, goosebumps and heartbeats, migraines and static. Things I could not possibly fathom describing. But I always wanted to accomplish the impossible. I have strived for the seas as a bird, craved for the skies as a dog, and yearned for the land as a fish. I wish to describe what I cannot describe, feel what I cannot feel, touch what I cannot touch. It was never for others. It never was, never has, and never will be.

I am a being of routine, of pattern and lockstep. I walk a path I've walked a million times, the grooves of which are etched into my skin. I find comfort in the shapes, the indents in which stay static. Familiarity is peace, steady in the winds of uncertainty. I stand in one place, guarded like a statue. The water around me swirls, rushes, roars with rapid and jagged crashing waves.

"There is power in fluidity," the waves whistle, flooding the marble of my skin.

"Why do you limit yourself to only that which stays still? Even the heartiest pine flexes in the wind."

"Because I'm scared. I'm scared that I will not be able to find my way back home if I lose myself to the current."

"What good is a home if not for longing? What good is dying if not for living? The air moves, the water flows, and you will soar. Don't be afraid to let go."

The waves go silent, the wind whistling in my ears with a soft tune. In my bones, I feel a deep connection with the whispers. Though unpredictable, I find myself searching for meaning in its undertones.

But I am trapped. Trapped in a cycle I cannot break. I wish to break free, to express myself in a sea of meaningless words, broken rhymes, fragile punctuation and brittle adjectives. I wish to serve myself, my mind, my skin and blood with unconventionality- nouns and sounds and line breaks that only make sense to me. I wish to think, to write, to work to create to sing to shout to breathe, what I could never speak. I wish to run with my words, to let them float on my tongue, to drop or fly in ways I have only ever imagined.

But I can't. I'm not supposed to. I am limited, as my work is not for me. My words are ripped from the hands of creation and into the box of normality, of literacy. I wish to reach for that box, reach for the hands and tear away that which belongs to me. But how can I when the hands that stole from me touch me so gently, speak so softly, whisper of my potential- subconsciously balancing me on the seesaw between favor and fate. My body yearns for what I could have, but yearns harder for their godly gaze. I have been groomed to search further for their praise in the leftist fields than my essential in the bedside drawer. And I do. I cross the flaming bridge, climb the falling

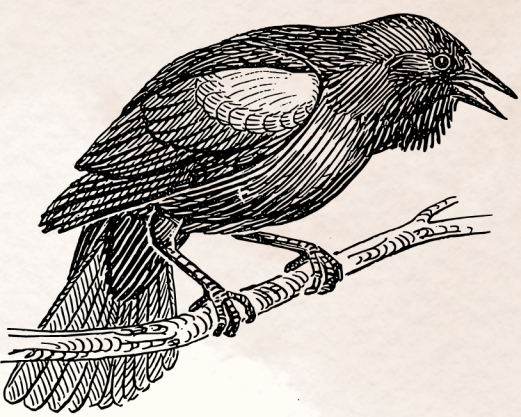
mountain, swim the draining sea simply to be regarded kindly in their eyes. I am but a songbird in a cage, a jester in a throne room, a lion in a circus. I live to act, to entertain, to perform. I am only able to create if it amuses those watchful hands which steer me by a leash. I have been guided so long, so far that even without that leash I carry on. If not only out of habit, but out of craving- yearning for the shower of their commendations to wash away my woes and keep me afloat.

I will not float forever. I will drown, losing myself to the waves.

But inevitably I will come back up. Death cannot hold me forever.

And the cycle will repeat again.





pull of a beach cigarette

by Benny Cauthen

there's a lighthouse in the corner of my eye
as i crouch along the midnight shore
satellites blinking out in space
seven handmade stars of lonely love
and a glow-in-the-dark helicopter
hovers above my head in gun rotation
nicotine in my veins, waves in my hair
wind in my nose, and a gold thundercloud
of promises haunts the black atlantic
saying something to me
but i cannot speak water
so what is it i do not know?
the atmosphere is cool tonight
God up above, i remain below



Tart Nectar

by Grace Gosinanont
Fiction

The summer months in California could make a sinner get on his knees and pray. I tighten my grip on the reins as the sun makes its acquaintance with the desert wasteland. My straw hat falls lower, absorbing the sweat gathering on my brow. As the image of a small farmhouse appears in the horizon I blow out a breath, reach forward to give an apologetic pat to Easter's hind, and snap the reins again.

We arrive at the homestead on a slow trot. I step down from the driver's box and walk Easter to the trough to drink, brushing my hand through her tangled mane before I remove her bridle and release her from the wagon. She snaps her tail at me as I walk by. I turn back and meet eyes that gleam with betrayal, offended that I dare make her work. "Gotta work to eat girl. You know that." Easter huffs, turns around to her trough with a stomp in her step.

I snort. Even if I don't have children- I know I won't have children- at least I can tell others I have a thousand pound, white-speckled toddler waiting for me at home. I fill my basket and run a thumb over the weave pressed against my forearm. When I swing around the wagon I instinctively look to our clementine tree in our yard. It's been in the dirt before Easter. Certainly before me.

Mama Lottie said it was planted when Colt was barely a child, something to provide even when she and his papa weren't there anymore. He had smiled at that. Wrapped an arm around my waist and whispered how it would be there for our children too.

I blink myself out of the decade old memory and stare at it now. Nature hasn't been kind to the poor thing, tilted slightly to the left with rotted fruit that fell off before they could fully ripen strewn out amongst the roots. I spot a singular smear of bright orange and squint between a few branches to a clementine hidden amongst the leaves. The only one that looks the color it was supposed to be. I step over the corpses of its citrus brethren and don't hide the scrunch of my nose hearing the wet noise fruit make against my

boots. I pluck the ripe clementine and place it in the safety of my basket.

"Mama Lottie I'm home!" I call out, wiping my muddied boots on the towel placed by the screen door. A few moments with no response and my shoulders tighten. I swallow before trying again. "Mama Lottie?" Footsteps follow. I breathe in deeply.

"Sorry, Petal, I was putting away the clothes, what was that?" Mama Lottie's smile is all cheek wrinkles and bright eyes when she sees me. She approaches with her hands held out to take my basket. I keep it close to my stomach.

"Just saying I was back from the general store Mama Lottie." I slip an arm around her to give her a quick squeeze and walk past towards the kitchen, setting my basket down on the dining room table. "Making cabbage soup today, you like that?" Watching her follow I trace the details of a woman younger than she looks. Her brown hair I had braided that morning slung over her shoulder with a springy strand sticking out here and there. She's started getting grays recently. Her nightgown frays at the edges of her wrist and is decorated near her collar with stains but I haven't figured out a way to convince her to change it yet.

She purses her lips at me, "We had that this morning." I open my mouth, then quickly shut it and try again.

"Not this morning Mama Lottie. We haven't had this in a little while. Last week the vegetable dealer was out of cabbage, remember?" I take various vegetables out of the basket and put them on the table beside the stove. I start to check where the best place to cut the cabbage is while she frowns.

"Why didn't you take it from our garden?"

"Because we hadn't planted them this season Mama Lottie." We haven't planted anything this season. Or any season since Colt's papa passed. But I didn't want to confuse her any further. She nods like it finally clicks for her and turns around after that. I throw in the vegetables for the broth and check if there's enough wood in the stove before lighting it aflame. While I wait for the pot to boil I pull the clementine out and look to the sitting room where Mama Lottie decides to settle.

She's straight-backed and staring at the fireplace again. I pull a plate out of a cupboard and puncture a hole into the clementine with the nail of my thumb. The vibrant skin of the fruit peels easily into my palm and I suck at the drips rolling down my hand before they reach my sleeve. Each slice makes some semblance of a circle on the plate and I whistle to Mama Lottie while making my way to the sitting room. She doesn't make a sound of acknowledgement or move, she never does when she's looking at the fireplace. I don't stop until I'm directly in front of her to lean down with the clementines. "Gotcha a snack."

She blinks once, twice, before jolting back as if I scared her. "Oh Lily! I didn't expect you to be here so late."

"It's only about 1 o'clock Mama Lottie."

She pauses, "Oh." readjusts herself in her chair and takes the plate with a lopsided grin. "Thank you, Petal. Is Colt on his way?"

His name brings the furrow back in my brow. "No Mama Lottie. He's not gonna be here."

Colt Matthews was a bastard in my husband's clothing. He never laid a hand on me but he loved to hold that over my head when he tried to spend money like our pockets were deeper than they were. I couldn't even let myself believe he was noble in death. Cause the way my husband of 14 years

died was thanks to a duel he challenged while drunk. A challenge where the only things the man still had left to bet was the house we were building on the other side of town and me. Sometimes I get to thinking if he was any more sober he would've preferred to keep the house.

I remember the day Sheriff Worthing approached me with the news. I had stopped my wild goose chases after Colt a long time ago. A woman of my age had far too high a reputation in the town's eyes to be dragging her husband out of shit saloons. He politely rapped his knuckles against Mama Lottie's screen door and asked if a Miss Matthews was home. We both turned our heads. He took his hat off and pressed it against his chest, a deep frown set on his lips. I never picked up on what he said much. I remember the scream from Mama Lottie. The scream only a mother could make. Her trembling hands left imprints of nails against my skin and all I managed to rasp out was where we could collect his body.

He died about 4 months ago but Mama Lottie's acknowledgement of that has been as fleeting as a dust devil on the wind. I take a seat beside her and nudge the plate of clementines, watching the dusty cobblestone of the fireplace and trying to find the same meaning she does in it. I turn my head at a low gurgling and see steam start to rise out of my pot. "Eat up alright? Supper will be ready soon." She manages a small nod and sets the plate on the table beside her.

I cook in silence, letting the sound of chopping vegetables and simmering broth overtake the room and not my anger. The townspeople have picked up on it. The ones that squeeze my arms or hug my waist when I don't want anyone near me. The ones that stare at me with pity and soften their language when I enter a room. They tell me, "You don't look like a woman in mourning." But I've made my peace with mourning. Mourned Colt before his last breath left his lungs. The town is grieving a person while I only grieve a body.

I chuck in another handful of salt before I stir and pull the ladle to my

mouth, it'll do. I pour a reasonable helping into a bowl and clear my throat before looking to the sitting room. "Supper!" She doesn't move and I sigh before walking in front of her again. "Supper, Mama Lottie. Don't let it get cold now."

Her eyes connect with mine and I instantly get the feeling something is wrong. They're nearly glazed over but when she looks at me her expression twists into one of panic. "Who are you?"

"Mama Lottie?" I take a step towards her but she presses herself deeper into the sofa, caging her arms around her.

"How-how did you get into my house? What are you doing here?"

"It's Lily, Mama Lottie, it's me just calm down-"

She cuts me off with a shriek when I try getting closer again, an expression of horror stretched across her face.

"HELP. HELP. INTRUDER."

"Mama please!"

She kicks forward and I hit the ground, the choking sting of boiling soup splashing against my arm and torso. Mama Lottie doesn't stop wailing, throwing pillows and books and whatever else she can get her hands on while I scramble for the door to escape the onslaught.

I slam the front door and collapse against the wooden steps of the porch, gasping in breaths at chunky, uneven intervals. My heartbeat hasn't left my throat. I tug at my blouse so it no longer sticks to my skin, ignoring the red heat that blooms over my wrist. There's a whinny in front of me and I meet Easter's eyes, which I swear soften as she takes in the quick rise and fall

of my chest. She clops over and lowers her head towards me but I bring a hand up and push her back. "I'm fine girl. She's fine. Go on now."

There's a pause before Easter takes a couple steps back again and turns. A huff of annoyance by her feeder. Mama Lottie's screams from inside the house eventually stop. I hear shuffling and adjust myself to lean against the railing of the stairs.

"It's something called Dementia," Doctor Davis told me a month after Colt had died. I had noticed her lapses in memory a little over a year ago. Used to be just a misplacement of her sewing kit but then it had transitioned to forgetting entire days. Colt had largely said it came with age and brushed off the times she would look at him and tilt her head, as if seeing him for the first time. After he was killed her memory just continued to worsen along with other erratic behavior. I went to Doctor Davis with the fear her grief would kill her.

"Something we don't quite have a handle on yet but it seems like there's no cure. If you'd like, I have a couple friends at a nearby asylum-"

"That won't be needed, Doctor." I slipped my hand out of his hold.

"Why Miss Matthews. Apologies for being brash but this can't be treated. And a promising woman like you don't need anything keeping you tied down when men come around looking for a wife."

"I made a promise when I married Colt that I'd take care of his family, Doctor. I appreciate your concern but your advice is not needed."

He reached out to take my hand again and I staggered back before I walked past him back into the house. It hadn't been too long since his visit but she's been getting worse. In small pockets of time she'd be Mama Lottie again but most days she's a stranger attached to the house I live in. I reach below my skirts for a small, gold tin slid on the inside of my boot.

It was a gift from Colt last spring. He told me he worked at the mine for months to rack up enough cash to get it. For his Lily of the valley. I held back a scoff when he handed it over and I could still trace out the D.E. engraving he poorly tried to scratch off at the bottom. Probably whoever he won it off of.

I attempt to pull it open but find the latch more troublesome than it usually is. Not that my hands made it any easier. Every movement felt clumsy with shaky fingers and sweaty palms. My arms felt heavier and as I flung the tin open the contents inside burst out. A dozen or so cigarettes littered the dirt of the farmhouse. I stare at them for a moment. I don't realize I'm crying until a tear splashes against the back of my hand. Then there's another. And then a sniffle. And before I could stop myself an ugly, deep, sob left my mouth. My hands wiping vigorously at my eyes and nose couldn't stop the constant stream of tears and snot and my skirts quickly felt far too tight as I hiccup out another cry.

I couldn't even register the front door opening, the world around me was already too loud. Then I feel a hand touching my shoulder. Mama Lottie crouches down beside me, frowning as she takes both of her hands to cup my face, quickly wiping at stray tears. "Oh Petal, what happened?"

I try saying her name a couple times but stumble over the syllables. She shushes me and waits before my heaving stops to ask again, "What's the matter Petal?"

"Sorry. Sorry Mama Lottie. Wasn't anything important I swear just-" I pause, looking at the dying clementine tree in the yard. "I was just looking at the tree and I got sad it's probably not gonna survive the end of the year. We're gonna lose it."

She bunches up the end of her nightgown and takes a seat beside me, "Well now that ain't something to cry about at all! Petal let me tell you something. The world is filled with so many things that leave us. Like the wind.

Now it's not cause of us that the wind's gotta go. But it can't stay forever. And that's okay." She takes my hand and puts it on her lap. "World is also filled with so many things that can stay. Now you take what you learned from what had to go, and bring it back to the things that won't leave you. That clementine tree wasn't meant for us. But we'll grow a new one. One that'll stay."

I stare out at the tree while she squeezes my hand. She reaches behind her with her other hand and pulls the plate of clementine slices onto my lap. "Made these for you. Go on now."

I smile and pick one up. The clementine is sour but I let the flavor settle on the tongue.

"Thank you."

"Anything for you Petal."

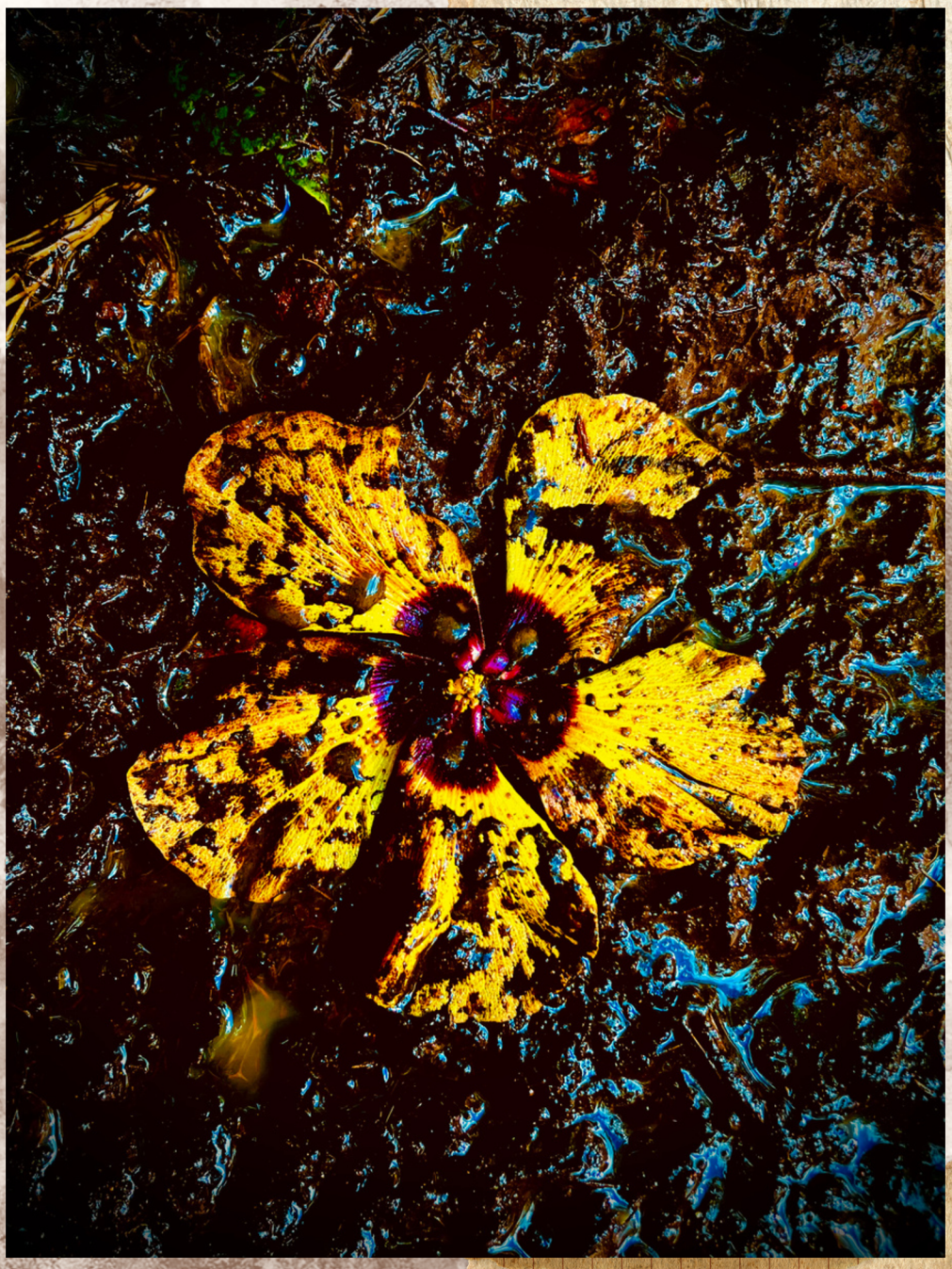
We sit in silence for a moment, each taking slices of the clementine. She squeezes my hand again and looks at me.

"Now when did Colt say he'll be home?"

I look back at her, seeing the orange of the sunset reflect against her pupils. "Soon Mama Lottie. Soon."

Miry Mai Hau Hele

by Christy Smith



Childhood Dreams

by Luis Loyola III

I remember as a child
Rita's refreshing gelatos and
roosters ice cream
Their dirt flavor of
Worms and also dirt
Naturally
I always dreamt to taste the dirt
The gummy worms that crawled
And chilled on the wintery cream
And how that child longed to
Feel free and show you his favorite
Flavor
It's a silly thing, but we were kids
Now you and I lay in the dirt, tasting it
Resting in it
Following those childhood dreams
Towards the unknown



Luna Insidiosa

by Luis Loyola III

The serenity of the space
between our souls is dim and quiet
only the clouds remain in the night
never again to see the stars
never again to see your light
My Deep Love, Luna Insidiosa

And so, the Blood of the broken heart bleeds
Once more, beautifully forevermore
As the Blood runs down his wrists
Like a river, only gentle as the beckoning mist
The Blood of the bleeding heart seeps
Into the ballpoint of his crimson pen

And so, he weeps...

Di vises mi miserete aeterna...

You tower above me, so rise I must
finding shelter in the mist above
wishing forevermore to soar
through the haze to gaze at you once more
yet hoping to let go my grip and fall

Breathe in and fall...

...and forever sleep under your pale light

My Sidi's Grapevines

by Dalal Yaqub
Non-fiction

In the radiant warmth of the almost ending summer on August 22, 2016, at 5:31 PM, my *ballad*[1] of Al-Mazra'a Sharqiyah in the occupied West Bank of Palestine unveiled its ageless nature just below a honey-like rosy-pink sky. The terrain, blessed by years of sun rays and bruised by a continued colonial subjugation, gave a quiet testimony to an existence written across each crack and cranny. On the rooftop of our humbled hand-built home stood my *Sidi*,[2] a respected man, dressed in his cherished blue-striped button down polo and ravened dress pants that clung to his frame like a second layer of skin. He always dressed in what Americans call a "Sunday best" because he understood that any day could be his last. He was 81 years old that year when we were in our motherland, as he stood on the rooftop with me. On his head, he wore his milky white *kufi*[3] as a crown of dignity passed on from his male ancestry since before the 1948 Nakba.[4]

The August airflow was saturated with the perfume of juicy citrus and sour *enib*[5] as my Sidi clutched the same bright orange set of scissors he made use of every season to pick and gather the fruits that thrived amidst its harvesters' unsustainable farming functions. Where they faced severe agricultural devastation, including land seizures, water scarcity, and immobility, all of which my Sidi knew too well. The silver and firm metallic blades of the scissors beamed like the love he had for, as he called me, his *"Habibti"*[6]

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[1]Palestinian Arabic word for village.

[2]Palestinian Arabic word for grandfather.

[3]Palestinian Muslim men wear kufis as an emblem of humility in the Islamic faith and in the preservation of Palestinian culture from generation to generation.

[4]Palestinian catastrophe, which resulted in my grandfather being a refugee to his own country due to the aggression of settlers towards natives.

[5]Palestinian Arabic word for grapes.

[6]Palestinian Arabic word for "my beloved."

That love that I always felt protected by the presence of reflected at that moment from his soil-colored irises. In his left hand, cradled like a heirloom of Palestinian resistance, he held up clusters of amethyst *enib* with a paisley purple undertone, cut from their vines as stiff as the concrete roots of our home beneath our feet. As he began to admire the serenity of the *Asr athan*[7], he turned to me gently and said, *"Habibti, huthi sura illich ashan itfargi ahlich"*[8]. As I knew he meant to take a picture of the *ballad* view, I responded by saying, *"Wakof ashaan a sarawak Sidi"*[9]. And so he stood there with his head raised like a king and gave me what he considered a wrinkled smile as I captured my dearest portrait of him.



As I reminisce about this short while I was with him on the rooftop, along with our grapevines surrounding us from behind, I now understand that being Palestinian is the greatest honor of my life, as it is his. It's from my *Sidi* that I have learned that being Palestinian means loving and finding life in everything rooted in our blood, and being Palestinian means thriving in the connectedness among our elders and our young. Being Palestinian illustrates our vital truth– that regardless of what hardships threaten to break us, whether we are displaced or residing in our rightful home, our endurance grew from the seeds of our grapes to the fruitfulness of our morale by our motherland and us as its people that refuse to be forgotten. My *Sidi* and his grapevines are the veins that keep my heart beating for Palestine, in the hope that we can be on the rooftop picking grapes like we did before.

[7]Afternoon call to prayer in Islam.

[8]"My beloved, take a picture to show your parents."

[9]"Stand and look at me so I can take a picture of you grandfather."

morning tea

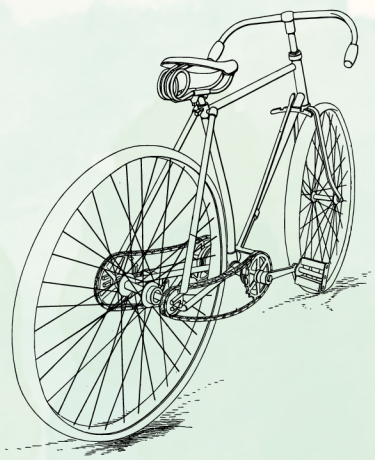
by Teddy James Salise

brown sugar crumbles
from a soft silver spoonful–
a sweetened circle.



broward county intersection

by Teddy James Salise



a boy waits to cross
biking shirtless, undisturbed–
i want to be him.

Weird Fishes: Whale

by Julian Rauh
Fiction

I approached the young man, writhing in a corner. "How long has he been like this?"

His uncle ran a hand through gray unkempt hair and adjusted his large, round-rimmed spectacles. "Since we got back, a week ago. Uh, we were on a... research mission. Some experimental technology was involved."

"And this... experimental technology did this to him?"

The uncle's face twitched. He shifted his weight from foot to foot. He did not want to answer this question. "Not exactly."

"What exactly were you two doing out there?"

From the corner, a murmuring sound. I knelt down next to the young man, whose face was buried in his hands. "Dive... dive... dive..." Revealing bloodshot eyes, he threw his head back to gaze straight up at the ceiling and let out a soft, dry chuckle. "Swimming with the weird fishes..."



I looked to the uncle. He did not answer. "Look—I'm trying to help you here. If you're concerned about your trade secrets, that's fine. I don't need specifics about the technology. I just need to know what you were doing."

" I-" The uncle broke eye contact. "I warned him. I've always been warning- always been telling him: not everything in this universe can be grasped by the senses. They just can't. That's why we use models and abstractions. He's always been stubborn like that... "

The old man shook his head and took a deep breath, running a hand through his hair again. Once I had been thoroughly sworn to secrecy, he continued:

"Okay. Human space travel, until this point, has been like an Old Earth sailboat, gliding along the surface of the sea, if you're familiar with the concept. In our case, we're confined to three dimensions. But there's a whole ocean 'beneath' us, if you will. And I've been working to penetrate the surface..."

Most of Jonas' dive was uneventful. He traveled deeper, watched the stars dim, and bickered with Pierre.

" Looks like you're almost out of line. Same old?"

"Yup." Jonas looked around and saw nothing save for his dimensional tether, which trailed a few meters behind him and vanished, and dim remnants of light from nearby stars.
Usually, when he got this deep, Jonas would find that there were no further layers to travel to. This time, however, the indicator light by the joystick on his spacewalk suit remained green.

"We should be far enough away from the Sun for you to go deeper this time—minimal gravitational interference from any celestial body. How are you feeling?"

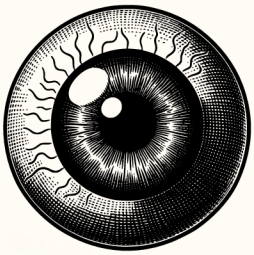
"I think I'm ready."

"Okay. Just remember, you'll lose comms when you disconnect the tether. The suit's auto-return will take care of you if anything goes sideways. Go get 'em."

A couple of layers deeper, Jonas realized he was enveloped in a perfect void. He turned his head left and right, but could not feel or see himself move. As he played with this phenomenon, something... shimmered? For a split second, he saw a silvery blue light appear and disappear. He pressed the joystick forward to go deeper. There, again: a dancing, teal wisp. He went deeper, and the shape grew and morphed in erratic ways. His eyes went wide and his pulse steadily climbed. It grew larger. An undulating, teal mass floated in front of him. Jonas could not tell how close or far, big or small, it was. It could've been the size of a star, an asteroid, or an apple.

Jonas froze. He was a scientist. He wanted to understand. He had to understand. What was this anomaly? He postulated several theories as he watched the thing change. It could be a new type of element, or maybe a particular class of celestial body that only forms... here. There was another idea, itching at him from the corners of his mind where he desperately tried to keep it. The thing could be alive. Jonas thought this idea, quite frankly, was ridiculous. Yet, watching it move, some primitive part of him could only see it that way.

The mass grew larger and smaller. Jonas could not tell if it was simply moving closer to him or actually fluctuating in size. Neither seemed improbable. As the form shifted, Jonas recognized an impulse to identify certain shapes it took in terms of what he could understand. For a flash of a moment, Jonas could've sworn he saw the surface of the mass speckled all over with orifices. Mouths and noses, ears and pores—insectoid eyes, staring out at him. The next moment, it bore a striking resemblance to mammalian viscera. The next, a mangled mess of jagged bone. He did his best to reject this impulse—it had no place in the scientific method. He would use logic and reason to understand. Nothing else.



The mass, this time for several seconds, took the form of a single eye. It was unmistakably so. An orb of pure, ghastly white interrupted only by an ever-shifting iris and a single, void-black pupil that dilated and constricted at bizarre intervals. Was the eye massive, or was it just extremely close?

Jonas' neurochemistry, in that moment, was a caustic brew of adrenaline and cortisol. Out. Out. Out. His inner monologue blared at him like a clarion call. He was frozen, but his finger found the courage to pull the stick backwards, taking him back towards the 'surface'. As he traveled, the eye remained for several layers, staring at him. Eventually, he saw the teal substance instead, his instincts now desperate to label it the creature's skin. Again, he rejected this impulse.

Safely on the same plane as the tether, about halfway to the 'surface', Jonas hesitated to attach it. What would he tell Pierre? *I don't even believe what I saw.* He tried to convince himself that the eye, too, was his brain sorting incomprehensible information into something he could understand. Jonas' heavy, frenzied breathing was fogging his helmet, rendering him a very scared, very blind fish in a fishbowl that was much too small.

Reattaching the line felt something akin to admitting defeat, but he had to. "I, I can't breathe. I'm going to die. God, my chest—"

"Jonas?" Pierre's gruff voice took on a soft quality. "Oh, my. You're having a panic attack. You're not going to die. You have hours left in your oxygen supply. Even if you did get dangerously low, the auto-return would bring you back to the tether and the tether would bring you back to me."

The vacuum felt thick—indomitable. Jonas could feel it pressed against the foggy fishbowl. He could feel it encroaching on his skull. "We don't belong out here...we shouldn't have—"

"Okay, that's it! I'm pulling you in."

"No! Not yet! There's something...I have to understand."

"Jonas, listen to yourself!"

"No!" Jonas snapped. Saliva flew from his mouth. "There's something down there. Something... I think it's alive."

"Jonas! I'm sorry, I didn't know you were prone to panic atta—"

"I know what I saw." Jonas interrupted between shallow, heaving breaths.

Silence. Jonas could almost hear Pierre run a hand through his hair. Then: "Are you sure?" Pierre spoke softly, quietly.

For several seconds, Pierre only heard heavy, strained breathing. "I—no. I'm not sure. That's why I need to go back."

"Jonas, I warned you that you might see some weird shit. The space we're exploring, it's impossible for us to wrap our brains around it. You're going to drive yourself crazy. Come back, please. I'll pull you back in, I can run some tests on the diving equipment. We can talk about what you saw, and I'll design a scanner for you. We can start mapping out this space, create a mathematical model—"

"Is that what exploration is to you? Abstractions? Making a fake version of it just so it doesn't make you uncomfortable? Just so it's easier? That's not true knowledge! I want to know this place."

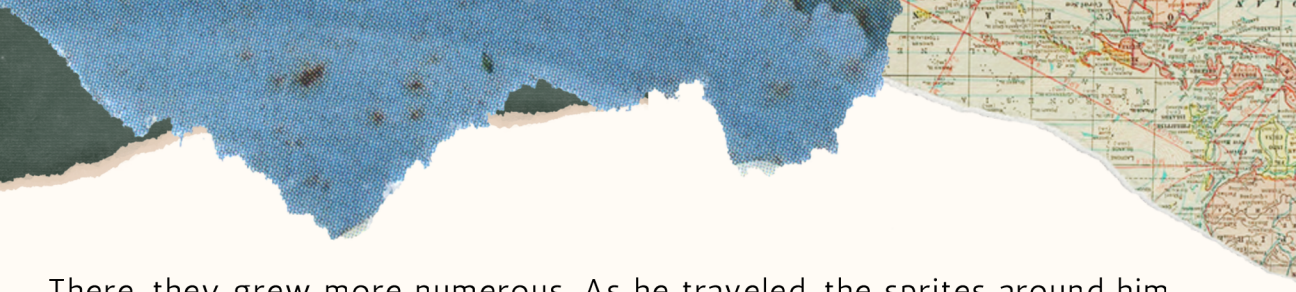
A soft chuckle rang out through the comms-line. "Jonas, I know. Your dad..." And then a sigh. "Look, I get it. I do. I used to be the exact same way. But you have to understand—you have to accept—there are things simply beyond the scope of our minds. Please, you'll drive yourself insane like this! The way you're breathing, can you even see right now?"

His uncle was right. Jonas' helm had been rendered almost entirely opaque in the front. He felt his heart pounding, his blood surging wildly in his face, his fingertips...Jonas focused on bringing his pulse down. He needed the adrenaline out and the oxygen in. Inhale...he imagined he was at home—a bright sun shining through his biosphere and a warm breeze tickling his feet
through the vents. Exhale... He repeated this process until the fog began to fade. "Yeah. Alright. I'm back."

"I can't stop you, can I?"
"Nope."

During his descent, Jonas recalled reading about something called a 'cat.' Supposedly, Old Earth was rich with many other beings that were also sentient, but thought in a fundamentally different way—each had their own modes of logic and reason. A cat, for example, could navigate their territory and instinctually calculate a trajectory for a jump, but not understand calculus or physics. There were simply some things beyond its understanding, no matter what. Humans existed at a higher level of consciousness. That's why they took over the world, as it were.

His thought was punctuated by the appearance of several colorful, dancing lights—little motes of energy, as they appeared to him. He observed for some time, then resolved to go deeper.



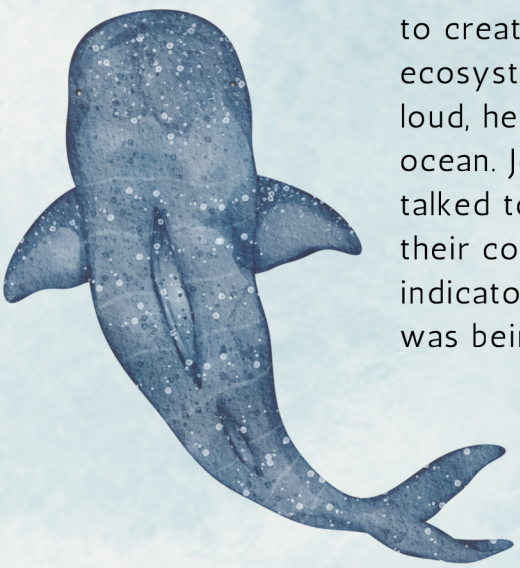
There, they grew more numerous. As he traveled, the sprites around him blended into shapes, folding in on themselves and wrapping around each other with impossible geometry. Triple helixes blossomed into dodecahedrons which spiraled into each other and broke apart into triple helixes once more.

Sprites. He chastised himself for using such an unscientific word. He'd reflexively identified the strange lights as alive, comparing them to fairies. Maybe Pierre was right about coming back with a scanner. Did they react to radiation? Other lights? Jonas decided to spend some time traveling back and forth, observing the lights blend into shapes which only revealed themselves as he moved between layers. He theorized that they were a multi-dimensional superstructure and spent some time traveling between the planes, trying to sketch out the way the shapes were connected to each other. It made his head hurt.

The part of him not conducting the scientific process was utterly captivated by the beauty of these things. He felt even more determined to see the true shape of it all, but the more he tried, the more he could only see fragmented, kaleidoscopic messes of color and shape. He was almost too captivated to notice the lights diminishing in number. He stayed still once again and watched the lights around him disappear. There! On his layer, he saw something briefly materialize: a brief flash of blackness against the dancing lights. It was there for a second, and then gone. The lights that had been there before were also gone. Jonas decided to follow it.

He traveled deeper, trying to match speeds with the mystery object in the hope that some of its shape would be revealed like the lights. By the time he achieved this, he was too exhausted to filter his imaginative impulse. A gaping maw was all he could see before him– a sphere of black, peppered with cold lights. He swam alongside it. His vision warped as he gazed at it. Against the perfect black of the void, the pit appeared to him as a portal filled with constellations, a piece of starry night–a slice of the abyss adorned with white, crystalline teeth. Around the edges, he saw the same teal color. It left behind a path of empty space as it carved through the colorful superstructure.

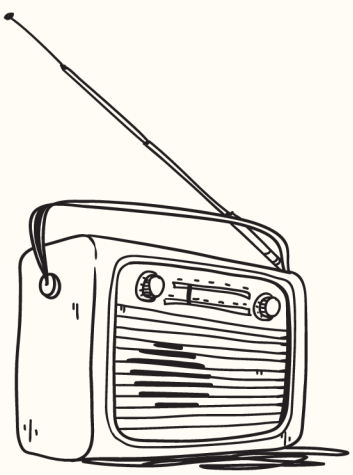
As Jonas gazed, he could only see one thing. He knew it was ridiculous. He knew it wasn't true. He didn't care. This place was cruel to his mind. It didn't care about his processes of reason. Why should he? It was a whale. The lights it devoured were krill. He threw out all his other theories and efforts and accepted this as the truth.



As he watched the whale feed, Jonas began to create new theories about this aquatic ecosystem deep within the cosmos. Babbling out loud, he observed it swimming through the black ocean. Jonas spent hours following the whale. He talked to it. He asked it questions. In the midst of their conversation, a sudden jerk. The oxygen indicator on his suit was flashing orange, and he was being dragged away from his new friend.

And then Jonas was a boy. It was his 11th birthday. He was running across the moss hills behind his New Earth home. After a day of flying kites over the heat vents and touring the machinery of his biosphere, he and his father raced back home. There, his father handed him a box. It didn't look like presents usually did. It was made of metal, and adorned with strange dials and a long antenna.

"This," his father said, "is a radio from Old Earth. It's been in our family for generations." His father flipped it on, unleashing a tide of white noise from the old, barely functional speakers. Jonas was amazed. "Your job," his father handed him another box with an assortment of tools Jonas didn't recognize, "is to take it apart, figure out how it works, learn what all the different wires and buttons do, and then put it back together perfectly." Jonas' eyes were wide with excitement. "You see, you can read as many books as you want—but true understanding comes when you know how to take things apart—look at them on a deeper level, and connect them to a greater whole. That's the key to understanding everything."



"Everything?"
Jonas' father ruffled the boy's hair.
"Everything."

Pierre couldn't tell me exactly how long Jonas' brain had gone without oxygen. He explained that the suit should have started bringing him back in time, but it was clear he had been using oxygen faster than the auto-return could account for. It was calibrated for the

slow, controlled breathing of a trained spacewalker.

"This 'auto-return,' why didn't it take him back right away?" I asked Pierre.

"Ah, It's not teleportation. The distance he must've traveled in that dive, that's a real distance. It's in a direction that doesn't exist within our perception, but a direction all the same.
When the auto-return triggered, it had to backtrack all the way through the 4th-dimensional space he had traveled into. Have you heard of scuba diving? It's a thing they loved to do on Old Earth."

I shot him a puzzled look, but tried to recall. "That was, uh, people would swim underwater? But with a space suit? So they could breathe?"

Pierre laughed a bit, and then corrected me: "Ah, almost! They didn't need to wear space suits, just an oxygen tank on their back, but yes, that's the idea. Well, when a diver needed to come back to the surface from the bottom, they needed to swim all the way back up. I know it's not a perfect analogy, but it's how I've preferred to think about this. Well, I had calibrated the auto-return to calculate how much reserve oxygen would be needed based on the distance from the tether, if you're following, but—"

"All it takes is a couple minutes without oxygen to cause brain damage."

Pierre nodded, and walked over to Jonas, still sitting in the corner. Now he was perfectly still, with a loose grin and blank stare on his face.

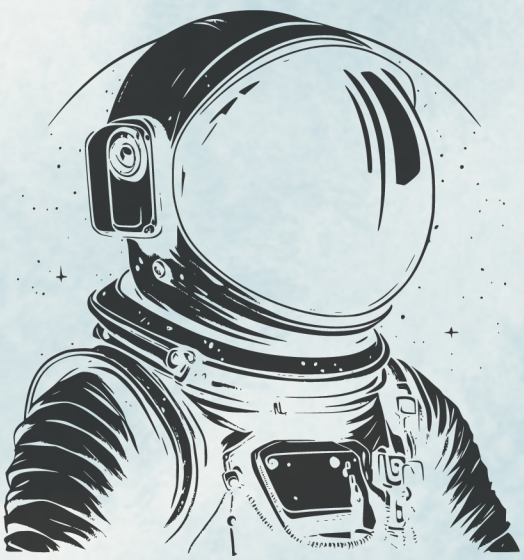
"And why would he have been using oxygen faster than anticipated?" I asked. "I'm assuming he was some type of trained spacewalker."

The uncle didn't answer, instead just awkwardly shuffling around. He knew why, he just really didn't want to say. Didn't trust me yet.

"Listen, I'm just trying to figure out exactly what's going on out here while still keeping things under wraps. Discretion is what we're after here. You're not in trouble. Your dive technology is only a tertiary interest– don't think that you're the only person who's been messing around with this stuff."

A small pang of sadness ran through his face when I mentioned that. "Okay." He recounted the story of his panicked conversation with Jonas mid-dive, the mention of something that might be alive, and Jonas's insistence that he go back and figure it out. He couldn't say how much of the damage was oxygen deprivation and how much was from whatever the boy saw in the deep.

"Thank you." And I was gone.



Koi Watercolor

by Aisa Uchimura



Scars Unfounded

by Elisabeth Gaffney

Never once was she uncrowned
A royal's heart, with love unbound

Although her words were screamed so loud
Transpired only a whisper of sound

Thickened blood caused a sudden swoon
Only to meet an empty wound

She grit her teeth in a mental girth
A futile attempt at securing her worth

She pushed herself up off the ground
Knowing she'd leave her scars unfound.



Lately, Ive Been Rewatching Ugly Betty

by Mia Herrera
Non-Fiction

My sharpest memory is of my first day of seventh-grade algebra. I cut across campus in the stale August heat, my thick bookbag slamming against my back and scoliosis brace. It was slow in its rhythm, like the creeping of sweat pooling into stains under my pits. 8:30 am. That's when my first period began, but they didn't let us out of the cafeteria – our holding cell for arriving too early – until 8:20 am. That meant I had precisely ten minutes to sprint from the entrance all the way to the back of Walter C. Young Middle School, where Building 14 was.

I couldn't tell you where Buildings 11-13 were, even now; but apparently they existed somewhere on campus. That's why Building 14 was in the very corner of the school's boundaries with zero shortcuts available. No matter what, you had to race to get there. Later in the year, it was very common to see students running across the lawn to get to Mrs. McCarthy's class on time in Room 1408. She was my English teacher for that year and she would put your grade down if you arrived even a minute late. Personally, I think she liked watching the kids run.

But on the first day of school, I arrived at Mrs. Kaplan's algebra classroom with four minutes to spare. Scanning the half-filled room, I locked eyes with my friend Kacey across the room. I sat in the closest desk I could find near him. The sprint caught up to me at that moment, I was heaving and sweaty.

Great.

To my right, was a blonde girl I'd never met before. There were two things I immediately noticed: her face, which was round and pale like the moon, and her cherry-apple scented perfume which instantly wafted toward my booger-encrusted nose. Her eyes flitted to mine, and she

smiled. My lips split into a grin as I smiled back, revealing my braces.

"Why's your forehead so greasy?" she asked.
I would later learn that her name was Grace Thatcher, and that she was everything I was not. Every day of seventh grade, I sported a pair of thick square glasses that made my eyes all beady, braces that made my lips protrude into a Neanderthal form, and a scoliosis brace that made what little shape I had even less noticeable, more rectangular.

Grace had the silky beach waves compared to my frizzy dull strands, a mature chest compared to my massively underdeveloped one, and Kylie Jenner lipstick I didn't know how to use, let alone afford. She was astutely aware of her position and *loved* to rub it in.

Grace was not discriminant with her victims, and for that I was grateful. She liked to point out things about yourself that you weren't already aware of – like a greasy forehead. Like I did, she understood her power, that being rich and pretty afforded her a higher ground. Being rich meant she could be nasty to her friends and they'd still want to be around her. Being pretty was an assurance that she couldn't be treated the way she treated others.

The last day of eighth grade was the last anyone heard of her, even the two friends who still tolerated her. Every now and again I'll look up her Instagram in a ratty way, hiding my ugly curiosity under my bed sheets. Every time she's still rich, she's still pretty. I don't really hope for anything different. Sometimes life isn't fair.

I think about her years later, just as I think about her now. Most recently, I thought about her when I went to USF for a Research and Scholarship Conference. The dress code was business casual and I was

starkly on the wrong side of it. My cheeks flushed as I was stuck in this inescapable van on the highway, surrounded by nine other honor students who knew what they were doing. When I had first arrived, my friend Alexis looked me up and down with barely hidden disdain.

"Did you at least print out your CV?" Alexis stared at my Vans, particularly at the scuff marks on them.

I shuffle my feet a little, moving my weight uncomfortably. "No, the email said we didn't need it anymore." I open the email again as if I needed a shield for my words.

Everyone else had theirs printed out just in case. They also wore well-fitting slacks and nice blouses. I was in blue jeans that I had to keep up with a hidden shoelace, and the nicest plain shirt I could find. I sat with my hands folded in my lap and slick with sweat, trying not to listen to these women go on about the research opportunities they were applying for – their noble dreams and aspirations.

And there I was, the little artist.

The conference had lengthy philosophical discussions, etiquette training, and informative presentations. I could only think of my scuffed shoes.

As we walked back to the van at the end of the day, I thought about Grace when one of the girls looked at me like I had just killed her dog. She had told us of a scholarship she was part of the committee for and complained about the standard of the essays she had to read. They were smart kids, but they didn't understand how to write in the way that scholarships wanted.

I had then suggested that maybe not everyone knew how to present themselves in essays because they lacked the chance to learn.

"There's resources they could find," she scoffed. Her ears moved with her scrunched-up face, the gold earrings laced between her flesh jingled softly.

I had a million responses to say back, like: "What if they don't have time to do that? What if they work full-time, or even part-time in addition to being a full-time student?" or "What if they didn't know that these secret codes, the people born in high places set, even existed at all? Where do they start to look?" or "So, even if a student did absolutely everything else right – perfect grades, lots of experience, and poured in years of *hard, hard work* – you wouldn't accept them? Because they didn't fit your 'style'? Is that correct?"

Instead, I stayed silent as my lips split into a grin. She ignored me and continued to complain.

I still have thick, albeit well-fitting glasses and absolutely zero cleavage, but my gum-shredding braces and cage of a scoliosis brace have since been left behind with seventh grade. I think of that girl though, who entered algebra class scared and sweaty and incapacitatingly self-aware. I wish I could have been there to tell her she should be proud she was learning algebra at twelve years old, and excelling no less. That she just needed time. I don't think she would've believed it, but I would try.

I think of Grace when people reek of privilege, whether it be from money, looks, or a sense of superiority for being part of the snobby academic elite.

I will never be rid of those people, I think. Sometimes life isn't fair. But I choose to stand confidently in my blue jeans and black Vans and remember how I earned my spot like everyone else. And I think of that lonely little late-blooming girl.

Magic Image Box

by Benny Cauthen

the disposable camera in my aluminum foil pocket
dusty hipster nostalgia machine for romantics
mirror of the past dream, fleeting and physical
perfectly pure snapping pomelo
long sunsets on summer days
light flash and the mysterious image grows
like colored moss on a boy's bony white back
magic mercurial liquid swirling into form.

at the sleepless youth camp encircled by hills
not rolling but sweating
under straw and quilt blankets
the acetate roll found twenty exposures
and my memory as sweetly sunburned.

a schoolyear room guards the plastic shrine
then single simple moments wilt like grass
under silver scissors or dry dirty sun flame
my unframed teenage golden days
mangled before their bloom

i'll never see the fruit of my film.

At 2 in the Morning

by Maria Bettis



Walls of my House

by Troy Goatley
Fiction

I have lived in this house for my entire life. It was given to me by my parents, who received it from their parents, who received it from their parents, going back for as long as anyone in my family has kept track. The furniture has changed, of course, new beds and dressers, new mattresses and sheets, new memories put up on new shelves which are part of new bookcases, but the walls. . .the walls have stayed the same. It is the condition of receiving the house, you must promise not to change the walls. They were white when I was growing up here, and have been white since my family has owned it. In over two centuries not one single person has driven a nail into a wall, has hung a poster or covered up these stark, barren, bone-white walls of plaster. Logically, someone must have done something to the walls at some point, there was no plaster back in the 1640s, which as far back as my family can trace the house, certainly none that would withstand that sort of time, and yet every single member of my family swears that the walls are exactly the same as they were when they were given the house. It wasn't normally something I thought about, just an old family superstition, and I paid it no mind.

Then the walls started to move.

I don't know when or where it started, but I noticed the furniture first. It was all slightly off, a little closer together, a minutely tighter squeeze in the rooms. Drawers would open across doorways they didn't block before, or cabinet doors would bump into each other in a new and peculiar way. I thought I was going insane, thought I was paranoid, hallucinating, sick. The people I spoke with agreed, "How lucky you are to have a house at all", they said, "Why would you question such a thing? Even if the walls don't fit, surely you can *adjust*, it's so *selfish* of you to say otherwise."

I *adjusted* far longer than I should have, until I had to turn sideways to get into my bedroom, so illy did I fit into the house, so hostile were its walls and architecture to my body and soul, and oh how *oppressively white* those walls seemed when they were looming over me in the dark, so close that I could feel their eyes on me, eyes that seemed to bore through plaster and drywall and into my mind, telling me to adjust, to make it work, to make myself fit. I adjusted for weeks, crouching under low ceilings, crawling on my hands and knees through hallways that had collapsed into tunnels that looked as solid and as white as though they had always been there. I started to think maybe it was me that changed, maybe the house was perfectly normal and it just wasn't built for me, or maybe I had been ungrateful, maybe I should just be happy to have a house at all. I told myself this so often I started to believe it, and things seemed better when I believed it, when I just followed along and conformed to the new bends and angles the deathly white walls demanded from me. This worked until I heard the first crack.

The first crack was a toe, foolishly pushed too close to the base of the wall as I leaned back like a gymnast to sidle my way through a hallway, and as the wall shifted, my toe did not, until it was forced out of the way. I screamed into the walls, into the hallway that seemed far too long, leading from a room I couldn't remember to another I didn't recognize, and the walls *laughed* at my pain. I tried to push through, to keep going, and the walls shifted again, twisting my foot around until my ankle snapped and popped. I'd have collapsed, but the walls fit too tightly around my body to allow even this small mercy, they pressed against me and held me in place as I screamed and cried and shoved against the walls with every ounce of rage I could conjure.

The walls kept laughing at me, kept pressing closer until I had to turn my face to the side, I felt a shoulder pop out of its socket and let out another useless scream, grasping blindly for something, anything, to tear the walls down. There were no hammers, no nails, but there was something, there was the sharp, splintered bone of my leg stabbing through the flesh of my ankle, and in a last fit of desperate rage, I drove that bone into the wall as far as it could go. The joy I felt when I heard that wall *scream* was beyond anything I had imagined, and it pulled back far enough to let me use my hands and nails. I tore through the wall until the plaster crumbled and I finally saw the eyes I had felt for so long.

The wall was filled with bodies, pressed against each other in impossible contortions, faces twisted in silent screams, and as the air hit the torn ruins of their skin for the first time in centuries, every eye turned as one to face me. Hands came next, clawed, spindly fingers with the flesh peeled off them to expose muscle and tendons came crawling out of the wound in the wall by the hundreds, and I stumbled backwards, dragging my hurt leg behind me as I stumbled into my bedroom.

I can hear them now, pounding and scraping against the locked door, scratching inside the walls, but I will not fear them. I thought it was fear keeping me here, telling me that things would be okay if I just kept going, but it wasn't fear that got me out of bed when the walls pressed against me so tight I couldn't breathe, it was hope. No matter how tightly they build these walls, hope will trickle through the cracks like water, filter through the ceiling like sunlight, and when all I have to resist the walls are the shattered remnants of my broken body, it will be hope that pushes me, kicking and screaming, through the walls and out the other side, because I know that there is another side. It's out there, waiting for me, and all the scratching claws and gnashing teeth these walls can muster will not keep me from it. I will see it soon.

Lesser of Two Evils

by Madison Conway



Lesser of Two Evils

by Madison Conway



Vampire Burial

by Riley Johnson
Fiction

The Mother of Mercy watched her. Her eyes seemed to follow Sister Blanche as she moved. Sister Blanche was long used to it. The patrons of the day, a young well to do couple, scanned the empty pews cautiously as they talked over the coffin. The Mother's sun tinted gaze shone over the pair, slowly receding. Edith laid between them, resting in her coffin, more peaceful than she had ever been in life. The dirt from her exhumation fell softly, dirtying pristine wooden floors. Clara rolled a strand of her sister's hair between her fingers.

"We can crush her legs."

Clara looked up at Sister Blanche, aghast. Her husband, Silas, looked at Sister Blanche with a similar expression of abhorrence. Where Clara's voice had been raw with her tears when she spoke, Silas' was as smooth as ever. "I'm sure there are more humane ways."

"Several," Sister Blanche said. She motioned to Edith. "We could put a scythe blade over her neck to chop off her head should she rise. We could place a stake through her chest. Those are both quick and effective. Or perhaps-"

Silas cut her off. "We could put a stone in her mouth. To keep her from closing her mouth."

"And we could unleash a scourge of the undead upon the city." Sister Blanche resisted the instinct to roll her eyes. Barely. "If you would like to." She sighed. "You wanted my opinion, Mr. Price, and I have given it to you. This is my suggestion; we lay her face down and tie her legs, so that she cannot escape upward, nor can she run."

He seemed to turn the suggestion in his head as his wife clutched onto his arm. Through red-rimmed eyes, she looked at Sister Blanche, as if she could see right through her. There was a seriousness in her expression, one which Sister Blanche had rarely seen in women like her. "Are you sure this would keep her down?"

Sister Blanche ran her thumb over the top bead of her rosary. "We have never had a vampire rise in our graveyard. If she were to rise, there would be no way for her to escape by herself."

Clara held Sister Blanche's gaze and gave a weak nod. "I understand. I entrust my sister to you."

"Thank you, Mrs. Price. Your trust means more to me than you know."

...

Clara followed Sister Blanche out the back door of the church. Edith's plot stood empty on the top of the hill and Clara could not escape the day she had first climbed it. She gripped her lantern tightly as the sun set over the top of the tree upon the hill. A group of men followed closely behind them carrying Edith. Clara had never seen them before, but they wore matching rosaries to Sister Blanche. She supposed the church had hired new men.

Sister Blanche had been more than accommodating to her already; the church rarely did vampire burials and even more rarely did them so covertly. To call for something like this would be to risk the reputation of her family, and Sister Blanche had kept it under wraps. She didn't call Clara crazy for feeling something was wrong, unlike Silas and her father. If Clara remembered correctly, Sister Blanche had been rather close to Edith, and Edith alone. When Edith was younger, she and Sister Blanche had sat together and talked for hours after church, until nearly Edith's curfew. Perhaps that was why Sister Blanche had listened.

The Sister stopped beside Edith's headstone, resting her hand on the top. She brushed a stray leaf off the top. Clara watched as it drifted downward into the bottom of the pit where Edith was to be laid again. How lonely it must be. She gripped her lantern tighter.

The men set Edith into the pit mechanically, with little finesse or grace. With a nod from Sister Blanche, they set back down the hill with the same precision. "Would you like to give any final words?"

"Good night, sister." Clara dropped a flower onto the coffin. "Maybe we shall meet again some day."

On the first night of Edith's burial, Clara sat by her headstone until dawn.

...

There had been no reason Blanche could find as to why Clara would suggest Edith was undead. No grave sounds or scents, no soil disturbances, and there was not even blood on Edith when she was exhumed. There was nothing to indicate Edith was anything other than dead. Yet, Clara Price insisted Edith be exhumed and examined.

It made no difference. Edith was still dead.

Silas stared at his wife across the carriage, her hands crossed delicately on her lap. "Are you satisfied now? She's dealt with."

Clara glared at him, her lips turned into that sour pout he always hated.

"Do you have to be so rude? I know you were never a fan of Edith, but she was still my sister." "It's not that," Silas said to her. "It's the insistence to pull her out of the ground for no reason." He shook his head. "She's dead. You saw her from her death until her burial. There was nothing wrong with her." Clara looked out the window and Silas ran a hand through his hair, "You're being paranoid."

Clara scoffed. "And you're being a prick."

Clara said nothing else for the rest of the ride back to the manor.

...

On the third day of Edith's burial, long after Mr. and Mrs. Price had left, Blanche climbed the hill to Edith. She stuck her torch into the grass beside the headstone and paused, standing against the light of the setting sun. With a sigh, she took her shovel to the ground.

Blanche wasn't sure how long she dug before hitting the wood of the coffin lid. She knelt down on the side of the hole and dug her hands into the dirt around her until she found the lip. As her hand met the gap between top and bottom, she moved backward and gave it a firm tug. Soil fell toward her as her pull was met with a push from inside.

Edith clawed her way out through the gap, falling onto the lid beside Blanche. She coughed into the soil and Blanche patted her back softly. Clumps of dirt and congealed blood and mucus fell from her chapped lips.

"It's always like that in the beginning." Edith glanced at her, brown eyes red in the light of the torch and skin deathly pale. Blanche brought a hand to her cheek, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "I'm sorry it took so long."

Edith took Blanche's hand in her own, turning it over between hers. "You're here."

"I'm here."

"This isn't another dream?"

"I'm here, dear." Blanche brought Edith up to stand on the coffin. "I'm for real." Edith pulled Blanche in for a tight hug as the sun rose over the steeple behind them.



If I Was

by Trayten Wilkins

If I were the Adam to your Eve
I would've fallen even harder than you could have conceived
I would have torn my ribs out myself
And offered them to you
As if you were my own goddess
A gift from on high
Blessed like Nefertiti
As regal as Calypso
Poignant like Aphrodite
I'd buckle as your hips sow.

If I were the Adam to your Eve
I would've devoured the fruit
Seeds and all.
I would've sunken from the tide of love
That came pouring with the fall.
I would've pressed the flesh to my lips
And wondered what it would've been like to taste yours
I'd give up eternity and immortality
To kiss them just once more.

Oh, if I was the Adam to your Eve
I wish that first, I'd have died
So that I never had to witness
The final closing of your eyes.
I'd have held you to my soul
And kept you on my skin
And forgot to repent to God
For my first, most loving sin.



Snowfall

by Madeleine Feldman

In the bright snow that glittered under the navy sky,
The two women, frozen in the cold, started a waltz.
Nothing heard, nothing seen
As reality seeped away.
Their muddy boots moving in the snow
Their coats fluttering about
As the snow fell.
They laughed at the wind
Watched each other's faces blur
Neither afraid of being buried
For they would be buried together.
Their laughter continued.



30 Second Gestures

by Aisa Uchimura



The Farmer

by Madison Rosencrantz

Fiction

I woke up disoriented, my senses muffled, and my body cold. The ground beneath my feet was uneven, and I could feel myself sinking into the damp earth. My entire body screamed in protest as I was attached to a post. My muscles were sore, and my legs wobbled beneath me as if I'd been standing for hours. It felt as if they were barely able to support my weight. My first instinct was to rip away the scratchy fabric sack over my face, but my arms wouldn't move. They were bound by a coarse rope that dug into my wrists. I tugged, and the pain shot through me. Each movement made the rope bite harder, sending waves of fresh agony up my arms.

Where the hell was I?

I felt my heart start to race as it pounded against my ribcage. The sack over my head was stifling, and the air inside was thick, suffocating, and heavy with the smell of damp earth and rot, like the sack had been left to fester in a forgotten corner for too long. The stench of mold clung to the inside of my nostrils, so strong it made my stomach churn, each inhale feeling like I was breathing in decay itself. The fabric scratched at my forehead, irritating my skin, and I could feel tiny bits of the material breaking off, sticking to the sweat that slicked my face. I tried to yank myself against the rope, but the bindings didn't budge. My wrists were slippery with sweat and blood, making the ropes chafe even worse. The friction was relentless. The harder I fought, the more the bonds seemed to constrict, biting into the tender flesh. I tried to scream, but my mouth was gagged, only muffled whimpers escaping into the fabric. My heart pounded in my chest as I twisted and pulled, but the ropes were too tight.

I was at someone else's mercy.

I couldn't see, but I could hear. The stillness of the open field was broken by the rhythmic hum of cicadas, their steady chorus rising and falling like waves. A soft breeze rustled through tall grass, making it hiss and whisper as it brushed against itself. Somewhere close by, I heard the steady, rhythmic flapping of wings. Birds. They were circling me.

I felt a shiver run down my spine. I didn't know why, but something about their presence twisted my gut in a way I couldn't explain. I tried to piece together how I had gotten here. Images flickered in my mind, working many jobs for the locals and spending my days toiling in the nearby farms to make ends meet. But there had been a man.

The Farmer.

His face was a blur, but I remembered his eyes. Cold. He had hired me. That much I knew. Beyond that? Nothing. My head throbbed as I struggled to recall the details. The hours stretched on, the sun baking the burlap over my face. I felt the sweat trickling down my back, but I couldn't move to wipe it away. The birds grew bolder, their flapping wings closer now. I could feel their tiny talons digging into my shoulders, sharp beaks pecking at my clothes, pulling at the straw that seemed to poke out of my sleeves.

Straw?

Why was there straw in my clothes? I thrashed harder against the ropes, but each movement only made the birds more aggressive, their relentless pecking sending sharp jolts of pain through me. What was happening to me? The birds started to scream, a cacophony of shrill warnings, cawing as they tugged at my clothes and skin. I winced with every peck, but I couldn't swat them away. It was like they knew I was helpless and that I couldn't stop them. Each prick of their beaks made me feel more like the thing they were treating me as.

A scarecrow.

I winced at the pricks of pain, trying to shake them off, but they clung tighter. I felt one of them dart for my face, its claws scraping against the sack and onto my cheek, and I cried out. But something wasn't right. Why aren't they afraid of me? The sky dimmed, signaling the approach of night, but still, I stood there, unable to move. The field around me fell silent, which was somehow worse.

Then I heard it, a distant crunching sound, like boots on dry grass. I stiffened, straining to hear more. The footsteps were slow, deliberate, and growing closer. A surge of hope coursed through me. Someone was coming. They would see me, free me. I tried to shout, but my voice was still trapped under the sack.

The footsteps stopped a few feet away. I heard the unmistakable sound of wood hitting the ground, followed by the rustling of fabric. The crunch of footsteps started again, closer this time, and then stopped. Suddenly, I heard something that made my blood run cold, a low, gruff voice humming a familiar tune. I recognized it instantly.

The Farmer.

I thrashed against the post, my body desperate to move, to fight, but the ropes held firm. I could hear him working nearby, digging into the earth. A metallic clank echoed through the still air, and another post was driven into the ground. Then came the dragging sound. He was moving something, no… someone, toward the post.

I heard muffled cries, weak and filled with terror. My heart raced as I realized what was happening. He wasn't here to free me. He was here to make another. The cries grew louder as the Farmer hoisted the new victim onto the post. I could hear the ropes tightening, the muffled struggles of the poor soul being bound, just as I had been. I tried to call out, to let them know they weren't alone, but the gag kept my voice hidden.

After a few minutes, the cries stopped. The field was quiet again, except for the soft humming of the Farmer as he worked. He was methodical and precise as if this were a task he had done many times before. When he finally finished, I heard him step back, his boots crunching on the dirt. For a moment, I thought he might leave, but instead, I felt his presence near me.

He stopped in front of me, so close I could almost feel his breath through the sack. The birds scattered, fleeing the intrusion of their master. He didn't speak. He didn't need to. I could feel his gaze as if he could see right through the burlap and into my eyes. And then, just as silently as he had arrived, he departed.

For what felt like hours, the field was deathly quiet. But then, the new scarecrow next to me stirred. They whimpered softly, their voice weak, their cries filled with fear. I wanted to comfort them, to tell them I understood, but all I could do was listen. Their struggles grew more frantic. All I could hear was the sound of their body hitting the wooden post in erratic, panicked movements. They thrashed against their ropes, each violent jerk accompanied by ragged breaths and soft whimpers, but it was no use.

We were both prisoners in this field. The night dragged on. The birds returned, more aggressive this time. But birds don't usually attack at night; they are usually shrouded in the quiet of sleep, so what has changed? They pecked at the new scarecrow, tearing at its clothes, its skin. I could hear the flesh ripping, the muffled sobs of my fellow victim growing weaker.

I don't know how much time passed before the cries stopped altogether, but I didn't care. Morning came, but nothing had changed. The sun rose, casting long shadows across the field, and the crows resumed their grim work. I stood there, bound to the post, knowing that soon, I, too, would be nothing more than a forgotten figure in the field.

Somewhere in the distance, I could hear the faint sound of footsteps approaching once again. I strained against the ropes again, but I knew it was futile. There was no escape. I had tried everything, even holding my breath until my chest ached, hoping that something, anything, would loosen the bindings.

The footsteps stopped, once again mere feet away from where I was bound. The sound of fabric dragging across the ground echoed through the silence. The slow, deliberate way the Farmer worked was all so familiar now. He had done this before. He would do it again.

I heard a low groan, weak and barely audible. Another person. They were still alive, still fighting. My chest tightened as I listened to the Farmer humming his same unsettling tune, moving with that same sickening precision. Another post was being hammered into the ground. Another soul was being bound like me, sentenced to this slow, agonizing death. Time stretched on endlessly, and I lost track of the hours. The cries next to me had stopped, replaced by a horrible, haunting silence. Were they dead? I wasn't sure. I was still too numb to care. And then, as the first light of dawn began to creep over the horizon, I heard it again. Footsteps.

Slow. Methodical. Growing closer.

I swallowed hard, my throat dry and raw. The footsteps paused. There was no sound of a new post being driven into the ground, no dragging of another victim. The hairs on the back of my neck stood up as I realized something was different. This time, he wasn't adding another. He was here for something else. I heard the unmistakable sound of a blade being unsheathed. My breath caught in my throat. The cold steel of the blade kissed my neck through the burlap, a delicate touch, almost teasing.

He drew the blade down like he was tracing the line of my spine. I bit down hard on the gag, trying to keep from whimpering, but the fear was suffocating. I could feel the blade lingering, just barely pressing against my skin. He was toying with me, enjoying the power he held over my helpless body. "You're still holding on," he finally said, his voice low and hoarse, but I could sense that it was laced with amusement. "I can feel it... the fight in you." His words slithered into my ears. "That's good. I like it when they struggle."

My whole body trembled, my muscles aching from hours of being bound. My mind screamed for a release that wasn't coming. "Do you know why I picked you?" His voice was soft, almost intimate. I flinched as I felt the burlap brush against my lips as he leaned in closer.

"You don't remember, do you?" He chuckled, a dark, hollow sound that sent a wave of nausea through me. "They never do, but you'll understand soon," he whispered. I searched my mind for answers, grasping at the remnants of memories that felt just out of reach.

"You were always the strongest," he persisted, his tone dripping with a twisted kind of admiration. "Always pushing back, always resisting." His fingers tightened on my jaw, and I winced as the pressure grew. "But now? Now you're right where you belong." I bit down hard on the gag, trying to focus on his words rather than the pain. I couldn't stop the tears that slipped down my cheeks, soaking into the burlap. I felt utterly powerless. The blade returned, pressing gently against my neck. "I could end it all right now," he mused, his voice almost playful. "One quick slice, and you'd be free. No more pain. No more fear. But where would the fun be in that?"

After a few moments, he continued, "You think I'm your enemy, don't you? But I'm not. I'm your salvation." I heard him circle me like he had all the time in the world. "People like you… you walk through life blind. You don't see the damage you leave behind. The lies, the betrayals, the selfish choices." He paused behind me, and I could feel his breath through the burlap, hot against my neck. "It all rots you from the inside. Leaves you hollow." He stepped closer. "I'm here to cleanse you of that. The pain, it's a gift. It strips away the filth, the poison eating away at you." His breath brushed my ear. "You'll thank me when it's over. When you're finally clean."

He gripped the burlap sack, and it loosened. Slowly, he pulled it away. The cool night air hit my face, but I didn't feel relief. I blinked against the harsh moonlight. When my eyes finally focused, I could see that we were in the middle of a vast, empty field. Nothing but endless stretches of land under a black, starless sky. And around us, scattered in the dirt like forgotten things, were wooden crosses. Dozens of them and people hung from them, heads drooping lifelessly, bodies swaying ever so slightly in the breeze. He stepped in front of me, blocking my view for a moment. His eyes gleamed in the moonlight. I couldn't move, couldn't tear my eyes away from the bodies hanging. He walked behind me, and I heard the sound of a blade sliding free of its sheath. I tried to pull back, but my body was still bound tightly.

His calloused hand moved to the ropes around my wrists. With one swift motion, he cut through the bonds. "Run," he spat. His hand lingered near the knife, fingers twitching. "Go on... make it fun for me. Let's see how long you can last!" he taunted. The grin that spread across his face told me all I needed to know. I took off, legs pounding against the uneven ground, the sensation of cold air cutting through my lungs. Behind me, I could hear him laugh, a deep, throaty sound that echoed in my mind.

But before I could even register it, a heavy force slammed into me from behind. The world lurched sideways as I crashed into the dirt, the weight of the farmer pinning me down. "Thought you'd outrun me?" he growled. My limbs thrashed beneath him, but his grip was iron-strong. I gasped for air as he yanked my head back, exposing my throat. His hand clamped down on my jaw. Then, in one swift, brutal motion, the blade sliced into my neck. Pain, searing, blinding pain, shot through me. My mouth opened in a silent scream as blood gushed hot and thick, soaking the earth beneath me. I choked, eyes wide with terror, feeling the world fade into a distant blur.

I shot up in bed, gasping, my hand flying to my throat. The skin there was smooth and untouched, but the phantom pain still pulsed beneath my fingers. My heart raced wildly in my chest as my eyes darted to the window, and there, standing motionless against the pale moonlight, was the scarecrow. Its head tilted as if watching me.



Identifying Thoughts

by Diana Aquamire


Because you are quiet
and quiet. Oh feelings. Soooo many thoughts occur when you are silenced like that. The time
happened for a reason But just so much has happened. My voice was gone for so long it made me so
Something feels off, we're feeling too tired for too long. But then there's feelings. These feelings are not
I cannot stop now. I have to keep going. Things
Because all the good + bad happened for a reason.

Second Date Jitters

by Ryan Manney

Fiction

God this movie is boring, Donovan was thinking about a third of the way through his date. He realized the girl next to him, Kathy, was breathing far too heavily, something he didn't notice across the table on their first date. He even began to think she might be having an asthma attack. They were at the movies now of course. This was part of Donovan's plan on how to always land a third date. As a rule of thumb, you couldn't take a girl out to the movies on the first date, that's too much of a cop-out. Second date movies were still a cheat, but far less so than going on the first date. Make it through date number one and you don't even have to talk on the second one. The only problem was his scoliosis made it difficult to get comfy for the length of the movie. But jeez was this girl just breathing away over there. It's like she knew her nose was congested, practically blocked completely, and she was insisting on breathing through it anyways. Donovan couldn't possibly focus on the movie now.

He started to look around for something, anything to focus his attention on besides the thunderous breath beside him. Darkness. It was a movie theater. What was he thinking? So, he decided to seek refuge elsewhere. After tapping Kathy on the shoulder and mouthing he'd be right back, Donovan heard a whisper from behind him as he stood up to leave. He looked back at Kathy whose eyes were still glued to the screen. *What could possibly be so interesting about this movie?* he wondered. Only then did he notice two old ladies in the almost empty row behind them now lasering Donovan with the gray pools that seemed to be almost falling off their faces. They hadn't been there when he got there. Where did they come from? And why did their eyes bulge so much? Donovan felt seen to say the least. Too seen. Like they could see beneath his skin and were examining his interior bone structure. Brow furrowed, he turned and left the theater.

After what seemed like an acceptable amount of time to be in the bathroom, Donovan reluctantly entered the theater again. Headfirst, slow enough to be looked at twice by any bystanders. As soon as his eyes crossed the threshold, he spotted both of the old ladies, owl-necked, eyes still bulging and fixed on him. Donovan pulled his head back outside and landed on his back against the wall. *What the fuck*, he thought. How'd they know he was coming? Why were they even staring at him?

He poked his head around once more with an imaginary fist in the air behind him as if to clear the room like a military squad leader before the rest of his men ran in. Still staring. He opened the door quickly and put his head down, his eyes stuck to the floor, their eyes on him, as he half sprinted to his seat next to Kathy. He knew they hadn't looked away from him once.

He heard a faint whisper again and only barely glanced at Kathy. Her mouth had fallen open finally giving her poor nostrils a break, but she hadn't said anything.

One more whisper.

Donovan looked at her again, slowly leaned in, slow enough to hear the squeaking of the leather underneath him, and said, "What'd you say?"

Kathy jerked her head around and looked at him with a scared look on her face. She mouthed the word "nothing" and slowly craned her neck forwards, taking her concerned eyes off of him only at the last second.

Donovan looked down and brought his hand to his face. He wiped his eyes and forehead to clean his skin of the slimy anxiety piling up on it. He took a deep breath and slouched back into his seat, pulled down by the growing weight that was latched onto his stomach.

Another whisper. Now Donovan began to breathe loud, almost louder than Kathy sitting beside him. She took no notice. Was it happening inside his head?

Again. A whisper. Loud enough to make out this time. "We can hear you, Donovan."

His spine stiffened so fast it could have straightened out his scoliosis. He felt a presence behind him, reaching its tendrils around the seat and crawling across his body. He squeezed his eyes shut, trying not to move. Salty, sweaty fear beading down from his forehead and dripping off his chin. He knew that if he opened his eyes, he would see what he didn't want to see, what he knew was there.

One tap on his shoulder. His eyelids relaxed and only saw his torso pulsating with breath before looking up to his left.

"Are you okay?" Kathy whispered with tensed muscles.

Donovan scoffed a little and half smiled, trying to catch his breath casually. "Yeah, yeah," in between breaths, "I'm alright. Why?"

"I thought you were having a seizure or something."

Donovan cocked his head back a little, trying to portray a sense of normality, as if what Kathy was asking was totally weird, though he didn't think it was beyond the realm of possibilities.

"No no, I'm fine," he said, half smiling again. Why was he doing that?

"It's just these seats," trying his best to deter her from what might really be going on, "aren't really that comfy."

She frowned instinctually. "Oh, I'm sorry. Well, we could go if it's that bad."

To leave that movie theater was all Donovan wanted at that moment. He couldn't think of a better idea. "Leave before the lights come on? No let's finish the movie," he nodded to the screen. It was a thoughtful gesture, but he knew it wasn't what she wanted. He couldn't do that to the poor girl over nothing.

She smiled toothlessly but warmly at him, and it felt reassuring. He thought he might actually like her if she could get the breathing thing under control.

They both adjusted into their seats a few times before settling down again. But Donovan just couldn't shake this cold feeling. He had goosebumps all over his body. Even below the surface his bones shivered, shaking the marrow inside them. The longer he went without communicating with the real human being next to him, the more he became sure of a sort of unreal presence behind him.

He couldn't help it. Donovan very carefully and as timid as he could lowered his head so that he was looking into his lap. He continued this movement even slower to his left, his pupils pushed as far to the side as possible, desperately pulling his head a little further in hopes to glimpse the two women behind him through the gap in the seats.

What Donovan saw confused him. Two heads, yes, with light gray, dead-looking eyes still staring, but only two arms and two legs. The two women were abnormally attached together. How hadn't he noticed that before? He panned his head around as quickly as he could without startling Kathy next to him and replayed what he saw in his head. He must have been hallucinating the whole time. They're just a pair of conjoined twins. That's what it's called right? It's the only explanation, Donovan was convincing himself.

He began to play off the staring as normal, regular old observing. Think about it. It's a movie theater. He stood up and was in the way, of course they were looking at him. When he opened the door, it's only natural to glance back when the light from outside floods in. Right? And the whispers, he must have been dozing off. This movie was more boring than watching cow shit turn into compost.

Freaking out over nothing, he thought to himself, shrugging his shoulders and willing himself to focus on the damn screen until the movie was over and they could leave. Donovan composed himself until something completely horrible happened. Kathy started to stand up, but the movie wasn't over. She whispered in Donovan's ear, "I have to go to the bathroom," *Oh no*, "Fill me in on what I miss!" The edges of Donovan's lips fell lifelessly. She sounded so innocent. So oblivious to what was going on. What was going on?

Donovan's hands found their resting place in his pockets while his eyes found the screen once more, pleading his mind to take interest.

"Don't worry, Donovan."

The whisper. His lungs emptied. His abs flexed as if flinching from a punch. The wind was knocked out of him. He couldn't breathe.

"It will be okay, Donovan," it said, more drawn out this time.

He found his breath, hyperventilating and thought he might cry. He wanted to get up and sprint out of that god forsaken theater and never come back. He wished so badly he had never met Kathy, never came to the movies and would never come again. But he was paralyzed. A sort of sleep paralysis had taken over him. He couldn't move or talk no matter how hopelessly he begged his muscles to take action.

He became aware of the cold metallic grip around his wrists that was wrenching his arms back and around the seat. He felt icicles creeping around both sides of his neck. He tried to find his voice, but these icicles latched together over his mouth. He wanted to look at the monstrosity behind him, whatever was doing this to him, but his head was fastened forward. When he tried to kick the seat in front of him, his ankles were clamped down. Tears rolled down his cheek and froze when they hit the freezing, alive being covering his face. Donovan closed his eyes, fear bludgeoning his organs. He tried to squirm out of its grip, to scream for Kathy, for anyone.

He felt a miry, clammy, freezing drop of saliva hit the top of his forehead that sent a deep tremble through his scoliotic spine. Shaking out of terror and cold, Donovan pried his eyeballs upward. Teeth, black and the size of elephant tusks were looming above his head. His muscles relaxed as his will to live gave out. What was there to do now? He did not even have a last thought. Only one more painstaking effort to cry out.

The woman directly behind him had soundlessly swallowed him, clean and whole, licking up any trace of blood, guts, or excreted human wastes. She and her conjoined twin next to her grew in size just barely and her twin let out a measly burp.

Neither of them turned around when Kathy opened the theater door to come back inside. Kathy walked towards her aisle, her steps getting slower and heavier with each one as she struggled to spot Donovan in his seat. She trudged disappointingly down their row, hoping to see something left behind. Maybe he was coming back, or maybe he would see her again.

"Wow," Kathy let out with a throaty breath, tears clawing their way up her esophagus. "What an asshole."

The two old ladies in the row behind her looked up and simultaneously, sort of sinisterly, shook their heads. One of them said, "He's not worth the trouble, honey. Trust me."



Sleeping Rough

by Michael Cook



Through A Chain Link Lens

by Michael Cook





Wish for a Worse Dream

by Amalia Yasmeen Ali

Late nights I find my mind
As a hammer head shark
Swimming only for breath.

Moving but never travelling
Asphyxiation
Fetal - folding in on itself

It's not really you in my dreams.
Still glad you were there,
Even in imagined fragments.

A vital replica
Vinegar in the gills
Water as an organ



In Defense of the No Sabo Kid

by Rochellys Vargas
Non-fiction

As children, we are praised for certain behaviors. For me, it was my fluency and understanding of my native language that attracted the attention of the adults in my family. While I was celebrated for my great pronunciation and correct use of grammar, my cousins were made fun of for even trying. A good example of what we in the Hispanic community call a "No Sabo Kid" would be my cousins. This is a somewhat recent term used to describe and at times insult a Hispanic person for not knowing Spanish. The term itself is an incorrect form of saying No sé or I don't know in English. It's a way of mocking how someone who speaks broken Spanish might sound.

Personally, I've always loved being a part of my Hispanic community, but the way that shame and humiliation are integrated into our culture holds many of us back from being able to participate and express ourselves fully. In my opinion, this truly inhibits our interconnectedness, further limiting our potential as a community.

Our culture is so much more than the language we speak, though this is not to say that language has no impact on us whatsoever. At times, it influences the way we think and present ourselves toward the world. It becomes a point of connection and bonding for Hispanic immigrants living in the U.S. and allows us to find support in others who are going through the same situation that we are. Speaking the Spanish language or a Spanish dialect also serves as an identifier of a person's roots, allowing people of the same descent to better recognize each other in foreign places.

However, the criticism that Hispanic kids who speak little to no Spanish are less culturally aware completely ignores major aspects of Hispanic and Latino culture. It's more about the things we do and how we do them-our values and beliefs. This is what represents us and our culture. Because of this I never really understood how someone could make a person feel less than for not knowing as much about their culture as expected; as if having more knowledge about one's culture makes you a "better" Latino or Hispanic person. I would think to myself, "How could someone who eats the same food as I do, has the same physical features as I do, and possibly has had some of the same life experiences as I do, be that different from me?"

Of course, there are some differences, especially between generations. Not speaking the same language further exemplifies these differences as 2nd generation children feel excluded from the conversations being had in their own homes. Denying them the same access to community and connection their parents had. These differences have become more apparent with time, as the longer a family lives in a given area the more likely they are to have adapted and assimilated to their environment. As time passes, the children of these families learn more English and lose touch with their own roots. But imagine that every time you attempted to even engage with any part of your Hispanic identity, you were belittled for not knowing enough and put on the spot to prove your "Hispanicness". This alone would deter anyone from wanting to further educate themselves on the ideas and beliefs of the people who came before them. This shame drives people to shutter away hiding certain parts of themselves.

This along with other factors is what contributes to more detached members in the Hispanic community. If parents are dealing with the struggles that come with learning a new language and living in a new country, they might want to alleviate that pressure on their kids by speaking more English. Which in theory, would allow their children to more easily adapt to their surroundings and have an easier time in school. The natural side effect of this is the loss of the Spanish language in the home.

Unfortunately, this is the sad reality that many families live with, something that has been historically reinforced by the world around them. With states such as Texas even having banned speaking Spanish in public schools and severely punishing students who didn't comply, doing so up until 1978. And with campaigns like the English only movement coming in and out of fashion, it's completely understandable for parents to not teach their children their native language if they believe they will be discriminated against less. These experiences leave scars on the people there to have witnessed them. The world has changed but it is reasonable to assume that not everyone has evolved along with it.

The way we interact with people outside of our culture also brings into question the hypocrisy of this attitude towards No Sabo Kids. If an American or a foreigner were to try to learn Spanish or involve themselves in Hispanic culture, they would be accepted with open arms, encouraged, and supported throughout their learning journey. While the same cannot be said for a No Sabo Kid. The way I would explain this phenomenon would be that people may feel a sense of betrayal from No Sabo Kids not knowing as much Spanish as expected and are therefore viewed as less than.

To use a real-world example, Anya Taylor-Joy and Jenna Ortega are both Hispanic women who work in Hollywood and while at an event where Spanish was being spoken to them but only Anya was able to respond. After this incident, there have been countless videos comparing Joy's Spanish-speaking abilities to Ortega's as to form the narrative that Joy is a better representation of the Hispanic community. These interactions sparked outrage and discourse in the Hispanic community over who can really call themselves Hispanic. With many calling Ortega a poor attempt at representation, taking issue and offense to her portrayal of the Hispanic identity.

While I understand the desire to see yourself and your stories reflected on a screen, the work that people like Jenna Ortega are doing is still remarkably important, even if you believe she shouldn't be allowed to represent this community. She may not be what most consider to be a "stereotypical" Hispanic person, but she still actively represents different aspects of Hispanic culture. As no race or ethnicity can be seen as a monolith, Jenna Ortega's image stands to represent the children of the people who have immigrated here and who have passed down their legacy on to the next generation.

One of the many beautiful features of language is how much it fluctuates and changes with time. The term "No Sabo Kid" hasn't been around for long and we can already see this in action. Right now, we're seeing people identifying themselves with this term saying yes; I'm a No Sabo Kid and these are my roots and experiences as a Hispanic person. I believe that this marks a turning point in the culture and how people are starting to embrace their identities despite perhaps being treated differently in their own community. This shows that this generation is willing and open to educating themselves on their heritage; it's just up to us to show some care and compassion when teaching them. Allowing them to make mistakes without a wave of laughter following right after. We have to acknowledge that if this behavior of discouragement continues many of the cultural traditions that we hold dear and define us are in danger of extinction; further creating a less culturally diverse world.

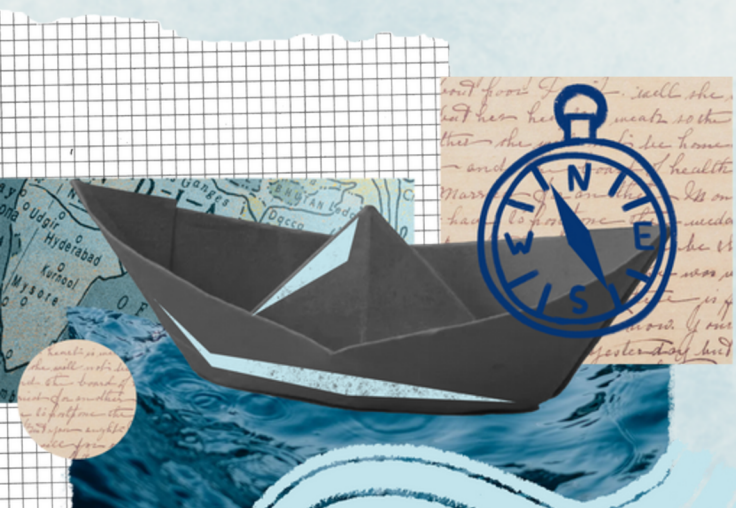
Voyager with Ambiguously Charted Course

by Jack Lewis

Eons pass in a blink sailing on these
Black waves, speckled by other voyagers.
The charted course is unhelpful, enigmas
Written long ago with destinations
Shifting and changing like clouds in the sky.
The black ocean, a labyrinth to cross.

As the lone voyager sails endlessly
Through the sea of stars, home now but a dot
With no destination charted for course
At the mercy of singularities,
Rogue and unseen obstacles, all shrouded
In the dark waves and mist dancing atop.

Though a million miles have gone past
The ocean stays the same and the stars fixed
In place. Signals from others on the sea
Are garbled and seem to tell fantasies
Of promised lands and of desolation.
No lights to guide, the voyager must dive
Down and into the dark, misty ocean.



St. Augustine

by Kyra Beck





Scene Three

by Kate Aydlette
Fiction

On the edge of town, there sat an ancient cart that was stolen-

"I won it fair and square."

You cheated.

"I didn't cheat! My opponent simply had bad luck. What I was trying to bring to your attention is that *my* cart is not ancient."

~~~

On the edge of town, before the forest line, sat a wooden cart covered head to toe in all sorts of greenery. The owner of the cart was a woman who always wore animal masks that only left the mouth and chin visible. Today she had chosen to wear a white bunny mask. She was *also* currently waving at the emptiness of her cart with a smile. The owner slumped down in her chair and rested her feet on the counter as the rain softly hit the ground behind her. A musky scent filled the cart through the cracks in the window.

"Why does the beginning need to be so dramatic?" the bunny owner asked.

It is not dramatic.

"Feels dramatic."

I am setting the scene.

"Then say it's a rainy day. That's a lot easier than what you were doing."

That would be boring. I want them to understand what the world is like around you.

The bunny owner crossed her arms, "Your words and descriptions are gonna get confusing to this "them."

Happy?

"I don't like the title, Bunny Owner. I don't own any bunnies."

It is a placeholder until your name is revealed.

"Do you even have a name for me?"

Of course, I have a name for you.

"Cool, what is it?"

You will find out soon.

"Shouldn't I already know my name?"

Can I get on with the scene, please? Or do you have any more comments about how I am unfolding this scene?

The bunny owner smiled, "Change my title and I will."
~~~

…

How about "the owner?" Or the Vision-

"The owner is fine!"

Wonderful! Can I continue with the scene now?

The owner nodded, "Take it away."

Three knocks echoed through the room as someone hit the cart's wooden windows. The owner swung her feet off the counter, her short blonde hair swishing as she stood up, and pushed the cart windows open with a large smile. In front of her was a young woman who looked as pale as a ghost with long jet-black hair.

"Hi!" The customer said with a shy smile.

"Hiya! How can I help you on this fine *rainy* day?" The owner asked.

"Do you have any ingredients for spells?"

"You're gonna have to be more specific, love."

"Umm," the customer glanced over her shoulder. "Summoning spells?"

"Woof! Dangerous stuff," the owner said before shrugging, "I have one pack of the basic ingredients left over." She bent down in her cart and started looking through her cabinets where she kept anything to do with the spiritual realm. Most of which she had stolen from other vendors.

"Your "them" didn't need to know that."

They already know you stole the cart. That piece of information should not shock them.

"What gives them the right to know my previous actions?"

You are the main lead of the scene.

"What if I don't want to be the main lead?"

"Did you say something?" The customer asked.

"Just muttering to myself!" The owner replied and stood up with the packet in hand. "Yesterday the Queen guards came through and bought up most of my stuff, but happily this is the last one."

"The Queen guards were here?" The customer asked.

"Yeah, but don't be too concerned about them," The owner said and handed the package of supplies over to their customer.

As the owner's hand brushed with the customer's, her body began to lock up-

With a violent motion the owner dropped the package and backed up until her back hit the counter. Her gaze at once snapped to the top of her cart, as her mask's beady eyes seemed to stare at something beyond it.

"No!" The owner growled.

"Are you-" the customer was cut off.

"I am *not* having one of those right now!" The owner yelled at the ceiling.

If you do not have it now, you must do it later.

"Listen I know it's my - *thing*, but you could make it so I never have to do that *thing* again!"

I cannot do that.

"Why not?" The owner yelled at the ceiling.

"Who are you talking to?" The customer asked.

The owner looked back at her customer, then pointed upwards, "Her."

She is not aware of me.

The owner, in a seething tone, said, "You still haven't answered my question."

"Who?" The customer asked.

The owner sighed and picked up the package before roughly placing it in front of her customer. "The one that created the gods, the one that controls all, the one that knows everything - whatever you want to call her."

"You can hear the creator of our universe?" the customer asked.

"Yes, her and the annoying clicking noise that follows her words."

"Is she nice?"

"She's frustrating."

"Why?"

Beneath the owner's mask, she squinted at the customer, "Why do you care?"

"Not many describe the god of gods as frustrating. I'm curious," The customer said.

The owner was quiet for a moment.

Do you want "them" to know what you are thinking?

The owner glared at the sky before looking back at her customer,

"The ingredients will be two gold pieces."

The customer gently put the gold pieces on the counter and grabbed the package. The owner tried to avoid touching her skin again but failed as their hands barely brushed against each other. Her body began to lock up and her conscious began to be pulled-

The owner slapped herself in the face.

"Oh my gods!" The customer said. "Are you okay?"

It is a quick one. Would be over in a second, then you would not have another one for a few weeks.

"No," the owner said.

"Do you need help?" The customer asked.

The owner looked at her, "The no wasn't to you."

"Oh," the customer said. "Did she also make you slap yourself?"

"No, that was all me."

"Then why did you slap yourself?"

"Because she wouldn't expect it."

"What are you avoiding then?"

"What are you trying to summon?"

"This isn't about me."

"Well, I don't want it to be about *me*."

The customer was silent for a moment, "Does she dislike you?"

"What?" The owner asked.

"Does she dislike you?"

"No…no I don't think so."

"Then why are you fighting her?"

"Because she could- she could take it away."

"Take what away?"

"The visions."

"You get visions?" the customer asked.

"A rare curse that she could rewrite so I never had it," the beady eyes of the owner's bunny mask glared upwards again.

"Have you asked her to?"

"Yes," The owner said and looked at her. "She just says she can't change it."

"Have you asked her why?"

The owner was silent.

A moment later, a cat leaped onto the counter. It was pale blue and practically see through, however the most disturbing part about the cat is that it looked like it had been run over by a car.

"What is that?" The owner asked.

"This is my cat Mittens," the customer said and scratched behind the cats' ear. "If your thing is visions, then my thing is seeing the dead."

"Have you ever wanted to not see the dead?"

"Once upon a time I did, but then I realized I could help the spirits I saw move on, and my curse became my purpose. Although I never once thought that it was an ability that could be removed from me."

"Why not?"

"It felt like I was always supposed to be like this. Like I said, I figured out my purpose," the customer said. "Perhaps that's why she can't change your ability. You would not be you without the visions."

"Then why make it so I'm aware of her?"

The customer shrugged, "I don't know. You'd have to ask her." She picked up the cat, then the package, and began to leave as she said, "Thank you for the ingredients. I hope you work everything out with her!"

The owner watched as the customer walked back towards the city.

"You didn't need to talk through her."

I did not. I simply wrote down what she wanted to say.

"Was she right?"

About the visions?

The owner gave a confirming nod.

Yes. I cannot remove this ability from you because it was always apart of you. However, I can make you unaware of me. Do you want that?

"...no."

Okay. The offer exists though if you ever change your mind.

"Why did you make me aware of you?"

I did not want you to deal with your visions alone. I am here to help where I can.

"I assume that means you can't just tell me what the visions mean."

No. I cannot, but that does not mean I can't help you figure out what they mean.

The owner traced the wood of her cart.

"What's gonna happen after this?"

What do you mean?

"I mean my scene is a small part in the bigger picture, right? So, what's gonna happen?"

I do not know yet. I do not always plan these. I write down how I see it most of the time.

"Wait. You can see me?"

Of course I can see you. I see all of you, and your lives, and where they could go.

"Do you like where mine goes?"

I do.

"And I just have to trust that the visions won't kill me one day?"

Yes.

"Will the journey be easy?"

No, but no journey ever is.

"Will it be worth it?"

That is not for me to decide.

The owner takes a deep breath in, and exhales it before asking, "You never gave me my name?"

You went off script by yanking yourself out of the visions, but also you did not introduce yourself to the customer.

"Right. Sorry."

Do not be sorry. I liked this detour.

"Well…I would like to find out my name if you don't mind. Can we take it from the beginning"

Sure.

~ ~ ~

On the edge of town, before the forest line, sat a wooden cart covered head to toe in all sorts of greenery. It was a quiet rainy day, and the air carried a musty scent through the open windows of the cart. The owner of the cart was a woman with short blonde hair, who always wore animal masks that only left the mouth and chin visible. Today she had chosen to wear the bunny mask. Through the beady black eyes of the mask, the owner watched as a new customer walked up to her cart. She was a young woman who looked as pale as a ghost with long jet-black hair. Through the beady black eyes of the mask, the owner watched as a new customer walked up to her cart. She was a young woman who looked as pale as a ghost with long jet-black hair.

The owner took her feet down from where they were resting and leaned out the cart window. "What can I get yah?" She asked.

"I'd like any ingredients you can provide that are related to summoning spells," the customer said.

"I only have a package for your basic summoning spell. Some jerks came in and bought the rest of my stuff."

"That'll hopefully work," the customer said.

The owner tapped the counter and retrieved the bundle of ingredients for a basic summon spell. She placed it in front of the customer and smiled.

"That'll be thirty silver pieces," the owner said.

The customer tilted her head, "Thirty silver? Everywhere else it's at least two gold pieces."

She does not remember the other variation of this scene like you do.

"I'm in a good mood, and I need more silver for change," The owner said.

The customer hesitated, but didn't argue, then asked, "Are you always located here?"

"My cart is, but I'm not always here. I move around a lot," The owner said with a shrug.

"You just leave your cart behind?"

"Yup! The cart wasn't mine to begin with and making sales is more of a hobby. Plus, I like to hit the road before I'm told to beat it."

"Why would people tell you to leave? You're barely in the city limits."

"They think I'm crazy because I see the world differently than most people, and they don't like that."

The customer paused, "And you don't wish to change that?"

The owner gave her a soft smile, which was a bit off putting when paired with the beady eyes of her mask, "Not anymore. Why do you ask?"

The customer looks down at her feet before smiling, "Most people I meet would want to change it in a heartbeat. You're the first to say they wouldn't. What's your name?"

The owner is beaming with joy, "I'm so glad you asked! I was about to ask you. I'm…" she looks up.

Tara.

The owner looks at the customer and holds out her hand happily, "I'm Tara."

With a chuckle the customer replied with, "Nice to meet you, Tara. I'm Quinn."

"Do you need anything else today, Quinn?"

"No. I'm fine. Thank you," Quinn takes the package of ingredients, "But if this all goes terribly wrong, I'll be sure to seek you out again."

Tara gives a little wave as Quinn leaves and smiles as she props her chin on her hand. She looks up at the sky and sees a blinking black cursor that is the length of a building beyond the gray clouds.

Her eyebrows raise up a bit, "That's a bit meta."

That was the idea.

"You're more like a voice in my head than a cursor in the sky."

The cursor fades away.

I thought because you kept looking up-

"I looked up because that's what most do when talking to god-like figures," Tara closes the cart doors, "Tara's not my real name right? I think I might prefer the title bunny owner."

No, it is just a fake name. Your real name is a reveal for later in the story.

"Good. I don't look like a Tara."

Eh.

Tara rolled her eyes, "Whatever. I thought this version of the scene would be more action packed for me?"

Is that what you are so grumpy about?

"A tiny bit."

I figured since you fought me on the visions last time, I would save them for later.

"Oh. Thank you."

You are welcome.

"What now?"

Like you said, making sales is your hobby. However, you can stay here for a bit if you want and just enjoy the rainy afternoon.

"And deal with the immediate, and confusing, shift to a whole different location? No thanks."

Tara grabbed her bag, her money, and other animal masks.

She paused, "Is the vision I'm gonna have going to be one of the more violent ones?"

Yes.

"When?"

Once I'm done with scene four, and maybe five.

"And you'll help me decipher it if I get confused."

Yes, but I cannot give you the answer. You must figure that out yourself.

"Okay, then I definitely don't want to skip to the next location."

Tara secured her cart, and headed out the back door towards-

"The woods? Really!"

You are not supposed to be in that scene. Why are you complaining anyway? You used to live in the woods.

Tara was silent for a moment before making a gesture, "...you can continue now."

With little to go off, Tara started her journey through the woods.

The Tongue of A Prophet

by Aien Serrano

I. My god lies caged behind my teeth.

They are restless on my tongue the way that a burning
fire flares from the stars.

II. A boy bathed in his own summer sweat wears the wind like a veil.

The boy is the one feeding his father's flock
And his herd. He combs the mane of his
father's horse
As his mother combed his as a babe.
He breaths out hymns into ticking ears
As his heart beats to the horse's breath.
When at once the clouds fall to the earth as rain
He is the vessel for these pouring prayers



The water slick as anise oil *will* lase the boys tongue with
maranatha.

III. I have kissed shepherds and soldiers with my chapped lips

In hopes that the oil running through them,
The oil that shines on their lips,
Would anoint me too.



Bloom

by Aisa Uchimura





Where The Heart Is

by Benny Cauthen



i recall the cover of a pale melting sun
silent tension producing me, a yawn
sinking dry into the grey beach rocks,
sharp punishment for refusing to ramble.
i sat anxious, waiting for a future home
salt air sticking to skin like rain on glass.

barefoot on holy land gazing at the sea, glassy
and shimmering under revelation's sun
ripening on the shore, 5 more minutes 'til home
the sleepy father lies already yawning
too heavy and buried to up and ramble
his breath is narrow, his voice foamy and sharp.

he sings with heart, but always just a little sharp
inquiring of my soul, his conscience clear as
glass i said *just yearning for america*, scrambling
for escape because i am his quiet teenage sun
breaking glass bottles, while everyone yawns on
bare beds in the last days of family homes.

watching furniture vanish, becoming bored at
home drawing blood on the coral reef sharp
the border country cross the sea yonder
is home to many shades of ancient glass
but i'm following the blaze of the sun
a solar road west on which i am rambling.

yet here instead of changing i'm idly rambling what do
soldiers feel like when they come home? do they want to
kiss their wife and dog and sun or rather yearn for
mountain air--cold, snowy, and sharp? -these images of
light reflected in my glasses on a plane of eardrums
broken with yawns.

remember when moses made the old red sea
yawn? he wasn't too good at poetic ramblings
i think the windows of my soul were made of
glass transubstantiating home to template house
where forks and knives are dusty and not sharp-
i hardly looked up to see the full day sun.
let the middle ramble east beyond me as
goodbye i threw sharp shards of glass
into my only home, the sunsoaked sea.

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FLORIDA ATLANTIC UNIVERSITY
Department of English
Dorothy F. Schmidt
College of Arts and Letters