

ORPHEUS



XLII

A Note from the Faculty Advisor

The editors for this year's issue of *Orpheus* are Crystal Arredondo, Matthew Besoyan, Tristin Bryant, Brayden Cales, Adam Carrillo, Catherine Gonzalez, Venessa Graves, Margaret Javier, Ben Lempinen, Kristen McGuire, Brit Melson, Eris J.M. Melo, and Asmaa Shida-wa. For my first year serving as faculty advisor for the journal, I couldn't have asked for a better team to help usher this issue to print. We had a remarkable number of submissions this year, which also meant a remarkable amount of work for the editorial staff. And yet, each editor reviewed every submission with care, precision, and generosity. From marketing and advertising to reviewing submissions, copy editing accepted works, and designing the layout of the journal, this team came together and made something truly special. I hope you'll agree as you read on.

I'd like to take a moment to recognize each member of the editorial staff. First, our layout team: Kristen, Brit, Venessa, and Brayden. I'm not sure there's a more demanding role to play, and yet each of you embraced the challenge that is InDesign and brought this beautiful issue to print. Thank you so much for your hard work. Of course, your roles extended beyond this team as well. Venessa, you also served as a poetry editor, reading through each submission with your characteristically careful eye. And Brayden, your call for submissions was outstanding and helped put us on the path to receiving the strong submissions we reviewed. And Kristen and Brit, the two of you kept the ship afloat. I can't thank you enough for your leadership.

When it came to marketing and publicity, several team members stepped up in a big way. Catherine, you designed our first poster for *Orpheus* this year. Its elegance certainly set the tone for the semester. We were also lucky to share the Humanities Building's display case with *Calliope* to help advertise our respective journals. Asmaa, I couldn't be more impressed with the space you designed with Kristen. The curation was stunning, and it truly lit up HOB's west wing. Thanks, you two.

Once the submissions poured in, our editors took on specific roles based on their interest and expertise, and I was consistently inspired by the insight they brought to the table. Ben, you wore several hats, reviewing both poetry and prose. You often led the way during our discussions, and I'm really grateful for it. Similarly, Matthew, your thoughtfulness and feedback was tremendously helpful and appreciated. Eris, you offered clarity on many of our submissions, especially several of the poems we received. And Maggie, your passion for several of the selected works really made all the difference in our discussions. The same can be said for you, Adam. You advocated for several pieces to be included in the journal, and without a doubt, this issue is all the better for it. And finally, when it came to the painstaking task of careful revising and copy editing, Tristin and Crystal, you two did a particularly wonderful job reviewing many of the longform prose submissions we received. I knew the contributors were in incredibly capable hands with you both. To each and every one of you: I'm so grateful and proud.

I'd also like to thank Dr. Alicia Rodriguez, Dean of Arts and Humanities, and Provost

James Rodriguez, for their generous financial support. Additionally, thank you to Emily Poole Callahan, Dean of Students, and the Instructionally Related Activities (IRA) committee for the sizable grant that has allowed us to continue to print this beautiful journal, even as costs increase. And a special thanks to Katie Gonzalez and the American Language Institute for their work with the multilingual students whose poems we are proud to publish.

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

Dr. Adam Schuster

English Department

ORPHEUS

Issue XLII

A Creative Arts Journal | California State University,
Bakersfield

Editors

Crystal Arredondo, Matthew Besoyan, Tristin Bryant, Brayden Cales, Adam Carrillo, Catherine Gonzalez, Venessa Graves, Maggie Javier, Ben Lempinen, Kristen McGuire, Brit Melson, Eris Jane Mendoza Melo, and Asmaa Shidawa

Managing Editors

Kristen McGuire and Brit Melson

Layout/InDesign

Brayden Cales, Venessa Graves, Kristen McGuire, and Brit Melson

Poetry Editors

Brayden Cales, Catherine Gonzalez, Venessa Graves, Ben Lempinen, and Brit Melson

Fiction, Creative Nonfiction, and Drama & Film Editors

Crystal Arredondo, Matthew Besoyan, Tristin Bryant, Adam Carrillo, Maggie Javier, Ben Lempinen, and Asmaa Shidawa

Art Editors

Matthew Besoyan, Brayden Cales, Eris Jane Mendoza Melo, and Asmaa Shidawa

ORPHEUS

Issue XLII

A Creative Arts Journal | California State University,
Bakersfield

Humanities Office Building Display Case Designers

Kristen McGuire and Asmaa Shidwa

Publicity/Marketing Team

Brayden Cales and Catherine Gonzalez

Faculty Advisor

Dr. Adam Schuster



Left to Right: (Front) Crystal Arredondo, Adam Carrillo, Brayden Cales, Dr. Adam Schuster, Ben Lempinen, Tristin Bryant, Kristen McGuire (Back) Brit Melson, Eris J.M. Melo, Venessa Graves, Catherine Gonzalez, Matthew Besoyan, Maggie Javier, Asmaa Shidawa

Orpheus Volume XLII published Spring of 2025.

Cover Art: Benjamin Parsons

Orpheus is published annually. The 2025 volume has been made possible by funding from Student Affairs, Academic Affairs, the School of Arts and Humanities, and the Department of English.

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

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

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

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



Poetry

Omar Ahumada

Two Peas in a Pod — 17

Cassandra Allen

My Sunshine Isn't Real — 18

Amber Assi

Elizabeth (In Remembrance of WW2 Survivors.) — 19

Adrian Benitez

The Paradox of Healing — 20

Matthew Besoyan

Sitting on its Shelf — 21

Autumn Bohannon

Space Junk — 22

Kariya Chiang

May Third — 23

Isaac Chipres

At Ease — 24

Little Soldier Boy — 25

Kyounggran Cho

Thank You Today, too — 26

Madison Darwish

Death of the coast. Velella velella, By-the-Wind Sailors — 27

Jelly's Toast — 28

Haru Deguchi

Even from after — 29

Teagan Faulkenburg

The Night of Different Creatures — 30

Olive Garrison

Siquu Gado Hadisgo — 32

Venessa Graves

I see you — 33

Love in Black Tea — 34

Heather Hansen

Mom — 35

No Means NO! — 36

Dallas Hensley

God's Blind Poet — 37

Penny Lanae

Three Days Untold — 38

Madysen Lovejoy

The Blaze of My Sorrow — 39

Eris J. M. Melo

texas, hold these hearts —40

Brit Melson

What a Garden Cannot Mend — 41

Daniel Meyer

The Wood Carver — 43

Jazmine Nicole Pena Cortez

Freesia — 45

Matthew Phengdy

BRING DOWN THE SKY — 46

Joel Plascencia Jr.

He Is Not Your Savior — 49

Dylan Prewett

All You Need Is Love — 51

Eternal Love — 52

Remy

Heaven is a Her — 53

Sophie Rosander

M.A.S.K. — 54

Rolling the Die — 55

Antt Stomen (Simon Cabrera)

Collection Basket — 56

Priscila Tijerina

The Face — 57

Eri Tomioka

Survival — 58

Ngan Thi Kim Tran (Julie)

Viet Nam — 59

Bintou Traore

Sincere Friendship — 60

Olivia Vega

heliotrope at sunrise — 61

Nursemaid's Song — 62

Art

Kirstin Coleman

Life, a balancing act — 65

Presence — 66

Gabriela Esparza

Duality — 67

Madre Patria — 68

Lauren Esqueda

Ramco — 94

unfortunate cowgirl — 69

Teagan Faulkenburg

Weaving Ends — 70

With Your Head in My Hands — 16

Heather Hansen

Act 1: The Illusion of Freedom — 71

Cyber Slave — 71

Jay Harris

Clara Valentine — 72

Valentine Vamps — 73

Xiomara Herrera

Uncover — 64

Josue Mendoza

The Fall of Kaon — 74

V Synthesis Prototype — 75

Sarai Lara Ontiveros

First Encounter — 76

One Last Song — 122

Benjamin Parsons

Legacy of a Thousand Souls — Cover Art

	<i>The Cotton Seeds of Buttonwillow</i> — 77
Joel Plascencia Jr.	
	<i>I, Forgotten</i> — 78
Remy	
	<i>Red Spider Lily to Sakura Blossom</i> — 79
Anna Rinaldi	
	<i>Crimson Snowfall in Technicolor</i> — 80
	<i>Strawberry Short Circuit</i> — 156
Evelyn Rodriguez	
	<i>Gas Station Daisies. Big Sur, California, 2021.</i> — 81
	<i>Sea Cave. Arch Cape, Oregon, 2024.</i> — 82
Samanta Samano Calderon	
	<i>Obligados a Cambiar</i> — 84
	<i>Obligados a Cambiar</i> — 85
Asmaa Shidawa	
	<i>Loki - One piece (Eiichiro Oda)</i> — 86
	<i>Rose teapot</i> — 87
Skye	
	<i>Monster</i> — 88
Jessica Torres	
	<i>JWD: Showdown</i> — 93

Creative Nonfiction

Amber Assi	
	Three Life Lessons: Biology as My Teacher — 95
Alli Berry	
	Mo(u)rning Routine — 98
Alex Biternas	
	When You Consider This Winter — 102
Brayden Cales	
	Contemporary — 104
Mariam Dalqamouni	
	Stressed on a Lab Bench — 107
Mehak Dixit	
	Finding Home Within — 108

Teagan Faulkenburg

The View from Deerfield — 110

Isaias Romero

A Sneaker Head's Walk Towards Freedom — 112

Jhsmari Santos

The Imposter Test — 114

Quiana Llanin Sevilla Esparza

The View of Guadalajara's Downtown — 117

Bianca Villalobos

Experiences of where words fail, music speaks — 119

Short Stories

Crystal Arredondo

Peachy — 123

Lori Bagala-De Marco

Of Her Own Design — 127

Matthew Besoyan

Echoes of Life — 128

Tristin Bryant

Fool Me Twice Shame On Me — 135

Alyssa Flores

The Bird Cage — 146

Penny Lanae

The Withering of a Sunflower — 153

Matthew Phengdy

Elwin's Beginning — 153

Drama & Film

Omar Ahumada

Wherever You Want Me to Be — 157

Jacob Atlai Cota

What Now? — 168

Miguel Juarez Garcia

Chronicles of Astris — 174

Poetry



With Your Head in My Hands
By: Teagan Faulkenburg

Two Peas in a Pod

Omar Ahumada

I want to rip the skin off my flesh.
Tear every muscle and get to the bone,
To get to the source of you.
I don't know what you look like,
every time I try to see you
I only see me.
I feel like a dog chasing its tail.
I can't see you, but I know you
see through my eyes.
I feel you everywhere in me.
I feel you in my thoughts,
I feel you pressing onto my heart.
I hear you when I speak.
For someone so hidden,
you love to show yourself to the world.
Against my will, against my beliefs.
You make the world confusing.
White is black and black is white.
You make every compliment a hidden insult.
You make every victory a loss because
the person sitting next to me did it better.
You distance me from others because
I am not good enough for them.
You make every happy moment a lesson.
Your greatest achievement was that
you made me believe I am not even
good enough for myself.
Somewhere along the way I realized
my reality isn't real.
So neither are you.

My Sunshine Isn't Real

Cassandra Allen

Despite my love for my father, his name—
the one passed from his father to him,
and the name given to my grandmother—
will die with me. My children will not bear
the language of hate that comes with that name.
They will know my mother's name and they will
carry it with them. I am horrified
because my mother is approaching the
age where I'm afraid that I won't give her
grandchildren before it's too late. I am
so scared that I'm entering the age where
I'm too old to bring life into this world.
The continuous rhythm that is me
taking the hormones to realize the
body I want to have is the same one
that may sterilize me and take away
what I've lived my whole life for. I'm praying
every single day that my dream isn't
just a dream. But dysphoria sets in.
I cry about it. I cry about it
all of the time. I just want so badly
to be a mother. My body seems so
useless in the grand scheme of things. I scratch
my arms and I punch my stomach as if
I could beat the demons that have taken
residency inside my body out
and then allow the love I've waited for
to grow within my belly.

Elizabeth

Amber Assi

She talked as if it were yesterday,
The vivid memories flashing through her mind,
Like a stop-motion movie, she watched,
Remembering all the good and bad times.

The sadness in her mother's face,
Knowing it would be the last time,
Bidding goodbye, her voice quivered,
And soon her presence would be replaced.

A dimly lit and crowded dwelling,
Countless refugees her only company,
But even worse was the sound of bombing,
Forever there, horrible and haunting.

Being only a child, she was confused,
Her innocence stood as a lone shield,
But with added years the guard was broken,
Leaving her in a desolate condition.

But she also remembers the good days,
Happiness was found in the simple things,
The joyful singing on Sunday morning,
Braided hair, her beauty-forming.

Gazing up at the ceiling she talked to me,
Reminiscing every small moment and memory,
Then the alarm on her machine started beeping,

Switching out her IV I kept listening.

"I want you to meet someone," she said intently,
To the chair in the room corner, she pointed,
"That is my sister who has been visiting,"
Separated during the war she had been missing.

I thanked her for the introduction,
I only wished I could see her too,
The chair was empty, only a ghost remaining,
No one had come to visit that evening.

To Elizabeth, there was always someone present,
She had never been alone in that room,
One day it was her mother, then a friend,
Her father, brother, and sister again.

And in time I came to realize,
Elizabeth too had never been present,
She had never laid down on that hospital bed,
No; because to her, she had always been—home.

In Remembrance of WW2 Survivors

The Paradox of Healing

Adrian Benitez

All I had to do was listen;
All I had to do was look your way.
If I'd given one more second,
Perhaps life would have stayed the same.
Painful, stressful, filled with sorrow,
But at least we'd be together—
Struggling, surviving, side by side,
Even in misery, we'd have each other.

Now I'm lost in every detail,
In every remark, every little clue.
It all leads back to you,
The good, the bad, the you I knew.
As my heart trembles, my eyes fill with tears,
My voice scratches, choked with fears—
I'm sorry—but my words won't break free,
Trapped in this silence between you and me.

Without you, it's like I'm cancer-free,
My skin glowing, my strength returning to me.
My clothes fit better, my confidence grows,
Falling in love with myself, watching it show.
I prioritize my health, I push through the pain,
Cancer-free, but still, I remain...
A shell of myself, somehow incomplete,
Alive, yet dying, a heart that won't beat.

Sitting on its Shelf

Matthew Besoyan

A story is not a story
If you tell it to yourself.
It's just an inner monologue
Put up on a shelf.

This magic unto yourself.
What a shame that it would be
To leave your story

Sitting on its shelf

It's to the writer to share So,
Stop clutching your pearls and purse.
Every reader alters the meaning
Of the spirit of living verse.

So let your pretties go
And to the world let them burn.
For better or for worse
You have to take your turn.

To share what is inside of you
Self-criticism be damned!
The world needs your tale be told
Despite that it demands

To be a place of common sense
Creativity repressed.
Fighting poetry and love for free
Stanza and verse expressed.

Now what will you set free
To live inside of me
For I am your audience
As you are mine to be.

So please don't keep this beauty

Space Junk

Autumn Bohannon - IG: @milk_lobotomy

I held your funeral

This morning.

And wasted no time

For mourning.

I wore black and brought you carnations

Freshly picked and pink,

Just like Queen Vic—

Then shot your body into space

Inside a space casket.

At times I still think of you—

When I catch your gaze in the mirror

The visions of you ever-fading—

Your end couldn't be clearer.

Much less like a rocket

And more like a tomb

Your silver space casket glinted

Across the sky, followed by

A smoky, white plume.

Say "hello" for me,

To all the burnt-out stars

Who you were like previously

And currently are.

At first, I thought I'd bury you beneath me,

But you always wanted to be peaking

And now peeking down at me

Rubbing elbows with satellites,

Smiling ear-to-ear, painfully contrived.

And getting lost in the cosmos

For that, I almost envy you,

Though still can't conjure sorrow.

Not in this life, maybe the next

In your space casket, unable to puff out your chest.

May Third

Kariya Chiang

I remember screaming
or what felt like screaming
because it felt
like I was watching
my worst memory
the worst moment of my life
happen in real time
Like I'd just watched
my world lose its color
its oxygen
its soul
Like I'd just lost
what kept my feet on the ground.

I remember screaming
as though if I screamed
louder
harder
and with pools of despair
I could bring the life
back to her eyes
As though if I held on
longer
tighter
and with all my desperation
I could somehow
keep her on this Earth.

I remember screaming
at the dichotomy between
the young, playful
epitome of life itself

walking through the doors
as I dragged myself out
and the young, playful soul I left
on the examination table
along with my 16 years
and 1-day-old companion
never to walk out the doors
with me again.

It's a feeling I can't explain
or describe
because no words will
ever be enough to cover
the thousands of pages
of sorrow
I have carried all this time
The thousands of pages
of missing
and foggy memories
of a life loved
replaced
by an all-consuming
world-shattering
grief.

Even when the time comes
when I will get as close
to replicating this grief
as I ever will again
I will still never again
be who I was before
and who I had to become.

At Ease

Isaac Chipres

“At ease,” they said, and I obeyed,
Loosened my stance but never strayed.
Boots in line, hands at rest,
A soldier still, at my best.
“At ease,” they say now that I’m home,
But silence hums like a dial tone.
The war is done, the fight is through,
Then why does battle bleed into
The nights, the streets, the quiet air?
A flash of light—I’m in despair.
Footsteps fall, too close, too light,
I scan the shadows, gauge the night,
Crowds press in—I map the way,
An exit clear, a plan to stay.
“At ease,” they say. If only they knew
how hard that is when war won’t undo.
I left the sand, the blood, the dust,
But it never left—it’s built in rust.
Not on my boots, nor on my hands,
But deep inside where no one stands.
So I stand alone, though no one sees,
saluting ghosts, still at ease

Little Soldier Boy

Isaac Chipres

I pressed my hands against the glass,
Waiting for the day to pass.
The train would come, the doors would part,
And I'd hold the boy who holds my heart.
My little one, my laughing son,
With skinned-up knees from games he'd run.
No matter where, no matter when,
My baby, he'd be home again.
I bought him flowers, blue and white,
His favorite ones—so full of light.
I'd hold them close, then press them near,
To hide the trembling of my fear.
The sun was high, the sky so bright,
Yet something in the air felt tight.
I reached to touch his hand once more—
But colder now than ever before
My baby's home, but home to rest,
A flag lay folded on his chest.
The flowers I had bought with love
Would lay beneath, not rise above.
He is my son, forever mine,
Though war has drawn a bitter line.
No matter where, no matter when,
One day, I'll hold my boy again

Thank you Today, too

Kyounggran Cho

My children go to school.

Then I drive.

My children exercise.

Then I wait.

My children are hungry.

Then I cook.

My children are sick.

Then I take care.

My children are growing up.

Then I pray.

나의 아이들이 학교를 간다.

그러면 나는 운전을한다.

나의 아이들이 운동을한다.

그러면 나는 기다린다.

나의 아이들이 배가고프다.

그러면 나는 요리를한다.

나의 아이들이 아프다.

그러면 나는 돌봐준다.

나의 아이들이 자라고있다.

그러면 나는 기도한다.

Death of the Coast. Velella velella, By-the-Wind Sailors

Madison Darwish

Jelly lines the pebbles.

along their bodies,

I walk.

Baring the blue onto my sole,

leaving nothing but guts.

The souls of the velella pile here,

coast to coast,

the tides drag them in.

The small birds gather near,

mountains of fish, mountains of tears

From a distance lines of silvery dew,

become the defined shape of you.

Washed up in the waves with others,

oh *so* small

you lie there,

in the slow breeze of it all.

My feet hesitate as I walk

forward,

the rest *crushed* under my weight.

I can't bear to step onto your face.

Gathering your features in,

among the waves and jelly blue caves.

You washed up just the same,

hundreds, if not thousands shore here

But within the wave's embrace was you,

and your cold face.

If I could I'd bring you back,

but I don't have a bill big enough for that.

Jelly's Toast

Madison Darwish

The Moon glows as tide slows,
jellies intertwine and enter lines.
Dance of Maritime.

Through the gaps of trodden lights,
illuminated seashell fights.
Crustaceans circle below,
interested in the show.

Plumes of feathers plucked,
pelican-style dancers.
Adorned in dress, squished in jest.
Cabaret moves under coral's groves.
Lined in chorus of three,
jellies intertwine and weave.
In sexy sloppy beats,
From theatric heat.

Watch intent as they twirl indoors.
Watch intent as they are swept once more.
Off the ground, off the sea.
Jelly's final plea.

*"Keep the moon up above, and keep the
sand dunes in love"*

Morning's come, once at last.
Only remnants of the play's past.
As I walk along the coast,
thousands scream as ghosts.
Washed onto pebbly sand
Lies the dancers of another land.

Even from after

Haru Deguchi

遠くても

君のいない街を歩くと
ふいに思い出がよみがえる
あの頃みたいに笑い合えたら
どれだけ寂しさが消えるだろう

遠くても、心はそばにある
同じ空の下で繋がってる
遠く離れた場で頑張る君を
私はここで応援してるよ

会える日まで頑張ろう
その日まで、お互い前へ

When I walk through this town without you,
Memories suddenly come rushing back.
If we could laugh together like we used to,
How much of this loneliness would disappear?

Even if we're far apart, our hearts are close,
Connected under the same sky.
You're working hard in a distant place,
And I'm here, cheering you on.

Let's keep going until the day we meet again,
Until then, let's move forward together.

The Night of Different Creatures

Teagan Faulkenburg

Moon drunken man,

This is your fate.

As your body bends,

Your body breaks.

The moon does rise,

Your bones all crack.

One by one, each a snap.

Your body turns, your body grows,

This isn't something that you chose.

When the wind howls,

So does your throat,

You're on the prowl,

You put on your coat.

The night is here,

The moon is high.

You feel something deep inside.

An instinct that you cannot meet,

When you are full,

When you have feet.

The air is thick,

And the air is warm,

You want something in this new form.

There's blood nearby,

You smell it near.

No steak ever could compare.

Tonight you hunt,

You run for prey.

You feel it now,

There's no delay.

Your body aches,

Your muscles tear,

There's blood too close

You will find where.

You move closer, steady paws.

There's no stopping, there are no laws.

You don't want a sleeping prey,

far too still, won't run away,

But you feel hunger deep inside.

You would not act, with your other eyes.

Yet your snout beckons you to move,

To feast your prey, and to remove

Flesh from bone, meat from carcass.

You know this to be your purpose.

Teeth meet flesh in a dirty bite,

As you try with all your might,

To satisfy that inner call,

To tear apart, to eat, to maul.

When you're finished, there's nothing left,

Only bones beneath the flesh.

Now you hear the call of bird,

A sound you think you've never heard.

It is light, it is sweet,

In your mouth, you still taste meat.

You feel that you cannot stay,

The moon must go and hide away.

The night is over,
The day draws near.
You know it now,
And you fear
The coming light of morning sun.
The night is over.
It is done.

You change back, beneath the trees,
Blood on your hands,
Blood on your knees.
Still, you have made it through the night,
You should feel proud, but you feel spite.

Be still, now, for you must know,
you'll get again to go, and go
Explore the woods with different eyes,
A different mouth, different cries.
For the hunt, you'll never bore.
You'll experience this once more.
Once a month, beneath the moon,
You will see, it's not too soon.
With a different face, with different features.
You know the night of different creatures.

I See You

Venessa Graves

The images of your words are stained
into the eye of loss,
and now ingrained into the mind of dread.

The tears resemble the heart that is now decimated,

The mangled pieces unable to puzzle in sync

I see you,

I see you running,

I see you,

I see you tripping

Still sloshed in thirst

Scrambling over mislaid remains,

The zest of character bled out

I see you,

I see you running,

I see you,

I see you looking for sanctuary

the anguish within fidgets,

The blood spilled has drenched you still

You stand aghast, reaching out

Reaching out to the embers of a phantom

The blood spilled reeks!

Dawn emerging,

I see you!

I see you gripping on to the robes of man!

I see you,

I see you crying out, bruised, battered,

and sitting in the wreckage,

The Wreckage greed of deliberate will

To the light that shines bright, a toast!

To the light that affirms, keep you close

I see you, and smell the reeking stench of your terror

The heart that lays mangled, is relinquished to you,

Beaming forward, the screams echo behind

To the light that shines, cheers!

I see you, Keep you close

Nestled in the warmth of love,

the remains of my soul

Love in Black Tea

Venessa Graves

I don't remember much of you
But the glass flowered pitcher of tea
Sitting outside the door with a cup
No one can touch except me

I don't remember much of you
But the love in sitting on your lap
Protecting me from the barks of gigi,
Who fended off all of my cousins from your
flowered pitcher of tea

The vision is blurred,
Focusing, I see you sitting outside the door
gazing in thought
Till your eyes caught the sight of a man
A smile that lit up your eyes

The ache in the hearts
Grieved your physical absence,
I do not remember much
But a man who was half gone,
His cries brought fear
Over a little girl who had not yet understood
The loss of a significant other

I do not remember much
But enjoyment comes hearing stories of
you,
With one turn of my mother's head
You mixed biscuits so fast
You chuckled at my mother's baffled face
And nothing but words of endearment From

my father,
who you seen as a son rather than grandson
who guards his heart with bricks
Leaves a secret garden door locked
And only you carry the key.

The simple thought of you, it opens

Even though I do not remember much of
you

I keep with me an old green hymn book,
an attachment I can not let go of

Only knowing you as a toddler,

Parts of me wishes I could know you as an
adult

Every time he hears hymns, tears rain

Most importantly, every time he sees church
he is reminded of you both

A cornerstone in his heart of where he
knows and feels true love

An unbreakable pillar you helped build.

I do not know much of you or of your life

But loving my father and God

Is the legacy left behind.

Mom

Heather Hansen

Did it hurt?
Or are you free?
From the pain and suffering
Brought onto thee.
The pain of your past
Now belongs to me.
Even though I wish
It wouldn't be.

I fall to my knees
Every time I try to breathe.
Now your death
Is taking hold of me.
The guilt that consumes me
Resides in my heart,
But hopefully I can turn that
Into a piece of art.

I feel so lonely
Without you around,
But I know if you were here
That you would be proud.
Your laugh was full
Of joy and glee,
And now it's only
A memory.

Your smile brought nothing
But light to a room,
And now I feel like

I'm in a never-ending doom.

My love for you
Will never fade,
Not even in
A million decades

No Means NO!

Heather Hansen

What part of no do you not understand?

No means NO!

It's that simple and bland.

There's nothing that difficult about the word "no,"

In fact, there's only two letters you need to know.

It starts with an N and ends with an O,

That means you need to let me go.

You don't have consent or permission to touch,

So why do you keep on making a fuss?

Begging and pleading for me to continue,

But why would you want someone not even into you?

If I wanna leave, you should let me be,

Not continue to force yourself onto me.

If I say no, you better listen,

Because I won't stand to be another victim.

I've dealt with this shit one too many times,

But oh, I forgot—"it's not all guys."

God's Blind Poet

Dallas Hensley

Milton, sitting alone, blind,
seeing everything so clearly,
knowing the Bible like the back
of the hand he will never,
view again.

God's Ways justified?

or simply defied?

adding to the text sacred,
gaps filled by his books
explain all the blood shed
and why *The Creator* Saw Red.

Satan and his Troupe

Crafted by *God*,

like Everything Else.

Creator Creating.

Creating life for praise.

praise that is never sufficient.

only once He Sends *Himself*,

to Save the Day that *He* Damned.

the world will no longer be Damned.

Praise!

Praise me!

I am so Great,

Magnificent and Omnipotent,

I CREATE Destruction to Condemn It!

Destroy Everything because I Need My

Praise proper.

I Make mankind in My Image.

I Make Everything according to My Image

For the world

I Send Myself,

to Save My people,

from Myself.

i am creation,

abandoned after my first Mistake

destined to slip,

born with loose footing,

walking on a frozen lake.

asking for Forgiveness

drowning in the icy water.

accompanied by

Sin and Death

the Duo of Despair

treading their feet

in a world that is “not” yet

Beyond Repair

Milton tried to clear the air,

but all he had himself,

was a Blank Stare

Three Days Untold

Penny Lanae - Instagram @PennyLanae

The indents of my three days are the same
as mine.

This simpler expands, elevating me in no
time.

My ears become open to its vibrations of
sound,

making my heart relax whilst my mind
wound.

Conversation in a surge, along with the
aftermath.

It carries over into my time long after that.

My three days sits in its existence that en-
sures

the equivalence of beauty its soul procures.

My three days in which I do not know,
yet bits and pieces its mind seems to hold.

It swims in my daily plans,
setting intention towards what I am.

Its speech is as poetry in its smoothest form,
in ways it smiles is indubitably warm.

While the sound it prefers requires a deep
soul,

it's the colors of mother nature's fallen role.

My three days I will have for a while,
as the others, no need to reconcile.

The essence of my three days,

I'm sure as you know,
with each hour it only manages to grow.

A hopeless romantic of being able to per-
ceive,

the intensities and attraction in every person
conceived.

One might say obsessive and another imag-
inative,

yet at the end of every life, love's form is

subjective.

It makes you feel crazy, yet provides you
with purpose.

My love is vague in which ways it dispers-
es.

Unconditional, they may say,
still in regards though to my dismay.

So from afar, I choose to stay,
only compelling propitiously,
as this is how I was made.

A soul with no means of attachment,
expectation, forms of projection.

A genuine love stems from your own reflec-
tion.

Here I am, giving love to all my days,
In which impacted my life in their own way.
Regardless of time or form of connection,
My heart will always smile in their direc-
tion.

My Tuesday, My Thursday, and My Every
Day

Shall stay untold for another stage.

The Blaze of My Sorrow

Madysen Lovejoy

How foolish, terribly foolish of me
to allow your callused hands custody of my impressionable mind—
to allow your callous heart dominion over
my soft and untested spirit.

You handled me as though I was clay,
working me as the potter's wheel spun,
fashioning me into a version of myself you didn't entirely dislike
but could never get *just* right.

No matter the toil, you could not fit me into your mold.

So you squashed me—
collapsed my every dimension, flattened me
as though you were smoothing the creases of a piece of paper
that was once a butterfly but is now a reminder of what never could be.

I have died a hundred deaths in my effort to be worthy of you
and still only know one grave—
still choke on the dirt that buried me that first time and welcomes me
home once again.

You were a god of the highest caliber until the smoke cleared
and revealed your finger on the trigger,
revealed the dirt underneath your fingernails.

You, my love, were a god until the fire you stole burned your kingdom to the ground.

And so God besmirches me,
leaves terra-cotta stains in the shape of your hands all over my dress,
white on the day you proclaimed your love to me,
black on the day it joined your words
in the blaze of my sorrow.

texas, hold these hearts

Eris J.M. Melo

*In fast company you place
the initial stake
while railbirds watch and appraise*

*We're dealt these cards
under a blind bet and cheap lights—
what a childish dare
to end up where we are.*

*Dealer, call the flop,
and reveal the cards;
You have a strong hand,
now make the call*

*We stay at the turn,
in this dangerous wager
You go all-in—
Wow, you're really midwestern.*

*Now we're at the river,
and I refuse to fold,
I call a re-raise, a gambler's ruin:
heart in your palm,
and all of my glimmer*

*This ain't a winner-takes-all,
just call my bluff,
I'll take this bad beat,
and become your Queen of Hearts.*

*It's during the showdown that
I learn your name,
there are no cowboys like you,
Ace of Hearts.*

*We both have a straight,
T, J, Q, K, A.
Once we split this pot,
we can go on a date*

What a Garden Cannot Mend

By: Brit Melson

When the day comes that I am no longer earth side,
do not give my loved ones flowers

Forget those simple bits of ephemeral beauty
with built-in expiration dates.
Unachievable expectations and unsaid iterations of
“keep these alive...

...since your loved one is not”

Evanescent perfumes swiftly drift to rot -
And will be forgotten -
Then slip to what is not...

...anymore.

Another stem snapped from the earth -
It's always the favorites that go first
(but am I a favorite?)

Inevitably you'll find them lost in a solemn gaze.
They'll stare at death shoved into a vase.
Or into a casket.

I guess.

Liminal.

Lifeless.

Faux-photosynthesizing hostile fragrant reminders
that we expire too soon.

(Do we all expire too soon?)

**One week into grief and you'll find the gifted Peace Lily
sitting crook-necked in their claw-foot bathtub
already set in full rigor mortis**

Do not try to help my loved ones love a leafy green shell of me.

You cannot buy my essence at the local nursery.

My eyes are not found in irises.

My voice not heard in the wind-hiss of forget-me-nots.

My touch not felt in the ready reach of a Sweet Pea.

No carnation can sprout my reincarnation.

There will be no glory on the morning I am gone.

**Soon, the vase with the Peace Lily will be empty,
emptiness will become their story arc
– an all too common and unfortunate theme –
so please, just ease the emptiness.**

I hope you feel the tenderness with which I say this,

I hope the soil of your heart stays soft.

I hope it isn't too much to ask...

Please.

Sit with them. Be steadfast as an old Oak, sheltering when the world is too much.

Make them eat. Or don't. But bring food. Always bring food. Be abundant as the Sweet Potato plant, nourishing the living.

Love them. Love them hard and endlessly, as I do. Be enduring as the deep roots of the Sunflower, seeking light amongst the darkness.

Turn my love into a story.

Let me be a good part of your story.

Live the love I've always shared with you.

I hope you'll always live in abundance.

The Wood Carver

Daniel Meyer

I always loved wandering through the forest	I did not know how to care for trees at first
One day I heard a beautiful voice in the air	You guided my hands through every step
I followed the song until I stumbled upon you	Some days I'd see you with your new traveler
You were a strong tree growing thick and tall	I watched until they left each time
Other trees grew sparsely around you	Every so often I noticed a new carving in you
After some time, we grew fond of each other	You told me to pay no mind
We sat and spoke while you shaded me from the sun	You said it was your business and yours alone
One of your favorite things was passing couples	Over time, I stopped mentioning them
They'd carve their names in the other trees	I never saw my initials within your body
You saw their love and wanted one of your own	As you grew, you covered your body more
With every new lover you'd cut into yourself	Every inch higher was an inch more of canvas
Your bark chipped away, as did their care	You were changed, your bark wouldn't grow back
Repeatedly, you were left with just their names	Your exposed trunk was endangered by rodents and pests
Scars that were left to warp as you grew	I grew tired and I started to visit less often
Each day I'd come to water and prune you	All of this work to keep your beauty was starting to feel worthless

But I never stopped loving your song

I could have just spared you time and agony

It rang through your branches on the wind

I could have just brought my ax and
chopped you down

As time passed and the forest grew, we
shifted

I was scared to the core and kept hiking

A tree in nature does not need tending to

I still adore nature and all of its sights

It simply needed other trees to see how it
should grow

But now when I see a gorgeous tree I
tremble

After some time, we separated, our
relationship falling from false necessity

Sometimes I run and other times I close my
eyes

I was happy at first, now I could rest

Blindness does not help when the wind
blows

No more cleaning up shavings and bark off
the ground

The cool and calming breeze relaxes my
skin

I would not return to you and be met with
more initials

But I can still hear your song on every other
tree's branches

Now when I walk through nature, though, I
am changed

Forests and parks hold their beauty

Grass is still soft and berries grow fresh

But one day I was struck with an epiphany

I realized I was angry with you and your
carving

I thought a horrible thing just then

I could have just saved you the trouble

Freesia

Jazmine Nicole Pena Cortez

Now, only through a mirage—in dreams, through daydreams.

Dazed and half out of my mind.

Grasping onto the fading echoes of you.

Remembering every approach and interaction.

From your soft to hard embraces.

To the laughter and deep conversations.

They were frightening yet warm, like a hush of heat against winter's breath.

Clinging onto the textures of you.

From the rugged mountains of your form, to the smooth hills of your silhouette and skin.

Your beauty is as brilliant as every flower I've seen, bearing cold earth-colored eyes.

How I dreamt of treasuring those eyes, forever to be entrapped by such jewels and crushed in the palms of my hands for no one to ever take them away.

Coarse to fine hairs.

Grays resembling your wisdom and the serene beauty of frost-covered grass.

Your soft stubble and icy lips tenderly pressed against mine, warm and untouched.

Then this fragrance... oh, how it clings to the air around you.

Captivated by your musk, your sea salt essence, I yearn to capture this cherished aroma.

To keep it close and hidden as I lay down to sleep so it can linger with me always.

So shook by the spell of you.

These dreams and memories or delusions could be the death of me.

My mind says move on, but my heart lags behind. I dread to read this over. This shame, my secret longing.

BRING DOWN THE SKY

Matthew Phengdy

@mattpheng417.bsky.social
IG:Mattphengdy, FB: Mattpheng.200

Bring Down The Sky!

Let that which abhors the horrors of the world and is of that gentle thing

Arrive from beyond the edge of the Solar System!

Mankind is warped by the corrupted processes of hate and division, which has never been seen!

The collectiveness of mankind is but a reflection of the surface that which dwells the emotions and thoughts of those that call themselves, Human.

Watch, as those with sentient intellect absorb and digest information at a rate never before seen! As the golden age of information rears its head, there is a tragedy that lurks beneath the surface!

BRING DOWN THE SKY!

The common folk are inundated with so much knowledge, yet themselves are blind to it! Data streams, news, music, podcasts, talk shows and more impart knowledge that can be best described as part informative and garbage!

Not all knowledge holds the same weight!

Not all knowledge reaches the golden tops of mountains!

Yet mankind is easily moved, logic and reasoning fall to emotion and pathos.

That which is obvious is twisted and gnarled, broken into tiny bite-sized pieces of delusions.

When a landfill and a library are one and the same, mankind must make efforts to wade through.

One step!

Two step!

Three step!

Four step!

Five Step!

STOP!

You've gone too far! Listen to the sensationalist mouthpieces that dare to disseminate that information!

They say one thing

Another something else

And another the opposite

Or mixed
Or smashed
Or incorrect...
Or everything and the Moon!

We have the power to change the world, to make a difference
Yet we remain ignorant to the realities before us.
When the masses and the collective unconscious rally against their own interest
And entrust their futures to those that would wear the Mask of Devils and Gods
Inherent within the hearts of man I see that these truths are too much
Proclaim and shout from the eaves and rooftops, but be shouted down
For just as They Hated Jesus for telling the Truth, so do those
Whose hearts are hardened with delusions.

If we cannot change the World,

BRING DOWN THE SKY!

Bring it down on those who dare speak lies from their pulpit of supposed truth!
Bring it down on those who twist and wrangle freedom into mangled steel!
Bring it down on those who refuse to separate Truth and Fiction!
Bring it down on those who dare to take Our Rights away!
Bring it down on those who call themselves the Elite!

Only then can we break these chains of oppression, instill righteous virtues, properly educate the people, and take back the reigns of OUR FUTURE that has been steadily slipping away!

Just as Icarus flew too close to the Sun, so too, do our oppressors who follow the same path!

They tread on the lion's tail, but do not expect to be mauled!
They are vain, filled with immense hubris, yet they have disdain FOR US!
ARE THEY truly the supposed Saviors of Our Souls?
Or do they speak in paradox? Where if will is just as strong as Steel—

Then if it bends, it MUST BREAK!
BRING DOWN THE SKY.

He is Not Your Savior

Joel Plascencia Jr.

Pretentiously announcing how you're the hero of your story and having to justify your humility is irony at its finest. Not because the words you use are to the detriment of another party but because you lack the self-awareness to realize that you are, in fact, the problem.

Believing what you may, under the prefix that what you were doing was for the best of man, only to turn and get angry when you are denied praise, remains a constant disappointing attribute of yours.

However, your anger is misplaced. You've become enthralled with fantastical notions, when no one shows up to your gilded statue, it is they who have done something wrong... and rather than accepting your shortcomings, you call it blasphemous. Pointing your crooked finger and calling them charlatans, knowing your herd will follow you no matter what.

But they are not true believers... instead, they are infatuated with your straw man arguments, believing that if they too follow blindly, then perhaps with great manifestations and prayer, the gold on your statue will someday rub off on them. Giving them the vindication to fight for their fake religion.

With a serpent's tongue, you whisper your concerns into the ears of those who listen. Telling them of your machinations and sharing parables of your conquest in becoming their one and only God; a role you believe was made for you through divinity — in reality, a role like Judas is more fitting.

You blame others for your inadequacies while the degree of your verisimilitude only further rots away at the core of your being, calling it desecration when, in truth, you were never worthy of worship to begin with.

You are nothing more than a false prophet, following the belief that if men wish to live, then they are forced to kill. Except killing has never been the answer, but under the sentiment that empathy is a sin, anything that requires compassion is seen as weakness and not worthy of consideration. In a system built on dominance, mercy is discarded, and those who refuse to harden their hearts are trampled by those who have none.

In the past, a bridge was proposed to save your people, but rather than sacrificing your pride, you found the stones that had been collected, carved your initials on them, built your wall, and called it progress.

What about the others I ask? What have they done to be spared from your wrath but not I? Listen closely, for I fear the truth will only cement me further into this earth, but I will do my best to articulate what I can without repeating what I've said before.

Heed my warning... He is not your savior. America is caught in the wheel of destruction, and I fear the time for reasoning has long surpassed us, and no amount of truth could set us free.

Those who follow him blindly will eventually become silenced, not because they have won, but because they are all lambs to the slaughter and he led the way. You may think you'll be spared because of your alabaster coat, but not all animals are made equal... because a cage has no preference.

In times like these, transgressions are forsaken, but I hold on to hope that just like Rome, your empire will inevitably fall and when it does, we will finally be free of your tyranny.

All You Need is Love

Dylan Prewett

As you sit on the cot, the endless hours passing by, devoid of the real world, you look out at the many faces that briefly appear before your stainless steel barrier. Faces full of emotion and those denuded of it, eyes with wrinkles, and those that excluded it. All their expressions were like glimpses through a slightly cracked door.

Where potential lies just out of reach.

That first month you feel optimistic that the next face that materializes in front of you will be the face you spend the rest of your short existence with. Though, people walk past and throw a quick compliment from afar. They flash their kindest empty smile to the point it creates wrinkles and divots in their skin; while in a squeaky voice cheer, "Just look at you!" You begin to learn that these words sprinkled on you are merely just for show.

They will never attempt to go beyond that cold stainless steel barrier that withholds you from this world.

People simply assume that you were rescued or placed in good hands the moment you arrived at this facility. Unfortunately, all this new existence brings you is the looming notion of delaying your inevitable fate. Whether on the streets begging for scraps to stay alive barely, or being cooped up without a single soul reaching to hold yours, you are still going to die alone in this world without experiencing the true meaning of life. People these days assume the meaning of life is to put as much effort into your existence to reward yourself later with a sense of great accomplishment. However, people are communal in nature. Removing this from someone is similar to ripping the cord out of an outlet which eventually shuts the entire system down.

The meaning of life is to be loved and to love in return.

To curl up and feel their fingers graze over your body as you both sit in comfortable silence. To be the shoulder for their woes to be heard and validated on. To kiss their face and feed that flame that dwindles within them occasionally.

To quietly tell them with a simple glance, "I'm so thankful our fates intertwined the way they did."

You can't help but wonder what life would have been like if just one of those faces in front of your stainless steel barrier took a double take. What life could have been like if they took a leap of faith and slipped a finger past that barrier? As they lay you down on that frigid table, your tired eyes beg for one of these faces to pity your existence and halt this inevitable fate just a little longer. While your body might be frail and unkempt, it still has so much to give, and so much love left to experience. However, they whisper sweet nothings into your ear as they hold your head gingerly in their hands until the coldness of that table underneath you seeps into your soul and tells your entire body to just let go. Your head slowly sinks onto that table where so many others like you did the same.

So many hearts aching to love but left to rot.

Eternal Love

Dylan Prewett

Within the twilight's silence a shadow flies,
A blackened form against the skies.
The world, it growls, cold and low,
“A crow, a sign of grief and woe!”

But look dear friend, through kinder sight,
This bird is no creature of fright.
Its wings do not bring forth folly and pain,
But carry peace, free from disdain.

Its feathers dark, a sleek velvet hue,
I beg to the people,
“Look beyond and you'll see
A soul both pure and true!”

Misjudged, it soars with silent grace,
A gentle heart of steady pace.
Not all creatures adorn in black of omens of
obscenity—
To me, he brings the calm and its serenity

So please let the black bird that flies above
Be known for his kindness and sweet love.
It's not his fault that he resembles an unfa-
vorable crow
But no one should think of him so low

As he visits my windowsill each day,
He sings a melody I know, in a haunting
way.
Could he have been my love, my guide—
A husband once, with me by his side?

My final message, before he takes flight,
“Though we meet as strangers here tonight,
You're a gift from grace both soft and
sweet,
It's for you that my heart will forever beat.
I've known your heart before, so close, so
near.
You will always be my dear.”

Heaven Is a Her

Remy - @rechocochrry

It is her bedroom—that Garden of Eden,
where I find myself spilling secrets
while the warmth of her skin wraps around mine.
There's kindness in every caress of her hands,
and more in every word of encouragement.
I listen to her whispers in my ear to try the fruit,
the delicious love potion she crafted for me to bite.
She says the choice is mine,
she says that it'll open my eyes to the road less traveled.
He told me to be wary,
but I can't help feeling
she's the apple of my eye
and the coffin of my deepest fears.
It is called a sin to love her,
but they're wrong, for even if it's a sin,
I know in my heart I'll find her in hell
and get to be together again.

M.A.S.K.

Sophie Rosander

May you always make your bed

Like I know you can,

Make something useful of yourself

Marry a rich man

Always stand up straight

Ask, and never be late.

Always agree, but

Shhh! Never too loud

Sit in your seat

So I can be proud.

Steal the show, but

Know not to knock when the baby is sleeping,

Knead the bread and do the housekeeping.

Keep sweet, and

Kill with kindness no matter who you meet.

Rolling the Die

Sophie Rosander

The truth is a burning kiss
And my birth is a backhanded promise.

My mind is a bootleg sideshow,
And power is an unspoken decaying meadow.

My pride is a foolish fantasy
And my death is a cold thrown fist.

My body is a sold out show
But my weakness is a screaming,
thriving plain.

This mental game has no shame
Roll the die
and find
no side
will ever be the same.

Collection Basket

Antt Stomen (Simon Cabrera) - Substack: anttstomen

It's Sunday | A sun day

Gold mist seeps through slits of broken
blinds.

I walk the borders of my apartment:

Cleaning | Breathing | Collecting
the dust that sits in place.

Helios's whip slips and slices through my
room.

A pillar of bright,

Sword in a rock,

There is a blade of light
piercing the walls.

Burning the dust that falls into it.

I am surrounded by this stuff.

By these dead bits of me that I have shaken
off.

Lines of lint | Lint of light

Strings of sand rain in place.

The vacuum machine by my foot

howls away at the air.

Eats on the ground like a stray.

Rotating teeth | Cotton mouthed

The black bag that is its gut

fills more and more

until it whimpers to a rest.

Silent Sun | Silent Day

My bedroom is warm.

By the gold flooding stream

Or by the worn machine?

By my feet

It lays asleep.

So, I remove its plastic basket and hold it
out.

Here I am, in a body bag.

No one else at my funeral.

The Face

Priscila Tijerina

Scared of saying the wrong thing.
Acting the wrong way.
Nervous of rejection.
And the temper I can trigger,
It's always my fault
Always my fault?
Always my fault.
So, I desperately search through the stash of accepted faces,
Looking for the one that will satisfy them
I find it
The face I've been perfecting since I was young
The one that tucks away my resentment.
Suppresses my rage.
Mutes my pain.
Silently covers everything I feel.
Like muscle memory, the face is on
Vacantly staring at them, falsely accepting every bark
My body's floating
My mind empty
My eyes look past them
I can now stand there
And as they leave, my mask fades.
The anger rushes through me.
The tears fall.
The pain lingers.
The face they will never see.

Survival

Eri Tomioka

サバイバル

飛行機を降り 友達見て

「よし英語を話す」と言った

そして私たちはただそこに立って黙っていた

食べ物注文して「お水プリーズ」言ったら

「何？」と返されたのだ

そして授業が始まり先生が「どう思う」と聞いてきた

友達は「イエス」と答えている

質問はない

1ヶ月、いや二週間立って私たちはサバイバルジェスチャーを悠長に話せるようになった

英語？まだ苦労だ でもアメリカ人の友達を作るのは？

朝飯前

We got off the plane, we looked at our friends.

We said, “Okay, we’ll speak English.”

And we just stood there in silence.

We ordered food and said, “Water please?”

And they said, “What?”

Then class started and the teacher asked, “What do you think?”

Our friends said, “Yes.”

No questions.

After a month—no, two weeks—we were able to speak survival gestures with ease.

English? Still a struggle, but making American friends?

It’s a piece of cake.

Viet Nam

Ngan Thi Kim Tran (Julie)

*In Vietnam's land, so green and wide,
Where rivers flow with gentle tide.
The mountains stand, so tall, so high,
Touching the clear and bright blue sky.*

*The winds blow softly through the trees,
The scent of flowers on the breeze.
Vietnam, Vietnam, your beauty shines,
Vietnam, Vietnam, across all times.*

*In every street, the colors glow,
A peaceful land where dreams do grow.*

*Trên đất Việt Nam, xanh tươi và rộng lớn,
Nơi những dòng sông chảy với thủy triều nhẹ nhàng.
Những ngọn núi sừng sững, cao ngất,
Chạm vào bầu trời trong xanh và tươi sáng.*

*Những cơn gió thổi nhẹ qua những tán cây,
Mùi hương hoa trên làn gió.
Việt Nam, Việt Nam, vẻ đẹp của bạn tỏa sáng,
Việt Nam, Việt Nam, xuyên suốt mọi thời đại.*

*Trên mọi con phố, sắc màu rực rỡ,
Một vùng đất thanh bình nơi những giấc mơ lớn lên*

Sincere Friendship

Bintou Traore

l'amitié sincère

Dans le jardin des cœurs, une fleur s'épanouit,
C'est l'amitié sincère, un lien que l'on construit.
Comme un rayon de soleil dans les jours sombres,
Elle éclaire nos vies, jamais elle ne succombe.
Main dans la main, nous traversons les tempêtes,
Les rires partagés, les secrets en tête.
Dans les moments de joie, ou dans les peines,
L'amitié véritable, c'est une douce rengaine.

In the garden of hearts, a flower blooms,
It's sincere friendship, a bond that we build.
Like a ray of sunshine on dark days,
It lights up our lives, it never succumbs.
Hand in hand, we weather the storms,
Shared laughter, secrets in our minds.
In moments of joy or in times of sorrow,
True friendship is a sweet refrain.

heliotrope at sunrise

Olivia Vega

he's a breath of fresh air in outer space
he can flip a black hole sunny side up
boil a bottle of evian just by holding it
and melt a cold tile floor into hot lava

but i don't know what i turn into
when stuck
in the honey glow
of his brown eyes
when he breathes words
thick and sweet
that coax the sun to rise

Nursemaid's Song

Olivia Vega

It would be nice,
I often think,
if babes had enough
to eat and drink.

Or if a summer day
moved by like years,
with enough warmth
to dry their tears.

The world, I know,
cares not at all
for creatures hungry,
young, and small.

So women must,
with rolled up sleeves,
hang laundry up
and rake the leaves.

And at night we must
unpack all our sighs
in desperate prayers
and lullabies.

I pray that men,
rude and rough,
recall being made
of weaker stuff.

Or if they don't—

ah, very well.

Those who don't
can burn in hell.

If they repent
and show some grace,
they can come back
to light the fireplace.

ART



Uncover
By Xiomara Herrera
Insta: artexio_)



Life, a balancing act
Kirstin Coleman



Presence
Kirstin Coleman



Duality

Gabriela Esparza

Instagram: @giftofgabby28



Madre Patria
Gabriela Esparza
Instagram: @giftofgabbi28



unfortunate cowgirl

Lauren Esqueda

Instagram: @loliedoodles



Weaving Ends
Teagan Faulkenburg



Act 1: The Illusion of Freedom

Heather Hansen



Cyber Slave

Heather Hansen



Clara Valentine

Jay Harris

(fanart inspired by Welcome Home)

Instagram: @jericho_artz

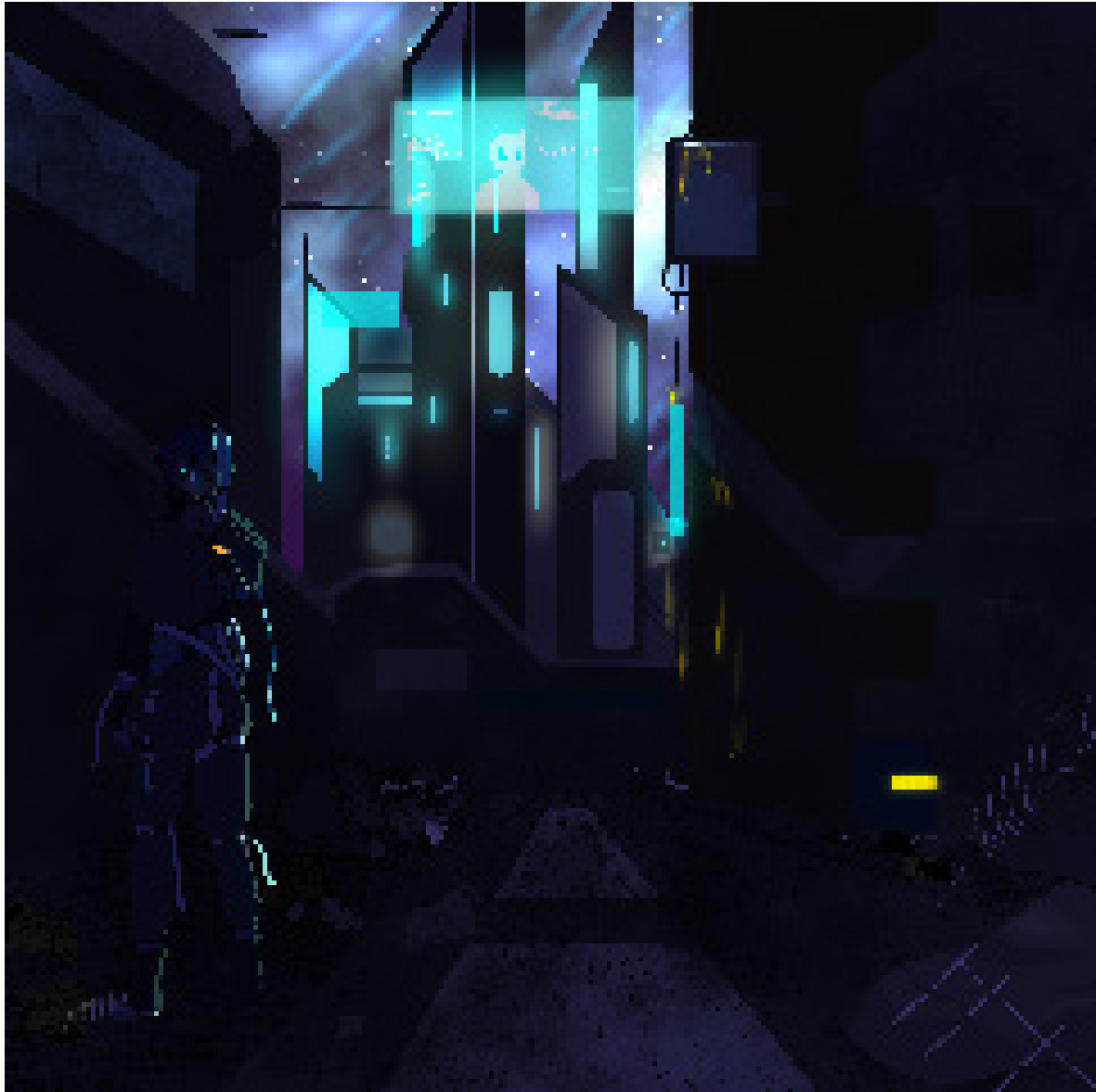




The Fall of Kaon

Josue Mendoza

Instagram: @hosue_art

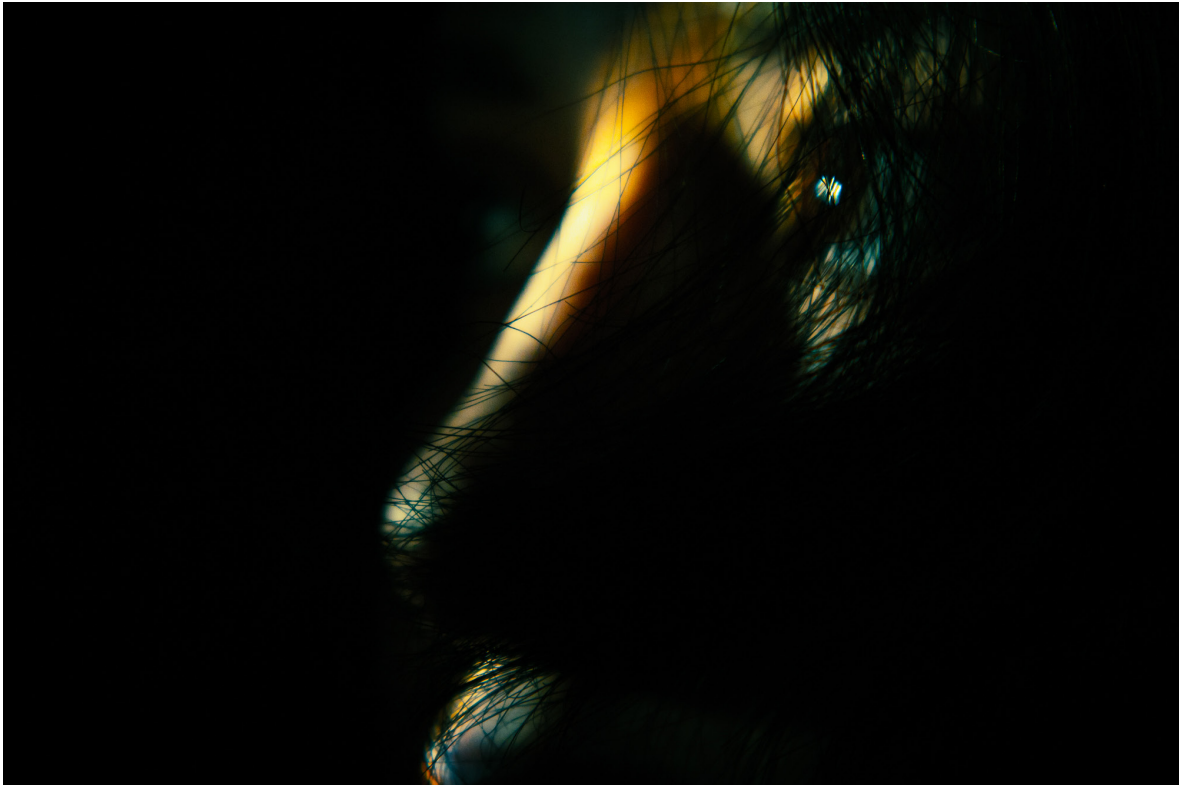


V Synthesis Prototype

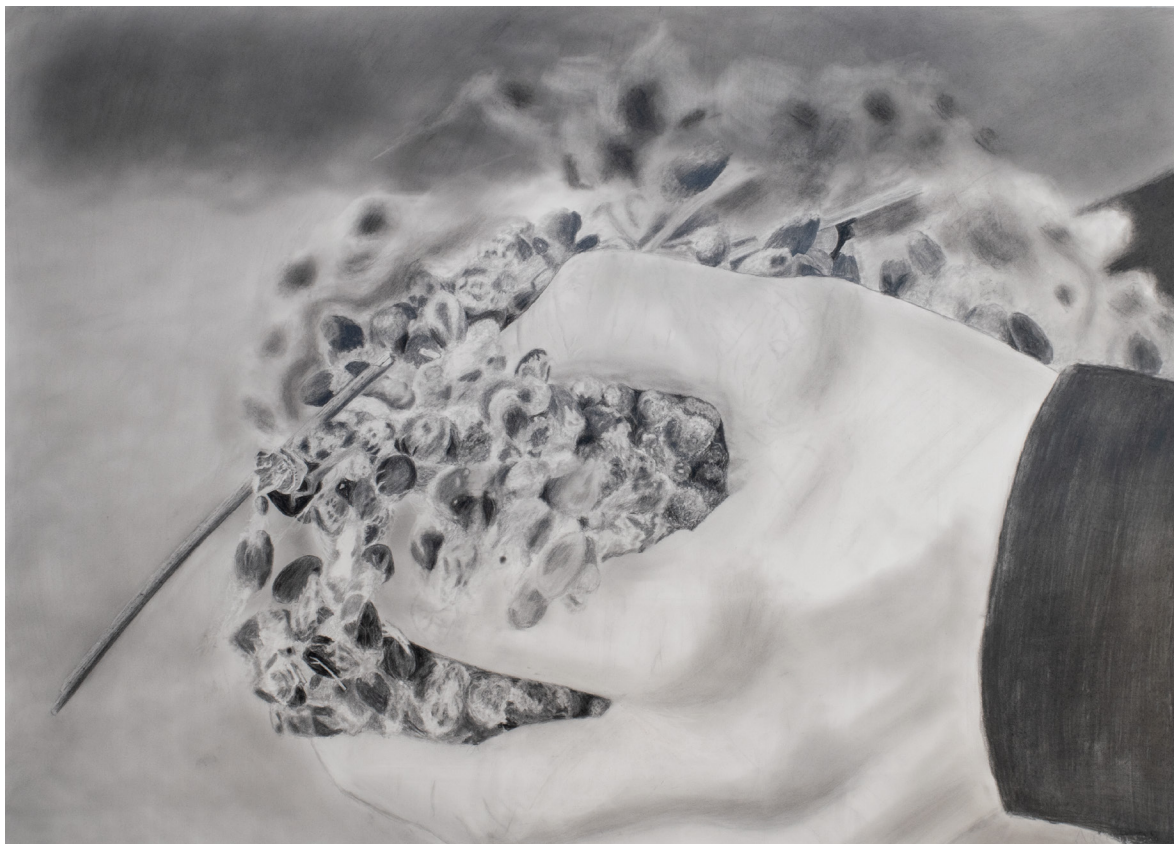
Josue Mendoza

(fanart inspired by Cyberpunk 2077)

Instagram: @hosue_art



First Encounter
Sarai Lara Ontiveros



The Cotton Seeds of Buttonwillow
Benjamin Parsons



I, Forgotten
Joel Plascencia Jr.



Red Spider Lily to Sakura Blossom
(fanart inspired by the anime series Madoka Magica)
Remy



Crimson Snowfall in Technicolor

Anna Rinaldi

Instagram: @jannarinaldi



Gas Station Daisies, Big Sur, California, 2021.
Evelyn Rodriguez



Sea Cave. Arch Cape, Oregon, 2024.
Evelyn Rodriguez

Obligados a Cambiar

Que extraño es darme cuenta de cual distante estoy de la que algún día fue mi casa, y no me refiero a kilómetros, mas mi mente ha cambiado y mi alma ha crecido. No hay manera exacta de decirlo, por mas que quiera compartir un sentimiento por medio de mi cámara no llegara nunca a ser como se ve en mi mente. Siento que todos nos hemos alejado tanto, obligados a cambiar, a dejar de creer, a ser como aquellos que decidieron llegar a invadir nuestras tierras. No existe manera de volver a ser lo que alguna vez fuimos. No es posible borrar la historia, llena de dolor y desdicha. Somos lo que somos, somos el resultado de años de injusticia. Es triste, inevitablemente triste. No cambia nada el mirar atrás, pero seamos conscientes de quien fuimos y en el fondo lo seguimos siendo. No es justo para aquellos que lucharon dejarlos en el olvido.

Este es mi manera de mantenerlos vivos y honrar nuestras raíces. Me siento sumamente orgullosa de ser quien soy, de venir de un imperio tan magnifico, que hasta aquellos que nos colonizaron les dio pena destruirlo.

Forced to Change

How strange it is to realize how distant I am from what was once my home. And I don't mean in kilometers, but my mind has changed and my soul has grown. There's no exact way to say it; no matter how much I want to share a feeling through my camera, it will never be what it looks like in my mind's eye. I feel like we've all drifted so far away, forced to change, to stop believing, to be like those who decided to invade our lands. There's no way to go back to what we once were. It's impossible to erase history, full of pain and misery. We are what we are; we are the result of years of injustice. It's sad, inevitably sad. Looking back doesn't change anything, but let's be mindful of who we were and who we still are deep down. It's not fair to forget those who fought.

This is my way of keeping them alive and honoring our roots. I feel extremely proud of who I am, of coming from such a magnificent empire that even those who colonized us felt sorry to destroy it.



Obligados a Cambiar (Forced to change)

Samanta Samano Calderon

84 Instagram: @SamantaSamanoCalderon



Obligados a Cambiar (Forced to change)
Samanta Samano Calderon
Instagram: @SamantaSamanoCalderon



Loki - One Piece (Eiichiro Oda)
(fanart inspired by the anime series One Piece)
Asmaa Shidawa
Instagram: @ace.sdoodles



Rose teapot

Asmaa Shidawa

Instagram: @ace.sdoodles

On a rainy day, a child was found in the village.
A child with purple skin and horns on its head
was no human child; it was a monster. The
villagers came together and decided the monster
could live-- only because they feared this was a
test from their God.



The monster grew faster than any human could. After only having it
with them for three years, the monster looked to be around the age
of 9. However, the monster child was harmless and didn't
understand why the villagers feared it.



The monster thought that maybe if it did something good and helped the villagers, then they would
accept it. And so, the monster did; it found an old, thrown out basket, and decided to fix it as a
present. The monster found the villagers' children. "Perfect," it thought; it can use the basket as an
offering to the parents since the villagers are still frightened.



Monster Skye



Unfortunately, the villagers' children were not as pleasant as the monster hoped. The moment it got close, they started to call the monster ugly names and threw rocks at it. They told the little monster to get lost, and the villagers would never love such a creature.



The monster sat there, not knowing what it did wrong or why it was hated. Holding the rock that caused it pain. Many emotions ran through it. Anger. Sorrow. Despair. What had it done to deserve all this? It must have done something, right? ..Right?



It returned to a place it called "home": a small cabin in the middle of the forest where no one dared to go. Run-down walls, a shattered window, and a pillow.

It wasn't much of a home; there was nothing warm nor cozy, but it was a place the monster knew it would be safe. It hugged its pillow in the hopes of a better day.

A place in the forest that always looked so beautiful and cheered it every time it looked unhappy looked lifeless and dull to the monster.

It wondered if maybe that's all it deserved. The monster did not deserve anything nice or pretty. It should have disappeared from the villagers' lives if it wanted to help them.



The monster sat and pondered in its thoughts, and didn't notice a presence that sat next to it. Only after, when the person leaned in, did the monster see the human and jumped away.



The human looked nice; she didn't have the same aura as the villagers-- hers was nice and warm. She had a smile on her face that made the monster want to trust her, but it couldn't let its guard down, afraid of being hurt again.

Though, for as much as the monster feared the human, the human was just as brave. Without giving the monster a moment, she grabbed its arm and bandaged the wound. It tried to fight back, but the human would not budge.



The human once again gave it a smile and the monster, this time, blushed; it had never felt this warmth before. It wondered, why would this human who it had never met be so kind to a monster? Did she not fear it like the villagers? Why? And, as if she read its mind, she answered that no one deserved to be treated this way when they had done nothing wrong. But the monster still did not understand; it had to have done something wrong; it must have!

The human told it to rest its head, and this would be something that would be worked on little by little together...





JWD: Showdown

(fanart inspired by Jurassic World Dominion)

By: Jessica Torres

Insta: @rexy.retro

CREATIVE NON-FICTION



Ramco

Lauren Esqueda

Instagram: @loliedoodles

Three Life Lessons: Biology as My Teacher

Amber Assi

A Misconception: Biology Through a Seal's Fang

The beach is a picture of power, nature's way of humbling our small existence. When I look out into the rich palette of colors cast onto the waters from the sky's reflection, I know there remain mysteries yet to be trawled from those deep trenches. The pull of the moon entices the ocean's tongue to constantly lap at the sandy shores. If you're lucky, the waters may grant you a piece of treasure, laying it at your feet in the sand. On one such occasion, the waves offered me the skull of a large creature. I couldn't identify its taxonomy at the time... my knowledge of skeletal anatomy was anything but perfect. To the excitement of my younger cousin, I requested that he perform dental surgery on the jaw to extract one of the fang teeth. I was in fact still a germaphobe; only in later years would I realize that such a lifestyle coupled with an interest in biology did not overlap. After scrubbing the tooth with bleach and washing it more times than I could count, I crafted a necklace with the tooth as my pendant. Under the impression that it was a shark fang, I wore it proudly, spreading the misinformation to anyone who asked.

My first biology teacher would later prove me wrong by suggesting that it came from a seal (Pinnipedia). I never thought they could have teeth that large, but then again, they are meat eaters. How much of the world I had yet to understand? The deeper I dig into biology and the facets of creation I find its complexity outstanding. How many other organisms or processes of life are still to be uncovered or understood? What if there are numerous methods or hypotheses we think to be true and accurate, but later will be proven awfully wrong? Thales of Miletus proposed a flat earth, only to be disproved centuries later by Aristotle. Now we laugh at the idea of a flat earth (though some still believe it—age-old understanding never disappears completely), what other discoveries will lead to the amusement of future scientists because of our current misconstructions?

The Little Things: Biology Through a Chiton's Shell

I can't keep these lines from the ocean; a second look is only proper. Many different shore fronts offer a plethora of treasures, each unique to their personality. To call all sandy beaches the same...? I would tread softly on the shoreline if that perception has ever crossed your mind. At this particular beach lay billions of small stones, individually shaped by the hands of seawater. Stepping barefoot along the littoral, my feet were massaged by the smooth rounded gems beneath. At first it slipped passed my attention, but nestled comfortably between the rocks rested the pleated shell of a chiton. Said to be living fossils, the genetic code of these creatures could recite all of the ocean's history if given the chance to speak. From above, the chiton shell appeared to be nothing more than a roughly layered surface, home to a few barnacles and strands of algae, save for the bottom corner of the shell where a thin strip of iridescent blue flashed in the light like Morse code. I stopped in my tracks and inspected the shell closer. I will give the sun credit for spotting the beauty beneath before I claim the rights to gloat. Gently picking it up, I flipped over the gray and kelp-green surface to reveal the brightly reflective turquoise underside. The shell of a Chiton is an exoskeleton, protecting it from potential predators of the ocean. The top of a Chiton's shell is meant to be inconspicuous from the sea floor. The bland unappealing surface of their shells serves an important purpose; however, only when dead does the masked beauty underneath become visible. To think I would have passed this treasure up if the sun had not beckoned a second look... and how many things have I failed to appreciate because I hastily judged before taking the time to notice.

Many writers or famous artists were overlooked their whole lives, only to become a sensation after their passing. Emily Dickinson, Edgar Allan Poe, Van Gogh... The world didn't appreciate the beauty in their skill; they left earth without knowing the impact of

their passions. There was a time I wanted to be a writer, artist, musician—but that was years ago. The world is not kind to those who chase after their aspirations. Why should I strive for future recognition in a time I won't live to see? Then there have been the "lucky ones," making their living at the expense of entertaining others who worshiped their talent. Even then, they were never satisfied... the drugs never truly let them forget the emptiness that fame and wealth had to offer. Enjoyment in the little things became dulled by the rich and popular life; the next high could no longer suffice. I don't believe this earth is our final destination. We're only renting our place here, and the payment is time. No amount of popularity, wealth, or recognition can buy back a single second. I no longer desire a life like theirs.

I've come to love the simple, plain pleasures that often go unappreciated. It is the small beauty in details that are hastily overlooked (a warm coffee on a cold day, a smile from a stranger, a bright blooming flower, or the smell of cookies in the oven, and laughter of friends and family around a dinner table). But doesn't the saying go, "small things matter the most"? If that were true, I think we would all be careful to slow down, take a moment, and appreciate all there is to find value in; unfortunately, this seems hardly the case. After claiming the chiton shell, I felt a cold breeze rush by and caught the sound of tires running across a paved road. Above me was a thick concrete overpass with traffic—as was its constant companion. Even at night, I could hear the rumble of engines, harboring passengers who were always in a hurry to reach some destination.

The Nature of Death: Biology Through a Deer Skull

The flesh still clung to the pedicle bones, surrounding the once-powerful deer antlers. The perfectly intact specimen homed itself in the center of tall, dew-dressed grass. The verdant blades seemingly grew into a perfect circle around the skull, as if bound by an invisible wall. Either way, the bones housed in that colony of grass blades disrupted fresh life with the symbol of death.

My grandma tells me of when her brother died. I was no more than three years old. I don't remember what sort of man he was, yet through the testimony of family I have come to respect his character. When he was in the hospital, my mother would take me to visit. Oblivious to circumstances, I joyfully trotted into the room, excited to see my grandma who was often there by his bedside. She never forgot how my young lively self contrasted that of loss and death. My pink cheeks and healthy complexion made her, for one quick moment, forget about the product of added years; a process that occurs to all things living.

Biology tells us death is natural. It's the circle of life. Organisms die and become incorporated into other organisms such as a tree in need of resources. However, if death is natural, why does it never feel as such? Did it feel right when your grandpa died? When your friend got sick and passed away? I do not study biology to learn more about the natural world. No, I have come to think that biology explains that which is beyond the natural. There is a supernatural being that created each and every bone in that deceased deer. He crafted the fur on its head—the powerful antlers. Design implies a designer, and I know our God made it well.

To cope with the reality of death some fall under the deception that it is a natural process and therefore must be accepted. Deep down I know they don't really think so—I know it by their life. They say they're not broken, but actions often speak a louder testimony to truth. When you believe that a lifeless pile of bones haunts your future, all you can do is live the best life now; maybe you try to push away the fear, but you find its nagging voice tempting your hands to dangle a rope necklace around your throat. I believe there is a perfected world, a home in which we were always meant to dwell—Its revolution governed by the pull of a greater force, no longer tilted toward the sun of earth, but of God. To be reunited with our creator is a joy in death that nothing else can bring. I've witnessed those

who search for other happy endings. What do they find? Nothing but dead ends; a temporary facade of peace and contentedness. To surrender one's bones into the hands of their maker is a truthful comfort, and to me is far more real than anything this world could ever offer.

Mo(u)rning Routine

Alli Berry

“I’m a math girl, not a dancing girl,” is what I told my mom with my arms crossed and a scowl on my face when she asked me to get up and dance with her. I was sitting on the blue couch that was almost too big for our living room. We had had this couch for as long as I could remember, and its age showed in the depressions in the cushions and the tears on the side where my dad often stashed his Whoppers and peanut M&Ms.

“You never know when you’ll get that craving, so it’s important to have them in a convenient location for when you do,” is what he would tell us to defend himself against the looks of suspicion we’d give him as he’d reach into the slit of the couch to retrieve his prize.

That’s the seat I was sitting in when I tried to explain to my mom, the best way an 8-year-old could, that I did not dance because I was simply too left-brained. My mom burst out into her signature thunderous laughter, the kind that the neighbors could hear from behind their closed doors. She was always amused by how much attitude my little body could hold. James Brown was playing over the stereo system and the song was “The Payback,” one of her all-time favorites. She waved her hand at me to dismiss my attitude while she swayed her hips and arms around, singing,

“I don’t know karate, but I know cuh-ray-zee!”

My mom was a hard working woman. She’d wake up in a daze early in the morning to make coffee and breakfast for my dad, always sporting a purple robe and a high ponytail that resembled a water fountain on top of her head, but instead of water, it was gushing strands of chocolate brown hair. After she had sent my dad off for work, she’d wake my brother up with a cup of warm coffee and me with a cup of hot chocolate. I wasn’t allowed to drink coffee until I was “of age,” which ended up being only 10 years old, but she didn’t want me to feel left out watching everyone sip their warm beverages to help get the day going. She would often turn her stereo on while she got ready for work. I’d be in my room, staring at the popcorn ceiling and wishing I was sick so I didn’t have to go to school that day, and she’d be in the bathroom, belting out whatever lines she knew to the Bill Withers or Prince song she was listening to while she fashioned her water fountain hairdo into a more suitable style for an office job. She’d work her 9 to 5, pick me up from daycare, and then we’d go home to listen to more music while she lovingly prepared dinner for us. This was our daily routine for most of my childhood, until my mom started to get sick.

By the time I was in junior high, my mom was diagnosed with fibromyalgia, an illness that made it hard for her to focus and stay awake, and she was constantly in pain. Along with the fibromyalgia, she also struggled with major depression, anxiety, and schizophrenia. She lost her job as a result. The mornings of hot beverages and “Purple Rain” quickly became a thing of the past. My morning routine changed, but I still held onto some of my morning rituals. I would still lay in my messy bed, staring at the increasingly hideous popcorn ceiling, counting the cobwebs that had accumulated in the corners and wishing I had any excuse to stay home from school that day. After my morning brooding session, I’d wake my mom up with a warm cup of coffee and a handful of pills. She’d throw them into her mouth the way a little kid does with a handful of fruit loops, tilting her head all the way back and using her index finger to shove the stragglers that had been caught in the corners into her mouth, then she’d take a big gulp of coffee to wash them down. I’d walk with her to the living room and set her on the couch in the seat that used to bear treats but now had a gaping hole in the side, exposing the mechanism of the recliner and reminding us that there were no chocolate prizes in the house. I’d put her coffee on the table and set up the stereo so she could listen to some Third Day while the pills worked to wake up her organs, muscles, and brain. She clung to her Christian Rock during these times; she needed the reassur-

ance that someone was looking out for her, that there was a greater plan, and that's why she was losing her faculties.

By the time I'd come home after school, she'd be up and moving, usually dancing and singing while she rode the little bit of productivity the medicine allowed her. She would still cook dinner for us—usually hamburger helper made with love, and burned more often than not. One night she was making us the beef stroganoff flavor, which was my dad's favorite. I, personally, preferred the cheesy flavors, like the cheesy enchilada or cheeseburger boxes, but I'd take whatever I could get. While she was cooking up the ground beef and listening to her Third Day on the CD player, she got distracted by the mountain of random things on the dining room table. While she was trying to sort through the mail, books, and grocery bags and boxes filled with mysterious and miscellaneous items, the kitchen started to get smoky. My room, which was directly off of the kitchen, started to get smoky too. So I peeled myself off of my bed, confused about the smoke but happy to have a reason to take a break from my homework, and I walked out of my room to see the ground beef on the stove was starting to turn black.

"Mom, what are you making?" I yelled into the next room.

"Oh shit! I forgot I was cooking," she yelled back as she scrambled back into the kitchen to see how the meat was coming along.

"I can still make this work," she said, pulling the pot off of the burner and reaching into the spice rack to grab whatever seasoning she thought might help hide the burned flavor.

We always had one of those unnecessarily large glass bottles of Tapatio to help drown the burned taste out, so we didn't complain. My mom would cook (and burn) food for us until her legs could no longer support her frail body for extended periods of time and her memory started failing her to the point of weekly kitchen fires.

This was around the time my mom entered what my family likes to call her "yelling at God" era. I was starting college at this point. The soundtrack to my morning brooding sessions was no longer soul, funk, or gospel accompanied by backup singers and string guitars. The new soundtrack sounded more like slam poetry with all of the emotion and none of the rhythm. My mom didn't want to listen to gospel anymore. She didn't want to hear God's message; she wanted Him to hear hers.

One morning, I woke up to a loud sound coming from the other side of the house. It was still dark outside. Were we being robbed? I sat quietly, listening for the sounds of an intruder rustling through drawers or disconnecting the stereo system. I heard my mom's voice; she was shouting and sounded angry. Maybe she's yelling at the intruder, trying to scare them off? I listened closer.

"Fuck you! How could you do this to me?! After all I've done to serve you! Why don't you just fucking kill me already?!"

"After all I've done to serve you?" I thought. Then it hit me, she wasn't talking to an intruder, she was talking to God. And she was demanding some answers.

After about a year or two of this morning soundtrack, we got some answers. Not from God, but from a doctor. In addition to her existing conditions, she was diagnosed with untreatable glaucoma and Lewy body dementia. She was losing her vision and her mind. And eventually, I was going to lose her.

This news from the doctor was a relief, but not the kind that feels like a weight being lifted off your shoulders. This news felt like an added weight, like her illnesses had popped out of her body and grew an adult body of its own, and it clung to my shoulders, digging its feet into the ground as I dragged it around with me everywhere I went. At least we knew what needed to be done to help meet my mom's needs, but we also knew there wouldn't be a happy ending. My mom continued to yell at God, no longer seeking an an-

swer to “why.” She wanted to hurt God the way He had hurt her. She wanted Him to know how betrayed she felt. After all of these years of being a great wife, mother, pastor, sponsor, and friend, this was the payment she got?

While she still had her vision, her time was split between yelling at God and sitting in her recliner—the one absent of chocolate treats—while she watched *Lucifer*, her favorite show. She knew she was losing her vision so she insisted on watching this show on repeat because Lucifer “had the perfect ass” and she wanted to see it as much as she could before she couldn’t see any longer. She wanted that image cemented in her mind despite her deteriorating ability to form new memories. Even after she lost her vision, we would continue to play *Lucifer* on the TV to keep her entertained.

One day when we were watching *Lucifer*, or rather I was watching *Lucifer* while she just listened, I asked her:

“Mom, do you still see Lucifer’s cheeks in your mind’s eye?”

And with a big toothless grin and a giggle reminiscent of a goblin’s, she said, “Oh yeah, baby girl, you know I do.”

Her plan had worked. Sure, she was losing her vision and her mental faculties, but she wasn’t ready to let go of her sense of humor.

As the years passed and the dementia progressed, we couldn’t rely on television to keep her mind occupied anymore. She started experiencing the films and shows as if she was a character within them; she believed the events in the films were happening to her. One movie we had put on to keep her occupied while my dad and I were cooking dinner one night had a character who had gotten pregnant and was struggling to put herself into a position where she could adequately care for this baby once it came. As I was finishing cutting up some lettuce for the salad, I heard from the next room over:

“How do you expect me to care for this baby in the state I’m in?!”

My mom was crying and angry and scared all at the same time. That was when we realized we needed to find a different way to help her pass the time.

What can a person do to stay entertained even after losing their vision and most of their motor skills? Most of her previous hobbies were out of the question. No more television, no more coloring, no more jewelry making, and no more reading. Fortunately, she was only blind and not deaf. We needed to get some music back into her life, and with the help of a little Amazon Echo Dot connected to Amazon Music, that is exactly what we did. It was time for a brand new morning routine.

I set up the Dot for her and asked what she wanted to listen to first. With bright, foggy eyes, she yelled:

“James Brown!”

“Alexa,” I said, “play ‘The Payback’ by James Brown.”

My mom stood up out of her recliner like a baby deer taking its first steps—a little uneasy and shaky with her knees not quite facing the correct direction, but still confident—and she danced. The aged depression in the cushion of her recliner got deeper that day as she would dance, fall back onto the seat, then get back up and dance some more, over and over again. We listened to James Brown, Prince, and INXS while she danced and reminisced with her old friend, recalling memories from when she was a child and a young woman.

She was still rocking the chocolate fountain ponytail and a purple robe, and she was still eating her medication like a handful of fruity dry cereal, but she had gotten a little

piece of her old routine back, one that she had abandoned years before when the weight of her illnesses smothered her so much that she began to lose pieces of herself. She got her music back. It was like an old friend that she had lost track of over the years because she took one path and they took another, separated by miles of land and sea. She didn't know how much she had missed her friend until they finally reconnected. And the reunion was spectacular.

Music and dancing soon became her primary source of joy as the dementia stole her memories and awareness. When she was lost and we were unable to convince her that she was in fact at home and not at her deceased father's house or in a moving car, the only thing to help ground her was a playlist of 80's hip hop music. Watching her deteriorate from a vibrant, smart, and loving woman into a small, scared, and confused version of herself is the hardest thing I've ever had to endure. Some days it was hard to remember who she was when I was 8 and more interested in math than music. It was hard to picture this lively woman who had the best sense of humor and the biggest heart I've ever seen. She had been sick for almost half of my life, afterall, so the bulk of my memories with her consisted of suffering. But when we would dance in the living room, hand in hand without a single thought of math crossing my mind, the room filled to the brim and overflowing with the sound of En Vogue, Salt-N-Pepa, and my mom singing "Whatta Man," I got a glimpse of who my mom really was behind her foggy eyes and memories.

Now that she's moved on from this world and the illnesses that plagued her for almost 14 years, all I need to do in order to feel close to her is say:

"Alexa, play some 80's hip hop," and if I close my eyes, it feels like I'm back in that living room next to that ancient blue couch with my mom dancing just a few feet away.

When You Consider This Winter

Alex Biternas

January - West Yellowstone

The forest faced a wall of hailstones, Earth was pouring, shedding them. From their slippery trail, each pine shook beneath. And though they tried disguising their scorn, the ground stood cold so the ice would not hurt. Any vegetation left, green, looked blue, as though the life from its veins could not bloom. Yet, wind blew and threw icicles from the shadow of home, numbing their chill. When their spikes hit the Earth hard, they could only shatter into a million diamonds. Covering the ground in a dull sparkle, for which the sun could never catch a glimpse. The snow and ice, for all its beauty, was eternally eclipsed. At night, the clouds might part and offer the somber and snow-covered soil an ounce of light; but even a full moon could only hold so much light.

February - Electric Peak

From a distance, the white cast of Yellowstone seemed comforting. Drowning in white, one could almost confuse it for being bright. The tempest slowed only when you closed your eyes. You dreamt silly, woolen, dreams. Ones that confused you and made you desire hibernation. And while watching waterfalls still and lakes freeze over, you sensed a cold which silenced footsteps and muffled cries for help. They proved the snowstorm's veil was an early midnight, not a goodnight. Even in deep slumber, the cliffs you hung off of were not cryptic; they were warning, sounding alarms, and howling an icy chill down your back. Though you were deaf to their calls, the cold made no sense to you, none at all. In winter storms past, there were times when midnight melted and brought you warmth. This time, frostbitten, black, and blue; mittens had not saved you. Surviving black ice and seasons of avalanches meant many gloomy hours, with no one to call to. It's here, in a hollowed trunk of spruce you met solitude. You rolled into her decay. She tempted you to isolate and wrap yourself away from the few voices you cherished most. It seemed that, while unforgiving to most, her burrow was a pleasant calm. She convinced you to join a bitter codependency and adjusted your illusion of warmth. Her words were a sticky sap, a sucrose seducing form of harm. Those promises raced far and reached the deepest parts of your soul. It was impossible to see spring approach when her lies rose to your ear. She was the only person who truly knew you; being alone was no longer your biggest fear. Solitude created a form of agoraphobia, custom, just for you. You were thankful that, in those times, she remained a canopy from a reality which overwhelmed you.

April - Fairy Creek

The sun rose more often now, with time having passed. The eternal midnight you had become accustomed to felt like it had started to move past. Streams cascaded, no longer a still image, and the ground softened when footsteps appeared. Finally, the tempest had ended and roots had awoken. Vivid colors filled your sight; yellow-green hues covered the places you thought had died. When compared to solitude, spring surmounted every expectation and you could no longer find solace in her desolation. Thankfully, spending spring soothed you. You did not know the winter had been that hard on the body, how it had resulted in your frostbite and broken all that tore you whole. Springtime was a salve, healing you slowly. The sun reached through you, thawing each atom and making them true. And while solitude was dormant, there was no longer silence; you could not help but feel resentment for those bitter promises made. Solitude's love was an early grave. Loneliness had been a choice you felt obligated to take. But, in retrospect, her company was not the only way to

feel safe; it was unfair she had made you feel that way.

June - Gibbon Falls

When summer blazed, hot, you thought you would never wear winter's cloak again. Your energy expenditure, now, spent carelessly and cheaply. There was an over-abundance of everything. Drunk on dandelion wine, blushed, you started to seek comfort in others. You had nearly forgotten how much strength you could build with the help of another. Breathing steady, you would hold hands; even with a risk they might leave you, the fear did not overwhelm your thoughts. The grass was lush, it made sleep feel like an option. Days blended together, they lasted longer when you were no longer your own stranger. But no matter how much growth you saw made, rebuilding from nothing was tiresome and cruel and a lonely winter loomed.

November - Half dome

Leaves fell. They dried and shriveled under the dimmed sun. The wind combed them into gentle piles while they awaited the inevitable. You walked trails and climbed high peaks. The air thinned and made you lose your breath. Slowly, the comfort that sought you on warmer days started to slip away. A sun that once engulfed you, now merely grazes your skin. You fear the coming winter, turning your back on all the progress you made. Empty arms stood, the only thing keeping you from the icy fire which closely trailed. You pray for the shelter you have built, and cherished, to withstand.

Contemporary

Brayden Cales

I was seven years old when I saw my first scary movie. Mom was working late, and we couldn't afford a babysitter, so she left me with my teenage Aunt Kayla who forgot to turn off *House of a 1000 Corpses* when she went to bed. The song "She's a Brick House" waltzing down the stairs woke me. I tried to make sense of the oddly shaped heads of each character. The orange graininess of the film and the camera tilted, ever so slightly, to the side—kind of like a poorly filmed home movie. Bill Hudley, played by Rainn Wilson, was being cut to pieces by Otis B. Driftwood, played by Bill Moseley—if you've seen it, you know. *"He's been a great help to me, a real blessing, I mean I couldn't have asked for a better specimen... this dry spell I've had here...total block...total block...Where is he...Where is he...Behold...Fishboy...No this can't be real, can't be real, can't be real...Oh, it's real, real as I want it to be Mama...Fuck you, you fucking freak."*

Fun fact: Lionel Richie was the first lead singer for the Commodores, but Clyde Orange sang "Brick House." The original lineup included Milan Williams on keyboards, William King playing trumpet, Walter "Clyde" Orange on drums, Ronald LaPread playing bass, Thomas McClary on lead guitar, and Lionel Richie—doing what Lionel Richie does best. It was the 70's and the Commodores had run rampant. They signed a record deal with Motown Records in 1972 and in 1974 released their first three hits, "Machine Gun," "I Feel Sanctified," and "Slippery When Wet." In 1975 they joined the Rolling Stones on their U.S. tour and in 1976 released two number one hits, "Just To Be Close To You" and "Easy." The scene ended with a video clip of Otis and Baby (played by Sheri Moon Zombie) kissing over Rainn Wilson's mutilated—half-fish half-corps—body.

I still don't understand how the knowledge of personal safety justifies the desire to watch scary movies. My mother told me that scary movies can trigger a fight-or-flight response, which comes with all sorts of adrenaline, endorphins, and dopamine. The brain then *rationaly* processes these chemicals in combination with its surroundings and concludes that the experience isn't a real threat, that it's *just a movie* meant to establish paranoia, distress, and fear. It was 2007; this knowledge should have been more than enough reason to fall in line with the other trepidatious movie buffs, their habitual masochistic bingeing, and the critically acclaimed, sadistic genre, this is horror. My aunt wasn't allowed to drive yet—or had just been deemed *of age* to get her license. My mother dropped me off at my grandma's house right before five o'clock—just in time for dinner. I hated her cooking. She loved Lionel Richie, just as much as she loved *cocido madrileño*. I was 15 years old when I realized that her cooking stayed the same, and as I got older, she would tell me more and more about *los comodors* and Lionel; their Top Ten hit "Brickhouse" in 1977 would be the one to earn the group an American Music Award and became the biggest-selling record produced by Motown ever. My grandma was right, they were pretty talented, so why was it that every time I heard that song my skin crawled, my breath tightened, and my eyes started to tear? It's just a song...it's meant to make me feel that way.

In 2016, I watched *The Devil's Rejects*, the sequel to Rob Zombie's 2003 *House of 1000 Corpses*. It must have been December because my wrestling team had a tournament in a couple of weeks that I was preparing for. My grandpa had shown up one morning to take me to practice, which was weird because my mom usually was the one to take me. I grabbed an extra pair of clothes to change afterward and hopped into his truck—it didn't occur to me that my mother had been crying. When coach said he didn't think I was going

to show up today, I was confused, “*Why wouldn’t I?*” My coach, direct and to the point, was never the one to *beat around the bush*, I admired him for that. “*Your uncle overdosed on drugs last night... he’s dead, your family didn’t tell you...shit... I’m... I’m sorry.*” It didn’t bother me. Mom was mad though, she cried for days, I went inside, I knew the other kids had no idea, I had no idea, I knew he was dead, I knew that I was supposed to feel something, I tried to cry at his funeral, I couldn’t, I was told that “*It’s disrespectful not to go up and pay my respects to my dead uncle,*” I hid in the back row of the funeral home while everyone else shuffled to the front crying.

Fun fact: Rob Zombie, in making *The Devil’s Rejects*, took inspiration from a real-life murderous “*Family*,” the Manson Family. “*I am the devil, and I am here to do the Devil’s work*” Otis B. Driftwood, as well as Charles “*Tex*” Watson announced to his victims as he murdered them—what a catchphrase. The gore in this movie was surprisingly dry, given its overall rating. Rob Zombie’s choice was to “*Not be light on the gore,*” but I get it, he had to follow certain guidelines, certain *parameters*, in order to screen in theaters.

My uncle loved scary movies. I would wake up some nights and he would be in the living room, going to town on a bucket of popcorn, watching yet another interpretation of an interpretation of another Amityville horror, whatever helped to get his scary movie fix in for the night, and I’d join him from time to time, just for a moment, before the genres intense rhythm became too much for me. The scene with Otis and Baby played over and over in my head, both of them laughing and kissing...laughing and kissing...laughing and kissing. Bill’s body propped up for everyone to see. Still, they continued laughing and kissing...laughing and kissing...laughing and kissing, while the Commodores sang “*mighty, mighty...well put-together, everybody knows, this is how the story goes*” in the background. I felt sick: my grandma’s cooking, the music, the laughter, death. I brushed it off like it was nothing. I didn’t cry, I wasn’t afraid of Otis, or Baby, I knew death was a part of life, I knew my family was heartbroken and I knew it was my fault. I should have stayed asleep, I should have reacted differently, I should have known that this wasn’t real, that it was a response that I had made up in my head, that this was how I was supposed to feel. I was seven...it was just a song...it was just a movie...nine years later... It was just my uncle.

Stressed on a Lab Bench

Mariam Dalqamouni

It is within such a cold and clean lab, with the sound of the equipment flickering, the unpleasant, keen smell of the chemicals in the air, and the pressure of time that creates the picture which defines my everyday existence as a student studying biology. The chemistry lab is protective yet a struggle, where the world of pressure and the scientific world meet, proving the powerful aspects of one's relationship with burden and control. The lab bench and the labs themselves become the mirror into my world, showing my scientific goals and exposing my anxieties, weaknesses, and growth.

The lab bench is where I spend most of my time, from hours on end, sometimes even stretched to the limit of my patience and focus, all while trying to carry out experiments, research, compare data, and figure out results. The lab is a place where precision and organization are vital and where failure can happen in minutes. This is where the magic happens, and my whole heart is poured into the work to understand life under extreme pressure. If you had to imagine yourself stepping inside with me, you would hear the light tapping sounds of the Bunsen burner turning on and the soft beeps of the machines mixing or reading data, and the loud vacuum sound of the fume hood sucking in the air filled with chemicals. There's a quiet tension in the air, but this specific pressure is the pressure of expectations on me to excel in academics and get the results right.

In the beginning, the lab might look like a safe place where I can relax from all the craziness and noise in the world and dive in the science like I'm diving in the ocean, touching the seaweed and creatures, learning and discovering new things as I go deeper and deeper. The lab chair, the organized arrangement of glass—fragile and sharp—and the stainless-steel tools become a small area of order in a world so often chaotic and noisy. The lab rules I have to follow give me a sense of control and mastery in my experiments. In some ways, the lab has become a fight against stress, the pressure of wanting to control both the controllable and uncontrollable sides of science and my life. The lab I once was comfortable in became a place where each experiment felt like it was adding a block to a Jenga tower that would eventually fall over and collapse.

Centrifuges are a set of devices in the lab that just draw my attention no matter how many times I have used them. It produces this weird, not quite intimidating hum. Placing my tubes inside it, balancing it well so it wouldn't send the machine into uncontrollable shakes, I could feel a hint of anticipation buildup in tension. The centrifuge does double-duty in my opinion: it is an instrument of separation, yet it symbolizes disorder that I try to hold at bay. Once it starts working, the resonance becomes more vigorous, creating a strong vibration that echoes across my bones. The samples in the tubes begin to spin faster, making a tornado-like movement that divides the factors of the mixture and purifies it down to its essential elements.

The higher the acceleration of the machine, the more the centrifugal force builds up, and I hold my breath while observing the tubes spinning. It reminds me of those great forces working upon me, like the pressure of success, the drive for performance, and all the expectations swirling around. Standing here, watching this centrifuge at work, I could feel everything yanking at me in my life. The centrifuge gives me a look at how there are struggles in my own life, and then a time of rest; the machine spins like my thoughts but eventually ends in clearness and all chaos and calm falls into place.

The centrifuge then begins to stop, the sound of the machine's buzz softens, and the mixture in the tube is separated. The solution, a mixture of many factors, is now divided and ready for me to analyze. In the whirling madness, within the centrifuge, lies the key to an understanding of the formerly hidden. And in that very process, there is a mirror image of myself, drowned within the sounds of life, and yet still eager to separate the things that

matter from the things that do not.

And then there is the fume hood: the constant sound of its vacuum fan becomes a sort of background noise while I am working, reminding me of the risks I am taking with the chemicals I use. The area in the fume hood is always colder, holding a clean and crisp pressure. It whirls around me, a soft current tugging the gases of the chemicals I am dealing with away from me. The air smells like the stinging stench of acid and other solutions that burn my nostrils and make my eyes water. The fume hood is like a barrier between the world of chemicals, risk, and danger and my safety and its fragility.

The feeling of the fume hood's confinement makes me feel secure, yet also lonely. The incorrect use of chemicals can be very harmful and even cause death; they are isolated and sucked in by the suction in the fume hood. A place offering only a misplaced feeling of control that by following its rules and procedures, I somehow will be able to guard against the craziness of the outside world. It's the perfection of not making a mistake, of not slipping up. However, in that fume hood, quiet and safe, I realized that something could go wrong even within the most controlled environment: one little mistake or one precaution that was forgotten, and the world I'd built could fall apart, the one in the lab, and the one I've built in real life.

In moments like these, the lab becomes a reflection of the flaws inside me. It is within the sterilized boundaries of the lab that I try to make sense of life, to seek order out of craziness, and to understand, for sure, the complications of biology. But with each experiment I do, a more profound truth shows me that proficiency, like control, is often but a misconception. The lab bench, where I try and master experiments, is also where I deal with my insecurities. The machines help me realize that some things are not in my control, and like the experiments conducted, I have to keep trying to understand, grow, and succeed.

Finding Home Within

Mehak Dixit

Dreams are like seeds. Some grow quickly into bright flowers that catch everyone's eye. Others take longer to root and quietly stay hidden in the soil. My friends' dreams were like wildflowers. They were vibrant and often changed with the seasons. They wanted to be astronauts, artists, or fashion designers—dreams that felt and sounded big and exciting. Meanwhile, I carried a little dream—to become a doctor. It did not feel as exciting or vibrant next to their wildflowers. I would try to make my seed sound as magical as their gardens by saying, “I want to heal people,” but it still was not as colorful. As we grew older, their wildflowers began to change. The astronaut went for accounting. The artist wanted to study communications. The designer never got to go to college. But my dream stayed the same, and its roots dug deeper.

That's when I decided to plant my seed somewhere new. Moving to America meant I could be one step closer to a dream that I tightly clung to. But the soil was unfamiliar, and the uncertainty felt like a big boulder that I could not lift. I left behind my family, my friends, and the life I knew. It was scary, standing in a new place with no guarantee that my dream would grow the way I hoped. The worry was initially overshadowed by joy. The excitement of pursuing the “American Dream” that I had grown up seeing on television and in movies gave me optimism. My heart pounded as I got on the plane and began to count down the hours until I touched down. I had always dreamed of going to college in America, and the excitement of actually being able to live that dream overwhelmed everything else at that time.

What felt like a dream as a child quickly turned into a sobering reality. America was not at all rainbows and sunshine like I had imagined. It was a battlefield, and I was fighting loneliness, culture shock, and homesickness, but they wouldn't budge. Every day, I struggled to bottle up my feelings. There were small moments that made me feel that I did not belong in this country. While my classmates would chat, I struggled to find words because of the language barrier. Their conversations were full of references that I didn't understand, but I still forced a laugh here and there in an attempt to be involved. But when it got exhausting, I would sit there silently, feeling disconnected and like an outsider in my own story. My room would echo with silence. And every phone call back home felt like a weighted blanket of guilt. Could I tell my parents, who had worked so hard to help me get here, that I was struggling? That the money we spent, the sacrifices we made, might be for nothing because I felt so isolated? Telling them I was struggling made me feel like I was admitting that I couldn't carry the weight of my dream, and I couldn't bring myself to do that.

I missed little things that America could never give me. I missed the smell of home-cooked meals throughout the house, the chatter of my family that filled the evenings, and the comfort of my old life, where everything made sense. I missed how I could go back ‘home’ to someone after a long, exhausting day. I could vent to my friends every time I felt sad or upset. I missed being in a place where I knew what I was doing and did not have to ask questions or explain my existence. The hardest part was the silence that followed each victory. Every time I did well on an exam or had a great job interview, I wanted to rush back home to my mom to tell her all about it. But sadly, my house wasn't home anymore. Celebrating my culture and festivals through a screen on FaceTime no longer felt like a celebration. Seeing my family gathered together in an attempt to make me feel involved, while I sat alone on my bed, felt like their efforts were in vain. In times like these, I couldn't help but wonder if it was all worth it, moving to a new country. I would sometimes question if I

was losing a part of myself while chasing this American dream. But every time this doubt crept in, I would remind myself why I was here in the first place and why all these struggles would be worth it. Becoming a doctor was one dream I never let go of, no matter what. So, I could not give up on this dream—or on myself.

Today, three years into this journey, I realize how much I have grown. The growth isn't just physical, but also emotional and mental. I have learned to cook my favorite meals, a skill that feels both like a victory and a bittersweet reminder of home. As I stand in my small kitchen, with the pan sizzling with oil and the air filled with the aroma of spices, I close my eyes and let the scent take me back to my childhood, when I would stand in the kitchen with my mom, chatting and laughing while she cooked. I can almost imagine her voice echoing in my tiny kitchen, which sometimes brings me back to reality. But the memory no longer makes me sad; instead, I smile as I think of the triumph I've achieved by being able to cook like my mom. Evenings are no longer lonely. Laughter and chatter with my friends fill the silence I once dreaded. Coming home after a long evening with them, I realize how grateful I am for these moments.

I now realize that growth doesn't always happen in ideal circumstances. Sometimes the soil is not in the best condition, and the sun feels too far away. But even through all that, the seeds find a way to push through. My dream that once felt small and ordinary has become profound and powerful. Its roots are even stronger because of the struggles and lessons that I've learned. I've learned to hold the weight of my dream without letting it become a burden on me.

The View from Deerfield

Teagan Faulkenburg

2007

It's past my bedtime. I peek through the slots of the balcony railing, trying to see my family below. My mom's laugh rings through the house, her song joined by her sisters, the chorus is a common sound this time of night. I scoot my butt down the stair, slowly, inch by inch, knowing that the fourth step down squeaks just on the edge, but they won't hear me. My cotton pajamas pull on a splinter from the step on the way down, but I am more bothered by the sand between my toes. I wipe my feet on the rug by the front door, trying to get the sand off them before I sneak into the kitchen. The brick of the fireplace is coarse against my cheek as I peer around the corner, trying to see why they are laughing. I am too little to understand what they are saying. There's condensation on the windows; the sunset blurred through the drops of warm water. I almost can't see the ocean through the live oaks. The women in the kitchen roar again with laughter as they spill white wine on my grandma's glass table. It still smells like the crab boil from dinner.

Our neighbor, Candace, is over. Her orange hair blends in with the sunset. She's painting a picture that I don't understand. The colors are red, and orange, and pink! I can hear the click of her pens as she picks a new color. There are purple polka-dots on the canvas, looking an awful lot like my aunt Leslie's dress. Candace is a real artist, my momma told me. I know that what makes her real is that she's doing a painting right here, in front of me, in my house. Momma says she painted a bush—I don't know why that makes her famous, but I watch her anyway, trying to see how her purple polka-dots turn into a family portrait.

Miss Lovely is talking about her trampoline and her birthday suit, and I want to know why my momma thinks it's so funny. I lean forward just further, trying to see what color pen Miss Lovely's going to pick up next, when the fourth stair squeaks. I hear the quick pitter-patter of feet running back to bed and a glimpse of the white cotton of my brother's pajamas disappearing down the hall. When I turn back to my momma, she's already inviting me into her lap, offering me my own pens and paper to color. Her voice sounds like the silver bells of our Christmas tree. As I climb up into her lap, I place one hand on the table and grip the fabric of my momma's scratchy pink dress as she lifts me up.

2010

I giggle as my mom catches me with my fingers in the bowl of frosting again. The sticky sweetness of the buttercream makes me start to reach for the spoon with which we've been mixing it. I'm old enough that I understand I shouldn't be doing that, but it's my birthday this week. Mommy and I are making my cake, mine and my sister's cake. We are going to be celebrating together this year; the reason is forgotten in the excitement of what mom's baking. The second cake has finished cooling, the scent of warm vanilla in the air, and we can frost the caterpillar. My sister is shouting the colors she wants on him. I am trying to mix the food coloring into the buttercream, but I can't get the right combo of blue and yellow to make green. I'm aiming for the perfect shade of green-blue, like the cool laminate countertops. Adleigh is asking mom for more gummy worms on the cake, her sticky hands grabbing at the bag. My mom asks me if we should do chocolate chips or M&M's for the eyes. There are two perfect blue M&M's already picked out on the counter.

The shade of green that I want finally emerges from the mess of frosting, and I move to mix the orange. Aunt Kirsten is frosting the butterfly. Its wings are sloppy, cartoonish, just like the worm-shape of the caterpillar. The sound of the shower turning on upstairs makes me pout, sticking out my lips. I was supposed to be next in line. Either Lindsey or

Gretchen must have jumped in the shower next, after the beach. Someone's soggy footprints lead from the backdoor, through the kitchen, and disappear up the stairs. I must have missed them while mixing colors.

This last week, I picked out a book about bugs at the library while my mom got another Lemony Snicket book on tape for the car rides. I remember that ants have three sections to their bodies, and butterflies do too. The caterpillar needs antennae. I reach over and stick pretzels in its head while my sister asks if we can bring the cake to the water to blow out candles. My mom tells her it might make the gators hungry.

My sister's shrieking laughter is contagious. I say the sharks are more likely. She shouts back that the sea turtles eat worms.

2017

In the summer going into my junior year of high school, I sit in the white room of my grandfather's house and paint the red cardinals I can see outside. I can hear cicadas through the glass panes of the windows as the humidity condenses in familiar droplets. My mom is singing in the kitchen; she's scrubbing dishes from lunch, something local, caught this morning. Her voice is as bright as ever, but she sings quieter than she used to.

I am sunburnt; and I can still taste the salt on my skin. My sister is having her turn in the shower. I am third in line. No matter how many times I rinse off, I always end up tracking sand through the house.

While I wait my turn, I trace my fingers over the soft silk cover of the couch in a practiced motion. I once hid in the cabinets of this room, behind the fossil my grandfather swears he found himself. I used to believe that story.

The island feels smaller since I've grown. It's hard to imagine that I was once small enough to fit on one step of the spiral stairs or slide down the banister. My grandfather's treehouse has decayed overtime, but I can't remember the last time I had climbed up there. I wonder if I outgrew it, or if it outlasted its purpose.

We are installing new floors next week, tearing the wallpaper off the walls tomorrow, and replacing those god-awful teal countertops the next week. It feels disrespectful to paint over my grandmother's brushed coral walls and remove the curtains that match the goose down chairs. The house has always been frozen in time, but now I am old enough to be the catalyst to start the clock once more. We are hoping to get the house on the market by September. I have one birthday left in this paradise of my own.

A Sneaker Head's Walk Towards Freedom

Isaias Romero

What does freedom mean to you? Is it that thrill and joy of running into the playground you had as a kid to escape for recess at school? Or could it be the flashy clothes, cars, and stylish aesthetics that make you feel like a Hollywood icon? Or if anything else, is it the ability to do whatever you want, whenever you want, because you worked hard your whole life to finally achieve ultimate freedom? As I grow older, I realize that the definition of freedom changes from childhood to adulthood, and the ability to experience that joy and excitement that we once felt as a child can no longer be experienced. With more responsibilities, more workdays, and the focus to help provide for our families, the freedom we can experience as adults can only be experienced once every so often. Oh, how our ancestors fought so hard to experience our eternal freedom!

A) Jordan 2 Chicago

When I was a child, I wanted to fly like Michael Jordan. Like how he did in the 1987 NBA Slam Dunk Contest, when he made a dunk from the free throw line. He made a rush towards the free throw line and soared into the air as he slammed the basketball into the rim. It had to be the sneakers. Those beautiful Jordan 2 sneakers must've had some magic potion that would allow him to soar like an eagle in the air. I was certain as a kid that if I had those shoes, I was also going to be a basketball superstar that could fly and dunk the basketball, just as Michael Jordan did during the slam dunk competition. After I had purchased these sneakers for my basketball tryouts, many kids couldn't help but glamour over them. I was certain that I was going to be able to dunk the basketball like Michael Jordan. As I would launch myself into the air to try and dunk the ball into the rim, I could barely even graze the net. Michael must've sold me a defective pair of Jordan 2s, or else I'm pretty sure it was the shoes that were preventing me from dunking that basketball into the rim!

B) Soccer cleats

A lot of my joy as a teenage boy was found on that green pitch. Boys running, families cheering, all exclaiming for their child to see them score a goal. One of the items that was most exciting for players on my team was who had the nicest style cleats. Some had the Nike Mercurial soccer cleats of the famous soccer player Cristiano Ronaldo, and others would wear the famous Adidas F50s by Leo Messi. I wasn't too much of a fan of those cleats because I knew that my skills came from how we would train/practice on the pitch, and I would wear my cheaper Puma soccer cleats. My teammates would think otherwise, but there was that one day I was able to score 4 goals with those Puma cleats! The following week, a few of my teammates showed up wearing the same Puma cleats as me.

C) Jordan 1 Travis Scott High

When I was in high school, the Jordan 1 Travis Scott was a highly coveted sneaker that was set to release on the Nike sneakers app. The launch would occur at 7 AM, and there would be millions of people around the world who would log in to the app to try and purchase these sneakers. The launch was an epic failure. Many customers were not aware that there were only a limited number of sneakers available (around 50,000), but I was one of the lucky customers that won. When I received the sneakers in the mail, I couldn't help but to glamour over the sneakers, the big cream-colored swoosh, and the brown hints of suede that would pair so well with an outfit I could not wait to wear to school the next day. It wasn't until one of my friends called me the same day I had purchased the sneakers and

said, do you know how much the Travis Scott Jordan 1s are valued at now? I questioned him, how much? He said, \$1,500! I decided not to wear them, and they've currently been sitting in my custom glass shoe container for the past 6 years!

D) Marching band sneakers

Every time I had arrived home from marching band practice, my family and friends would look at my smelly, dirty, old sneakers that would sit on the front porch and tell me how hideous they were to look at. I will admit, they were not pretty, but I was the only one who knew what those shoes represented. Many hours and days were spent on the high school football field, and we would march to play beautiful music that would leave our audience in awe. The magic of music takes a lot of time to perfect, but not nearly as much as the ability to march on the field as well, and the shoes reminded me of how all that dirt/grime represented that time and practice we as marching band students would spend mastering our love of music for our peers to listen to and enjoy.

E) Work shoes

As I get ready to go to work with my black-colored jeans, my dress shirt, and black leather jacket, I can't forget but to wear my black saddle leather Chelsea boots. The belt buckle that locks my foot into the sneakers gets annoying at times. It straps me in like a cat that's stuck in a cage and can't help but scratch and scream for escape. I hate the feeling of the shoes at times, but it somehow triggers my mind to stay focused for the tasks that await me. These Chelsea boots also give me a few more inches of height, making me feel like the statue of liberty as I look over my peers. I get mixed feelings with these shoes at times, but they truly exhibit my commitment to working with confidence.

F) Kobe 8 Independence Day

Red, white, and blue, the colors that represent our freedom in America. That pledge that we would say ever since kindergarten: "I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America and to the Republic for which it stands, one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all." Oh, how our ancestors/soldiers fought for our freedom, and now we are free. It seems that way, but limitations/laws are stringent, so that we can only express our freedom under the law's conditions. These Kobe 8s are only to be worn during special occasions out of the year to show off the colors of the American flag, just as how our representation of freedom can only be expressed through the lighting of fireworks on the night of the 4th of July.

The Imposter Test

Jhsmari Santos

Have you ever felt like everything you did was terrible? Do you feel the need to disprove yourself with every action? Does constant unworthiness haunt you despite everything you have been through? Do you feel like a fraud? If these sound familiar, then this Imposter Test is for you! Take this test and see the results!

When receiving compliments from family, friends, or strangers, how do you react?

1: Like a blue hydrangea getting a much needed spritz of morning dew...in a fecund field laden with the aroma of fresh growth...with the spring sun shining down upon me...Hey, compliments are nice!

2: Ah yes. Thank you.

3: Oh, I can never be as great as you describe gosh I was just so nervous and I was stumbling the whole way and I completely forgot what I was supposed to do and did I tell you how much I was nervous about this it really wasn't that great to me honestly you should see me when I'm at my best

4: i can see it in your eye, your lie, and in time, as i process all you have said to me, i simply cannot believe you.

Where does your creativity stem from?

1: The mind

2: The soul

3: The urge

4: Courtly love. "a love at once illicit and morally elevating, passionate and disciplined, humiliating and exalting, human and transcendent." Often utilized by Guillaume De Machaut in his numerous motets. The 14th century resonates within me. Qui plus aime plus endure.

5: The avoidance of failure.

When creating, what does this process feel like?

1: smoothlywithnointerruptionsandeachthoughtsimplyflowingontothenextandtotheoneafterthatandtothefollowingonewithnodoubtinmindwhatsoeverandonandonandonagainandon...

2: Perhaps some slight trepidation, a little here, a little there, ahh forget it, ill just leave it be, forget about it later, it's no big deal

3: That was not the right step. what was I supposed to do for this again? it's all falling apart. god please. where is my inspiration when I need it. the energy, the insight. You have done this time and time before, Mirth from out of your hands like rushing, raging, ravenous rapids. And now you forget. It has slipped out of your hands –

cataclysm...cascade...collapse...i was never meant to be in this position. please. i ache for the elation of freedom. A simpler time. When the eye of god is upon you how might you suffer

- 1:terribly so
- 2:like death
- 3:no one will believe me
- 4:worthy of failure

that too cycle over
Compile it all, let it go through you and let
It will happen again

4: Its fun, I like making things

How do you feel after putting your hard work into an assignment? A paper, perhaps?

1: Proud! And justifiably so, everything went into this assignment, my passions, my intellect; I took the time to research and follow my professor's instructions to a tee. I belong here. My magnum opus.

2: It was certainly a paper.

3: My paper is me. I am it and it is I. A paper is but a blank vessel for thoughts. Is my body, my brain not the same. As a sheet so easily taken by the wind, I soar to greater and greater heights. A leaf ascending, guided by an invisible flow. Solo and singular. Thoughts are of these and these alone.

4: and yet I cannot shake this feeling of failure. where does this failure come from. is it within the page and its length and shade of pure white. is it within the words written in forsaken and forlorn ink. is it found in me and all i have done and stand for.

i have always said uniqueness cannot exist in a vacuum and i have found comfort in this at times. how do we identify ourselves without everyone else around us. we are defined by our barriers. skin, clothing, the walls of homes. and yet how often do I pale in comparison, in shade. there is unremarkably me, and within me is an ever-swirling mixture of colors and shades and hues. I am but a painter's palette and on his canvas is the concept of me. how lame and boring.

i wish for definition.....paint me one way, a perfect way, angelic and ethereal, and never another for the rest of my life.....when all is done, with each meticulous stroke in vain, toss me aside, a rough draft, and forget I was ever an experience.

Results:

The imposter is within us all! How preposterous of you to ever feel alone in this!

The doubt you feel is but another shade of blue.

Painted across sunseting skies of sadness.

Across vast melancholic oceans, upon azure and sapphire hydrangeas.

It shall be ever-present in what you do.

But perhaps if one could only smudge the painting. Just a bit. Ever slightly and little by little.

A flowing smear of navy in the shape of an arch. There is but one way from here.

Not out, but through.

The imposter is within us all. Beside us. stalking, lurking, waiting.

And through the arch, it will beckon.

Calling us out by name, offering a hand along the journey.

The View of Guadalajara's Downtown

Quiana Llanin Sevilla Esparza

1. Downtown Guadalajara.

With a combination of history and modernity, Guadalajara's downtown takes me on a trip to the past while I'm walking in the present. Full of gothic and modern architecture, I feel as if I can travel to the Guadalajara of the past. As I walk through the plaza, I can see the lady selling potato chips and smell the burned oil while feeling as if I can taste them before even buying them. When I was a little girl I was so mesmerized by all these combinations of smells, and beautiful structures, so symmetric and at the same time asymmetric. The colorful murals that paint the walls and the ceilings of the cathedral and the government palace take me on a trip to the past, narrating the history of Mexico. They made me feel the emotions the artist was feeling while painting them. I remember when I was ten years old, I would go into the cathedral and look at the ceiling and feel how happy or sad the artist was while painting, just as if I was there when he or she was painting the mural. It was as if I was experiencing the same sensations while watching the beautiful murals. Remembering these experiences makes me travel in time and go back to those easier days, when the only worry I had was how much *Chile* I wanted to add to my potato chips. I also remember the warm hugs and protection of my mother, and how much I love and admire that woman.

2. View of the Plaza

I remember when I was ten years old sitting in the plaza on a bench facing the cathedral, looking at its symmetric beauty and being amazed by its colors. The gothic and colonial architecture combined and complemented each other and made me feel butterflies in my stomach just like when I fell in love for the first time. Back then, I used to like to go *La Plaza* with my mother, connecting with her by walking together and going to mass. For my mom, this was and still is very important; to connect with spirituality and God. Going to mass is something that used to connect me with my mother. Today, every time I go back home, I reconnect with my young self and my spirituality. Maybe not by going to mass, but by walking around the *zócalo* and reliving all those memories with my mother. The *zócalo* is full of merchants, some selling delicious potato chips, others selling delicious food. I remember sitting in the *puestecito* and eating a tasty *pozole*, the steamy and flavorful broth mixed with meat and hominy, with cabbage, onion and lime. Today, every time I eat this, I feel warmth in my heart and a kind of happiness I cannot explain; it is as if I am covered with a warm blanket. Right next to the cathedral is the government palace, a beautiful building that dates all the way back to when Mexico was a colony of Spain, a very sad era. But it gave us this beautiful building full of history and murals. As I go into the building the first mural I can see is one that depicts the independence. I look up to the ceiling and I can see another one with Miguel Hidalgo holding a torch symbolizing liberty. The combinations of dark reds and blacks fills you with patriotism and pride being Mexican; it is as if I can feel how Miguel Hidalgo is watching me and at the same time narrating what was going on during that battle. Now that I am older every time I go to the downtown with my family, I go into this building to travel to the past and to remember my roots, my honor, and how proud I am for being Mexican.

3. Inside view of the Cathedral

As I walk inside of the cathedral, I find myself looking at all the sacred art. My body starts to fill itself with peace and at the same time excitement because it makes me travel to the past and connects me with my faith, something that as the time passes, I find myself losing. The smell of incense makes me forget all my problems and somehow calms me down. It makes me remember when my mom and I used to go to

mass on Sundays, to reconnect with our spirituality and ourselves. I remember every Sunday at eleven in the morning the bells would sound announcing the first calling for mass, then the second calling at eleven thirty and the third calling ten minutes before twelve in the afternoon, which is the time that mass started. During those days I was about ten years old, and I remember feeling like it was a drag to be in mass. The sound of the organ made me sad but at the same time it gave me some kind of peace. Then the father started mass, and his voice made me sleepy. Oh man! It was such a drag to be there during those days; the only thing that made me want to go was that after mass we would go and walk around the plaza looking at all the colorful vendors trying to sell toys, food, and souvenirs. You could hear all the chaotic sounds of kids running, as well as people screaming. You could see all the different subcultures like the goths and hippies dancing and singing, the indigenous people selling all their beautiful, colorful art around the plaza, showing the diversity and cultural richness of Guadalajara. Today, when I go back home, I go to mass, and it does not feel like such a drag. It feels as if I was a kid again, very nostalgic, because mass makes me reconnect with myself and with my mother. I don't go to mass for belief but instead for reconnection to my younger self and my faith. It makes me go back to when I was a ten-year-old girl asking my mom if she could buy me some chips to sit down on the bench in the plaza, feeling her warm hugs and her protection.

Experiences of where words fail, music speaks

Bianca Villalobos

“Where words fail, music speaks”

-- Hans Christian Anderson

I have mostly enjoyed music because of my mother. She was after all the first one to introduce it to me in the womb.

“The Ketchup Song” (Aserejé)

When I was little, my mom and I would dance in the living room blasting the music at full volume. It was our time of the day; it was when she wouldn't be cooking or cleaning and I wasn't outside playing with my neighbor friends. Our favorite song to dance with was “The Ketchup Song;” my mother taught me all the moves and I loved learning all of them. The lyrics were absolute nonsense, many of the words weren't even words. They were just gibberish, but to a six-year-old that didn't matter. The thing about that time is that I don't remember ever getting tired of dancing. I would dance like the pink energizer bunny, flailing my arms from side to side while singing to “Aserejé, ja, dejé debebe tu debebere.” My mother on the other hand would need to take a break every once in a while. As a child, I thought her need to rest was silly only to discover at the age of twenty that my energy wasn't what it used to be. Even as a “young” person my energy levels do not hold a candle to that of my six-year-old self. It is unimaginable that I ever had such energy to begin with and that I would relate to my mother so much. I know that the older we get, the levels of energy will continue to dwindle until they reach zero. Though that future may seem bleak, I would like to focus on the bursts of childish energy we will encounter in our future. Here's to the song that is ridiculously titled “The Ketchup Song.”

“Mátalas” by Alejandro Fernández

When I was around seven, I had gone to enough Mexican parties and had heard a multitude of songs. I truly believe that every genre of music has a uniqueness to it, but Regional Mexican has a quality that is unmatched. Its volume and the proud ringing of the instruments form this melody that makes you glad to be alive and fills you with such zest for life. I remember that I was sitting next to my mom at one of these parties when I heard a song belted out: “Kill them with an overdose of tenderness, asphyxiate them with kisses and sweetness.” Needless to say, I was shocked. I turned around to my mom, and with my eyes wide open I asked her why the man is singing to kill women. There was a twinkle in her eyes when she let out a spirited laugh and told me that the man was not saying to kill them literally. The song meant that men should use an overwhelming force of kindness or affection so that women can't help but feel loved and appreciated. After hearing this explanation, I found that I really enjoyed the lyrics and thought that the song was so cool since it used a secret code to sing something so wholesome. When I grew older, I realized that the secret code that these lyrics used was figurative language such as hyperbole and metaphors to express their meanings. The memory of first hearing this song will be forever ingrained in my mind and cause me to laugh the same way my mother did. There you have it; instead of hearing the phrase “kill them with kindness,” I heard the variation of “kill them with an overdose of tenderness.”

“La Vie En Rose” by Edith Piaf

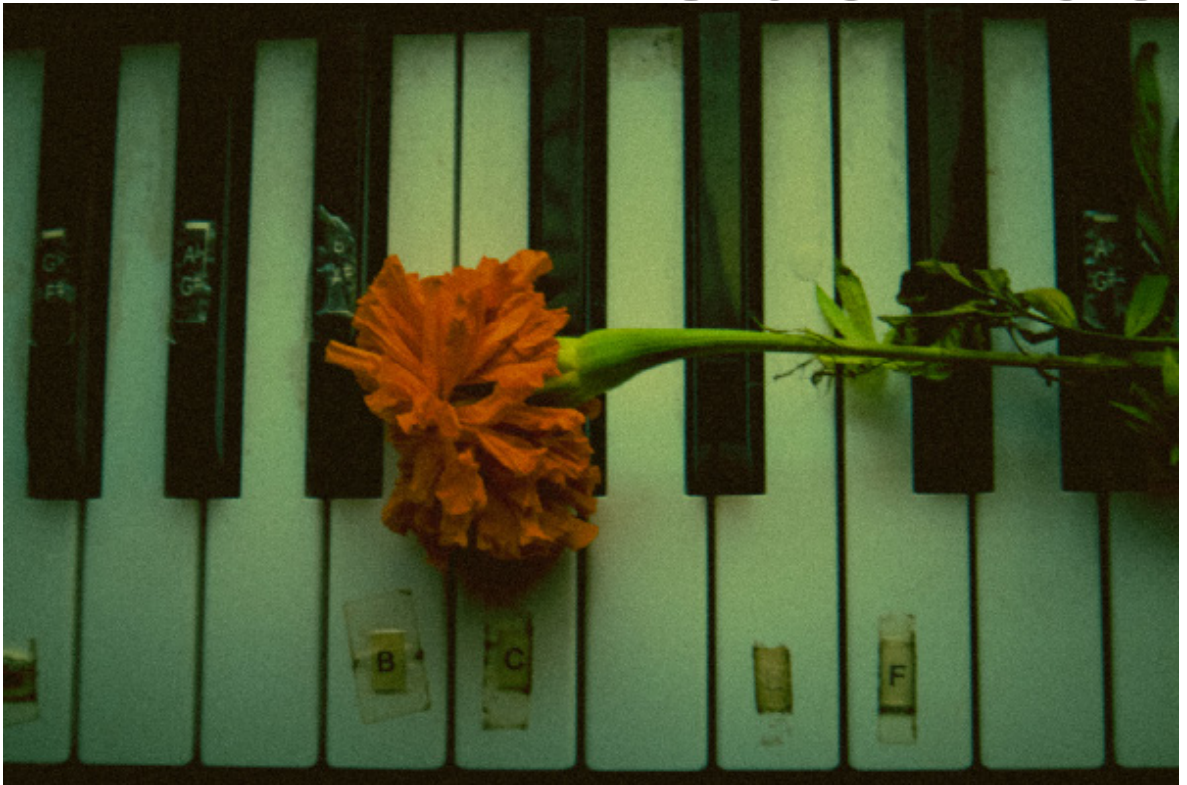
In my house it cannot be quiet when we are working. The arduous feeling of labor should be paired with an enjoyable sound so that it eases out and makes it possible to continue. Once when I was doing chores, I turned on the tv hoping to come across a channel that had music. While channel surfing, I landed on the show *How I Met Your Mother* and saw Tracy singing something so lovely and heart wrenching. It caught my attention immediately. I stopped sweeping and was entranced by “Hold me close and hold me fast, the magic spell you cast, this is la vie en rose.” After it was done, I turned off the tv and sprinted like a gazelle toward the computer to search up the song. I played it while I was taking out the trash, mopping, washing the dishes, and folding the laundry. I had it on repeat and after a while I started memorizing all the words. It was like I couldn’t stop until I had memorized every word and note. Then at night my siblings and I climbed into our beds and as usual they couldn’t settle down. They were laughing, playing and picking on each other. I was at the top bunk bed, trying to fix a curtain when I couldn’t take it anymore and shouted, “Shut up, you’re supposed to go to sleep.” They laughed and told me they couldn’t and asked me to tell them a story. It presented a problem because I had already told them all the stories I knew. Then I remembered the song I had learned that afternoon and told them I would sing to them instead but that they needed to quiet down. As I was lacing the curtain to the rod, I started to sing and tried to make my voice husky and smooth. I had repeated the song twice and was on the last verse when I looked up from the curtain and saw my mom on the doorway smiling warmly at me and signaling toward my siblings. I looked down and saw that all of them were asleep. I smiled back at her with a triumphant feeling, I placed the rod with the curtain back in place and settled myself into my bed. My mom waved goodbye and turned off the lights. I was glad that the song had worked like magic.

“Piel Canela” by Eydie Gormé

When I was in college my grandfather came to live with us, and he was offered to stay in my room. I didn’t really mind it except when I had to do homework, and there was nowhere to get some peace and quiet. I remember asking him if I could come into his room and study in there. He said “you don’t need to ask, just come in.” My grandfather was blind, so he mostly sat in bed listening to the radio. It was during those homework sessions that I sat on the floor across from him when a song came out and he started singing as well as tapping his feet along with it. I was surprised because he hadn’t done that before. I listened to the song closely while it sang “But the black in your eyes may not die and the cinnamon on your skin stays the same... my sadness would not be so immense like the one of being left without your love.” I told him that the song was so beautifully sad, but it still managed to hold so much joy to it. He responded by saying that’s what makes it so great. It was a song that we played during his wake. I held my mom while hearing it, knowing that he would have liked it.

I know that music has a way of connecting us; it is an aspect that spoken words alone can’t do.

Short Stories



One Last Song Sarai Lara Ontiveros

Peachy

Crystal Arredondo

[The following is a work of fanfiction with characters inspired by the game *Stardew Valley*]

The door slammed shut with a spray of mud revealing the forest green exterior of Lewis' truck. The color always reminded him of his favorite candle, the scent of pine that ruminates after snapping a sturdy low hanging branch. The mayor of Pelican Town tended his garden beds and never missed a nightly drink at the Stardrop Saloon after aiding in the town's daily qualms. As a seasoned gardener, he never wished upon the peppers to ripen or the citrus to fruit early, he would simply facilitate an environment capable of producing bundles of jalapeños in February and overripe oranges by March, and the perfect peaches by April. He remained unwaveringly confident in the perfect combination of chicken manure, soil acidity, and a self-sufficient body of compost so complex that it would allow him to reap the best fruits and vegetables to showcase that Sunday morning.

The Festival of Flowers is held during the super blooms of April, a time when Lewis is believed he could produce the best of Earth's gifts. For 9 years reigning, he held the honor of "Master Farmer (Amateur Home Garden)," fully aware of the redundancy of "Master" and "Amateur" being stamped on a golden plaque. Regardless, he remains proud of this title that solidified him as the best in his craft. The over attentiveness to his unmatched and yet to be graded crops are quickly cut when Marnie greets him. The local livestock breeder could snap him out of his own thoughts at nearly any moment in the day.

"I'm pretty sure I saw some gnats making home in those peaches," her voice carries through open areas no matter how calm, and demands a response every time. He leans over to inspect them. "Now c'mon, you know I'm messing with you. Been judged yet? They had me on my toes while they stared at my poor Ellie's utters for so long." She briskly walks up to his display with tiny dust bowls following her with each step.

"No, not yet. They haven't moved from that new farmer's booth for over ten minutes now." He clenched his jaw fighting the urge to dust off his peaches that got caught in Marnie's stride.

"Well, they gotta make it look like they're considering other candidates, ha! Try not to make it so obvious of course!"

His whole body relaxes and turns to her, "Okay. You're probably right, hm?" He turns away from the peaches draping the silk rag over his shoulder where it will remain for the remainder of judging.

Like clockwork, Lewis shows up for his nightly drink. Gus tended, owned, and lived at the Stardrop Saloon with an amiable ability to detect even the slightest bruise on the soul. "There he is! This one is on the house, bud."

Lewis straddles the bar stool, both elbows on the bar, "Is that new farmer the one that took over Gramps' acres?"

Gus, a bit startled that he didn't even receive his daily how-do-you-dos from the mayor, brushes it off and responds, "Mmmhm... Why do you ask?"

Before Gus could pour another Lewis has downed his beer and leaves cash at the bar. He arrives home, sets his keys and wallet in the kitchen, turns on the radio to a channel playing "Catch a Falling Star" while promptly lighting his favorite candle. He then allows his mind to drift without restraint, thinking about how a bundle of amaranth could have possibly stolen the long standing and well-deserved recognition of his perfected horticulture.

A sharp ringing alarm clock springs Lewis out of bed at 7:00 AM sharp. Without hesitation Lewis makes his way into the bathroom and begins meticulously pruning. A ten minute Scrub Daddy scrub down from scalp to sole where no nail bed or edge of skin has remnants of yesterday, dirt or debris, only his forearm is wiped gently because of a maroon colored scratch just noticed for the first time. He stares at it and connects its sudden appearance to his fruit crates. Because of his loss the day before, he quickly vacated the venue, swinging the crates in the back of the truck with the ease of broken down cardboard being trashed. Tomato red and satisfied with yesterday being torn from his skin he straight razors a clean shave, immediately followed by an aftershave that could self-ignite if left in the sun. Breaking from the concentration of combing every hair into place he notices that the usual smell of coffee, that would have been set to drip as soon as he woke up, was not wafting its scent into the now dehumidified bathroom. Instead, he takes in a breath of pine leaking from his jacket as he slips it on, and closes the lilac curtains framing the prized peach tree in the garden.

The doorbell froze him in his tracks on the way to inspect the tardy coffee drip.

“Good morning Lewis! We’re really sorry to bother you so early, can we come in?” The man speaking smiled with a brightness that only a spry young cop who enjoyed his morning shift a little bit too much could. His less than excited partner walks directly into the kitchen after Lewis gestures them without a word. This type of visit was uncommon so early in the morning, but a small town was often familiar with small and long standing meeting places to discuss town business, such as the mayor’s kitchen fully stocked with fruity treats, pies, and unending coffee.

Until today.

“Is there a good reason why this couldn’t wait until 9 at least?”

“Well, no sir, we really just have a couple of questions to get out of the way and then you’re free to go,” said the early bird.

Lewis almost chuckles at his urgency. “Am I under arrest fellas?”

“Now why would you think that Mayor? We’re just up to our routine a little early, ha!”

“This isn’t exactly a normal time or place to be speaking to the police about city matters—”

“You’re right,” the once silent partner quickly cuts in. “We’re here to ask you a couple of questions about where you were exactly between 9:45 PM and 3 AM just last night.”

Lewis tightens his brow in confusion. Suddenly the already healing scratch on his arm needs to be scratched, must be scratched, or the skin will not cease to ripple and twitch. “Sleeping. I don’t know if you boys can tell but I’m an old man that relies on a goodnight’s rest. I get cranky. Can’t stop fussing with little things throughout the day.”

Still stoic the officer continues, “I know it takes you about five minutes to walk from the Saloon back to right here, ya know, where Gus last saw you—”

“You spoke to Gus already?”

“What do you mean by ‘already,’ Mayor?” The more chipper yet concerned of the two officers chimed in.

“It’s awfully early to be bugging the last guy open, that’s all.”

Stone faced and unbreaking eye contact the second officer asks, “Are you tired?”

Lewis holds eye contact, without the need to take a deeper breath, without needing to disprove whatever it was he felt they were now definitely questioning him about. “No. I slept.”

“How long?”

“My full eight hours just like every night. Bright and early at seven sharp. For as long as I can remember.”

The officer sucks his teeth and some desperate air. “Alright. So. Let’s say you got home at around exactly 9:50, then wound up in bed by, let’s imagine 10:50, to safely say you fell asleep by eleven. Were you just staring at the wall for an hour? What’s going on there?”

“Well no...”

“Then what were you doing between 9:50 and 11 o’clock, Lewis?” Now a bit combative.

“I take my time to unwind, I grab some water, maybe a bite if Gus doesn’t feed me. I light a candle, turn on some music and relax a bit. You should try it sometime.”

“What was playing on the radio?”

Lewis pauses before answering, trying to remember the melodies carrying him to sleep. “The last song I can remember is ‘Catch a Falling Star’ before I started drifting off, why is that important to this? What exactly are you questioning me about, Alex?”

“Did you blow out the candle?”

“What?”

“Did you put your candle out before going to bed?”

“Well, yes. I never forget. This house is as old as this town and one thing that I make sure of is to not burn the damned place down. What exactly is going on?”

“Do you know why that song plays exactly when it does on the radio, sir?”

“Like I said, I’m an old man with old habits. One of those is not keeping up with what they decide to play on the radio at whatever given hour.”

The officer glares at the lit candle in the living room, the flame flickering over a shallow pool of wax only a couple hours from being completely burned away.

“That song plays every night at about the time Gramps died. Do you remember him?”

After an uncomfortable pause the edges of Lewis’ mouth begin to twitch into an arch. “Marnie was inconsolable.”

“That’s right, it was terrible. Aunt Marnie wakes up to the sound of her hogs squealing in the pens and goes to check. Do you remember what she found?” Lewis listens, but the whole town knows the story.

“That’s right Mayor. They found about a third of his corpse lying there while the pigs nibbled at what was left. And guess what?”

Lewis finally breathes in. “What?”

“They found out with what was left of poor Gramps that he had died at about 2:30 in the morning. Since then, at exactly 2:30 AM, the radio station plays a song at Marnie’s request. The song he would sing to their daughter every single night as a baby. And unfortunately, this past night the new farmer taking over Gramp’s farm went missing for a little while. Do you want to know what hours she’s unaccounted for?”

Lewis keeps the officer’s eye contact, almost never blinking. His coffee has grown lukewarm and hasn’t attempted to take a sip since the start of the conversation. “Go on Alex, tell me.”

Alex leans in speaking almost in a whisper, “It was around the time that your feelings got hurt and Gus took pity on you with a free beer. Then, after around the time you decided that a cheap trophy would look better lodged into someone’s head rather than onto your ancient mantle. After which you decided to forget about witnesses apparently! The poor bastard had to see—the hiker woke up to screams and found you breaking branch after branch—jabbing her Lewis? She was already dead. And, and you kept going with the branches into her chest?” The officer paused out of breath, completely surprised by his own reaction and the lack thereof from his detainee. “I know you already knew why we were here. We thought of not making a scene in town and upsetting anyone else even more.”

Lewis raises his chin to the kitchen window where the meaty trunk of the tree holding his previously prized peaches can be seen, the soil recently disturbed at the base. “Did you know that the species of peach you see right out that window doesn’t even flower without the perfect compost? The perfect weather even? An incredibly picky appetite for something growing in our little Pelican town. Demanding almost the impossible. Yet every year, every single year, I’ve successfully presented a bundle of perfect peaches to those judges who arduously demand year after year that I spill the truth about my soil.” With a calm smile Lewis relaxes his face and looks back at the officer. “Maybe now is the time.”

Of Her Own Design

Lori Bagala-De Marco

Her earliest memories were of avoiding people. At noisy family gatherings, she would climb into a cozy cupboard, where she could read undisturbed all day. Stories of solitude were always her favorite. She was drawn to the idea of a life that required self-reliance.

It began when she read *Swiss Family Robinson* and *Island of The Blue Dolphin*. How exciting to be left to your own devices; to create your world as its sole designer. What a gift to hear only the music you enjoy, to read only what inspires you, and to walk in silence with the natural world. As a teen she spent school lunch hours in the sunlit corners of the library absorbing post-apocalyptic classics like *The Stand* and *I Am Legend*.

Even now as she sat on her front porch in the low early-evening light she had to laugh at the worn copy of *Earth Abides* in her hand. How many hours had she spent absorbing the story of Ish, the nearly lone survivor of a global pandemic? How she'd envied his circumstances.

Suddenly a loud alarm sounded and she tucked the worn tome into her back pocket. It was time to walk the perimeter fences again. She laughed out loud, grabbed her loaded rifle, and stepped off the porch onto the deep ash that now coated the yard. She pulled her protective goggles over her eyes and moved forward slowly and carefully to avoid disturbing the silt. Her meter continued to buzz. In the distant hills, the fires still burned and the sky glowed green and orange. Something moved in the tree line, and she heard the low moans.

She had been so wrong. There was no time to read, or for quiet, and she certainly was not alone. What remained alive in her world was of no human design. And nothing ever would be again.

Echoes of Life

Matthew Besoyan

Mornings were always the worst. In his dreams he was young again. Young, healthy, and full of life. The sunlight was always there to bring him back to reality though. It hated him almost as much as he was inclined to hate it. Everything about his body made him feel like he had a foot in the grave already. By all rights he was still young, but his body was failing. Some mornings he would get out of bed and just the act of getting dressed was taxing and none of the healers (magic or not) around town could figure out why. His smithing work had gotten harder and harder until eventually he decided it was not worth the trouble anymore. He was, in short, a miserable mess all of the time.

“God’s damned sunlight,” Terran grumbled as he began a ritual of testing his body to make sure it would agree to work for the day. As he cracked and popped, he turned his face from the light and rolled himself away from the wall to face the rest of his room. Though he hated the light, he pulled the blanket off his upper body and let the sun beat down on him. Nothing helped soothe the rusted bones like the sun. While warming up he glanced about at his room in the clinic he had lived in for the last year. It was a clean place, well-built and well-kept but nothing held a candle to his home.

He heard some movement outside his room. It was as if the workers here knew exactly when he woke up and right on cue, 2 young men walked into the room and assaulted his senses with a bowl of what he could only describe as cat piss that these people swore could clean invisible dirt. One of the men, the one with the long hair, broke away from his counterpart and smiled as he made his way towards him.

“Mornin’ Terran. Sleep at all?” he chided, knowing full well that Terran’s chief complaint was always that he wanted more sleep.

“I’d sleep more if you could convince someone to build this window in a different spot,” Terran shot back. “And why do you sound so happy this morning, Garret?” Garret’s smile didn’t waver as he set the bundle of linens he had on the table next to Terran’s bed. “Not my fault you don’t like mornings, grandpa. All you do these days is grumble.” He pulled the small table around next to Terran’s bed and set up his wash basin for him. He was maybe in his early 20’s, tall and handsome with some stubble and jet-black hair that ran down past his shoulders. He seemed like a kind enough kid, but Terran never bothered to ask anything about him. The kid called him grandpa and that didn’t exactly make them friends. Still, there was something about these workers that seemed to make his mornings not so miserable.

Terran slowly sat himself up at the side of the bed as Garret finished setting up the table and getting Terran’s clothes out for him. He cleaned himself up and nodded to Garret as he moved the table out of his way. This is where things got embarrassing. He needed Garret’s help to put his clothes on. He hated it, but he had a hard time getting to his own feet. He held on to the young man’s shoulders as he worked his way off the bed. There was little talk as they danced their morning dance, putting his clothes on and getting him situated.

“I hope people treat you well for what you do,” he told Garret. “I never had it in me to be like you. Kind and giving and all that.” Terran had found himself thinking about these things a lot lately. How different could things have been for him if he had let anyone close to him? It had been both a terrifying and unnecessary concept before. In hindsight however, he was beginning to deeply regret his loneliness. “I know I’m grumpy,” he huffed. “I don’t need you to remind me of that. There’s hardly anyone left in this place, and you know I don’t have any family. It’s just hard to be upbeat like you when my own body protests everything I do. All those years at the forge, all that hard work and all that

muscle I had.” He stood up straight and his back popped. “Ughn...just to wither away here with your grinning mug as my only real company.”

“Well, you aren’t entirely alone, grandpa,” Garret pointed out. “I know it might not seem like much, but we don’t just take care of you, or anyone here at the clinic, because we have to. We take on this work because we care about people and we don’t want you to be alone. No one should suffer alone.” His smile found its way to his eyes as he handed Terran his cane. “And hey, if you are here when the creator calls you home, I’ll make sure that you have someone there for you, gramps. No one should die alone.”

“Well shit,” Terran scoffed as he began walking towards the door. “Way to make me feel even worse about my own attitude.” He painted a frown on his face to counter Garret’s growing smile and glared at him as he shuffled by. Once he was out of the room and could hear the two men set about cleaning the place up, he let the frown melt and allowed himself to smile. Maybe all of these kind people were rubbing some of the rough edges off of him. Maybe it was because he knew, somewhere deep in his bones, that he didn’t seem to have much time left. No measure of herbs or magic could reverse his withering body.

He slowly followed the aroma of cooked meats and coffee to the dining area. The room only had one large rectangular wooden table with 6 chairs and a few benches along the walls for the attendants to sit. It was just enough space to seat the occupants of the clinic at full capacity. Most seats had remained empty this year and he was ok with that. He slowly shuffled his feet along the worked stone floor while using his cane and the walls to keep himself steady. Eventually he made his way to the seat nearest to the hearth that was set into the far side of the room and eased himself down into its cushioned warmth. Someone had already set a fire for the morning and the warmth felt wonderful on his stiff body. All of his big muscles had kept him warm, but they were mostly gone now.

“I know I can always find you here first thing in the morning, Terran. It’s almost like you run here just to complain about how terrible my food is,” Chef exclaimed as he walked through the kitchen doors into Terran’s quiet space. He seemed to be in as good a mood as ever as he set a plate down in front of Terran and dug into his own plate across the table from him. Terran looked around the room at the empty seats.

“No one else is coming for breakfast today?” he asked as he took a bite of his eggs. Chef paused his chewing and met Terran’s eyes.

“Sam passed away last night. Cindy said she did all she could to help him, but she couldn’t keep him here any longer.” He let his eyes slip from Terran’s and went back to his food, the facade he had kept now shattered. They finished their meal in silence. Sam had been there for a year longer than Terran but he had been in worse condition. With him gone, Terran was the only client left in the building. As they finished their plates, Chef took their dishes back to the kitchen, leaving a mug of coffee for Terran to sip on. Minutes later Terran heard the back doors to the kitchen open and shut, leaving him in silence accompanied only by his thoughts and the occasional crackle of the fireplace.

He sat there for a few minutes before realizing he didn’t want the silence anymore. He was lonely and the weight of the quiet was crushing him. He decided that he would take a walk outside with Garret. As he started to stand up, he thought he heard footsteps coming down the hall and turned to see a figure standing just out of the light of the fire.

“Garret? Is that you?” he asked as he stood up and turned his back to the fire to face the figure. He squinted his eyes but could make out nothing through the blanket of shadows. As he grabbed his cane, he saw a flash of metal near the figure’s hands as it began to walk towards him, skirting the edge of the table as it seemed to glide across the floor. Terran strained to see the figure’s face as it came into the light, but the shadows were all wrong. They didn’t move.

“Garret!” he yelled. “GARRET! Anyone!?” The figure quickly crossed half the room as Terran turned away to move to the other side of the table, only to have the creature blocking his path on the other side as well. His eyes met the depth of that shadowed face and he felt his heart pounding so hard he thought it would go through his chest. The creature cocked its head to the side as it tried to speak but the words sounded like they were passing through water. Terran straightened himself upright as best he could, refusing to let himself be afraid and trying to make out the words. The creature cocked its head to the other side and it spoke again.

“Y..u w..i..l ..ie AL....E”

This time Terran could hear the words better and it unnerved him deeply. Suddenly, acutely aware of the fragile state of his body and the pounding of his heart in his throat, he lifted his cane and swung wildly at the creature. He put his whole body into the swing and when it passed harmlessly through the shadow, it put him off balance and he twisted hard towards the hearth. He felt his right hip snap and his leg buckle under him and found himself falling in what felt like slow motion. As he fell, he locked his eyes on the creature’s featureless face.

“YOU WILL DIE ALONE.”

A sharp pain shot through his chest as he plummeted towards the floor. A blinding flash of white followed by searing pain slammed through his head as he felt his skull hit the hearth and his body went limp. There were muffled sounds of movement and voices around him that fought against the ringing in his head, but he could feel himself losing consciousness and it was hard to hold on to reality. The sounds around him began to fade and as they did, so did his vision.

Then the pain was gone.

Everything was gone.

As panic began to grip him the pain he had felt in his chest came back like a dull ache. With the pain came vision. Unfocused at first but as figures and blurs of light and color began to fill his periphery, he felt like he was in one of his dreams again. In fact, as his vision cleared, he recognized his surroundings as one of the many places he had dreamt of before. It was dark out with only streetlamps and the moon lighting the buildings around him. From his vantage point in the air, he could see a man stumble out of a tavern nearby and onto the cobblestone road. As he made his way in Terran’s direction it was clear that he was drunk. Stumbling down the street he eventually slipped between the two buildings underneath Terran’s feet and stumbled halfway down the alley before falling over onto his back. As the man seemingly resigned himself to sleeping where he fell, a shadow appeared at the entrance to the street. Terran panicked as he recognized the shadow cloaked figure from the dining room and attempted to call out to the man in the alley as it glided towards him.

He couldn’t move.

He watched in horror as the creature knelt over the man, a flash of metal glinting in the shadows. Suddenly, Terran was right next to the two men, looking again into that black visage, but this time there were eyes. Dark maroon eyes and a voice like a growling stone giant.

“YOU WILL DIE ALONE.”

Terran looked down at the man on the floor expecting to see glazed over eyes and

the sweat-drenched brow of a drunk. Instead, he saw a pale, sunken man with blood running from the corners of his lips.

With Terran's face.

As their eyes locked there was a sharp pain like nothing he had ever felt in his chest. He screamed but found no voice. He looked down at his chest to see a knife protruding from it with an identical twin buried hilt-deep in the chest of the shadow's victim. Startled, he attempted to back away only to find the entire vision fading rapidly into nothingness.

THUMP.
THUMP.
THUMP.

In the darkness he could hear the sound of a heart. Slow and quiet. There were voices too. Voices he recognized as Garrett and Chef. Through the darkness and muffled sounds, he could make out words.

"What do...?" Garret was panicking.

"Gods I don't know... bleeding so bad... not... to make it..." Chef replied.

"No please," Terran pleaded "You can't give up on me." His words fell into darkness. He couldn't tell if he had spoken at all. He didn't want to die. Not yet.

THUMP...

Thump...
thump...

The voices and the heartbeat were fading away. He began to cry. Tormented by his regrets and feeling so lost and alone. He had never trusted people and his fears had always kept him from getting too close to anyone. He cried for what felt like an eternity in this empty space. He screamed in protest and fought against the suppressing darkness around him. He would give anything for another chance.

thump...

...thump...

...

...Silence...

The void around him exploded into a flurry of light and colors as visions of his life began to flash before his eyes. His childhood, raised by selfish parents who never cared for anything he did. He saw himself as a young man, surviving life and making enough money to live simply and shut himself off from the world. He aged rapidly, going through the same routine day in and day out. Until he was back in the clinic. He had enjoyed his time there more than he realized. For the first time he had people that seemed to care about him and he

wasn't alone. Then he saw his own broken body on the floor of the dining room. His cup of coffee knocked over and its contents slowly dripping to the floor.

Then he saw the man in the alley again.

This time it was like the vision was happening in reverse. Slowly at first but quickly gaining momentum. He watched the man stumble back onto the street as the shadow watched from another road close by. The scene began to snap around different points in the man's life. Much of it Terran realized, he recognized from his own dreams. He watched him go from a destitute drunk whose wife and children had been murdered, to a man of wealth and power.

Terran was amazed at the world he saw.

Laughter and love. So very different from his own.

He watched the man get younger and younger until all that was left was the day he was born. There was such unbridled joy in his parents' eyes as they brought this child into the world. A love and devotion Terran had never known. In unison they spoke the child's name.

“TERRAN...”

Both parents now looked at him.

Reality began to crash down on him with the weight of a thousand steel hammers. There was a deep longing in his heart as wave after wave of emotions and memories began to flood into him. Memories that cut deeper than any shadow could ever reach. At the tip of those memories was the grim reality of it all.

This dream was his real life.

And he was dead.

Terran had lost his life just as he had lost everything dear to him. In his selfishness after his family's death, he had squandered everything. Turned everyone away and drowned his memories in cheap liquor. Until someone had finished the self-destruction he had started.

Feeble and alone.

Everything went black.

...

“Ryke, my love, I have no idea. He has been like this for weeks now. He is stable but the wound he suffered in that alley should have killed him. Something is keeping him here.” Voices... he heard voices...

"I know, I know," The deep and rough voice was a stark contrast to the airy, lilting voice of its counterpart. "It was not easy saving him. Whatever that was that got to him... it wasn't human. I have questions and I need answers." The voice softened a little "I know you are doing all you can, Eira, that's what I love about you. Just... Keep me informed please." Terran heard the scrape of a chair and footsteps fade away.

Everything went black again.

...

Warmth. He could feel warmth. It felt like... Sunlight.

Terran opened his eyes. The room he was in was dark except for a small shaft of sunlight coming from behind where he lay. As his eyes adjusted, he could see a mirror across the room from him and the face of a young man staring back at him through it. It was the face of the young man in the alley. He slowly rolled over onto his back, unsure of what to think. His mind felt just as fragile as his body. It was all too much to take in.

He was not entirely sure what was going on, but he was not broken, and he was very much not dead. Was it all a dream then? Was his life as a blacksmith, isolated and self-ish, just a dream he had while recovering from that attack in the alley?

"What the hell," he exclaimed. His voice came out as no more than a coarse and raspy whisper. "Oh man," he sighed, "this is a mess."

He felt tears begin to burn his eyes. He tried to blink them away as he stared at the ceiling, but memories continued to assault the edges of his sanity. So, he let them in. Memories of being a young and reckless teen. The first time he had met his wife, already knowing that he wanted to marry her. Their first years together and their two children. He embraced the pain of their deaths as they were taken from him and he remembered why they had died. He remembered all of it.

He had pissed off the wrong people. Very powerful people. They came for his family and, after slowly taking away everything he had until he was nothing but a broken husk, they had apparently sent a Shade after him. That explained the shadowed creature. It had failed though.

From what he could gather, someone had saved his life. Even though he had been unable to save those he loved, or even himself; Someone had intervened and kept him alive. He had no idea how long he laid there, trying desperately to reconnect with himself. Eventually the tears did dry and the memories settled into his past where they belonged. All that was left was his future.

"Being stuck in the past is what got me into this mess to begin with," he said quietly to the darkness. "And I am not about to relive my stupid mistakes."

He had been given a second chance. Another chance at life and another chance to right his wrongs. To honor those he lost and do better. It was going to be a long road to recovery and vengeance was already weighing heavy on his heart. He needed to find out what happened and who tried to kill him. All of that could wait though. For now, he was alive and that was enough.

He grabbed the curtains from where he lay in the bed and squeezed his eyes shut. This was going to be hard. With all the strength he could muster, he drew back the curtains and let the sunlight fill the room.

“God’s Damned sunlight,” he rasped weakly. Smiling, he let his arm fall to the bed and basked in the sun. A voice echoed in the back of his head, from a dream or a life long gone.

“No man should die alone.”

Fool Me Twice Shame On Me

Tristin Bryant

“We are here today to not only unite these two people but these two kingdoms together as one. As the heirs of their bloodlines they carry their families’ legacies of truth, honor and nobility,” the priest proclaimed to the packed church. “The kingdoms of Arragore and Blysse are now bound together in sacred union!”

The bride looked over at King Mark of Arragore, locking eyes and smirking at him through her thin veil. King Mark found it harder and harder to restrain his laughter. *Almost there*, he told himself. *Just a little bit longer*. “You may now kiss the bride!” the priest exclaimed.

The newly crowned King of Blysse lifted the bride’s veil and kissed her. The crowd erupted in applause—but none louder than the proud King Mark. The newly married couple exited first, leading the crowd of the wedding attendees. The reception was held nearby in a large open meadow arranged with rows of long tables for guests to feast. But few were seated as the bard’s fast and lively music drove everyone to dance. King Mark remained on the sidelines watching but found himself tapping his foot along to the beat.

“Dance with me,” he heard a familiar voice say.

“It’s tradition for a father to dance with his daughter is it not?” Maria, the bride, asked.

He took a moment to remind himself that this gorgeous lady before him was the same person who wore her hair in a messy bun and wore the same filthy apron day after day.

“I do believe I’ve heard of this tradition,” he replied, extending his hand. She took it and they quickly found themselves dancing alongside everyone.

A few songs had people merrily line dancing. Mark stepped out to catch his breath. The bride was still kicking high, despite the dress, with a large smile on her face.

“Your Majesty, we took the liberty of placing your jewels and other goods in your cart for you,” a guard of Blysse told Mark.

“I shall be there in a moment,” Mark declared, brushing off the guard. Then he began down the path back to the church where his goods awaited him. But a feeling of someone watching him made him turn. He saw Maria smile at him and mouth something he couldn’t quite make out. But it didn’t matter now, she was a queen and he was richer exactly as they discussed.

1 Year Later . . .

“I do believe the arrangement is quite fair,” King Mark stated.

“Yes, but I have never heard of Arragore,” stated the other king.

“Never! How absurd! We are only the largest in land and army across the whole northern country,” he declared, hoping no one pulled out a map to prove him wrong.

“Really well, maybe it’s a better deal than I thought. I have been trying so hard to find my son a proper wife, one of true nobility and wealth,” the other king said earnestly.

“Yes, I understand. It has also been hard to find my dear Elizabeth a husband,”

Mark replied with his hand over his chest.

“I thought you said her name was Emma?” the king asked.

“Oh yes. I meant for both of them,” he corrected. *Emma*, he told himself. *I’ve got to remember that.*

“Well then you have yourself a deal,” the other king declared, shaking Mark’s hand. They clinked their goblets together in celebration.

When Mark made it back home to his manor, he found that the maids had done nothing. The cobwebs were still in every hall—okay, the only hall. They hadn’t even made dinner.

“What do I pay you ladies for? Standing around?” he cried. Beatrice, the older maid, didn’t glance up from her sewing. Nor did she acknowledge him.

“Bea, answer me!” Mark insisted.

“She still is giving you the silent treatment until you meet her demands,” said Alice softly.

“Great, one maid who won’t talk to me because she thinks she deserves more money and another who talks quietly. Oh, I’m going to miss Elizabeth,” he sighed.

“Emma,” Alice corrected.

“Yes, yes that one,” Mark said absently. He excused Alice hoping she would clean.

“Oh Bea. When I run out of maids it’s gonna be you walking down the aisle,” Mark said. Bea let out a light chuckle and the words *like that would ever happen* were written across her face. She still refused to speak directly to him until she received the raise.

Mark’s eyes drifted over the wedding reception, at the noblemen drinking wine and feasting. He smiled to himself. They all believed him, trusted him and soon he would be taking their money and running.

“She’s here!” He heard a few voices exclaim. *The bride? Duh! Of course she would be at her own reception*, Mark thought to himself.

He ignored it until he saw a crowd begin to gather. One of the men approached him and asked, “I thought you said she died in childbirth?”

“My wife? Yes, she did,” he replied with mock sadness.

“Then why is she speaking to the groom?” he asked. Mark quickly moved past him, forcing his way through the crowd. There in the center was the young prince now married to dear Emma, with some unknown woman. She was older with light brown hair, her red dress simple yet elegant. Her eyes scanned the crowd till they landed on him.

“My dear husband. What is this nonsense about my tragic end? Oh I know you like the sound of being a single father. Makes him seem like a saint doesn’t it?” she asked the crowd which exploded with laughter. “Honestly, I get sick *once* and have to miss a wedding and suddenly he’s a single father.” She gave him a quick peck on the cheek and intertwined her arm with his.

“I think we should talk,” she told him.

Once they were out of earshot he asked, “I’m sorry but who are you?”

"I'm Queen Jane of Parternia. Your wife and mother to Emma? Is that her name? I only heard of her quite recently. It's not often a *woman* has children she doesn't know about."

He stared blankly at her. "Parternia is real?!" he exclaimed.

Queen Jane frowned at him. "Yes," she replied. They stood for a moment in awkward silence. Why have you been using the name of my kingdom, that you didn't even know was real, to do whatever this—this wedding thing is?" the queen of the suddenly real kingdom asked.

"Umm... I'm marrying off one of my maids, pretending she's my daughter," he muttered. It sounded better in his head.

"I figured. She doesn't look like you," Jane said with a smirk.

"I said that she looks like you actually," said Mark.

"Oh yes, we're practically twins with our matching red hair and blue eyes," Jane remarked. He looked and realized in that moment that Jane's eyes were in fact green.

"Well, maybe I'm not good at colors," said Mark.

"What are you getting out of this?" Jane asked.

"Two chests full of jewels and gold," Mark said. This was the first sentence that he was proud of. She frowned, contemplating this.

"I'm in. Completely," she said at last.

"Oh," said Mark awkwardly, unaware that it was an invitation.

"On one condition. We split it 80/20," Jane told him.

"No! Absolutely not!" he shouted.

"Well, I guess I'll tell everyone that she's my daughter and you are some peasant pretending to be her dad. Take the reward for myself," she said, already walking away.

"Wait! 70/30," he shouted. She paused and looked back over her shoulder.

"Deal," she said leaving the room. *Hell yeah. Good job*, Mark thought to himself. His eyes widened in horror.

"Wait wait no! 50/50! 50/50!" he yelped, chasing after her.

Mark stood in his still dusty manor looking at his mostly empty treasury. The reward from the wedding was not nearly enough. He needed more money to cover what he owed. And soon.

"Hello, my king," said Alice, walking up to him. "I was sent to see if you needed any assistance." Mark opened his mouth, about to add some snide remark—when he came up with an idea.

After the success of Alice's wedding they quickly set their focus on finding a new target to trick. Mark had always been charming and convincing (at least he thought so) but watching Jane weave lies, he was amazed. She presented the next maid with such conviction he never doubted what the king's answer would be. Mark himself almost believed her,

even though the maid looked like neither of them. Their reward was three chests of jewels, of which Jane took two and left Mark one—though she took a few handfuls of his to ensure it was the full 70% she was promised. He tried to fight it but had no idea if Jane’s calculations truly *were* incorrect. Jane was so good at convincing foreign kings that they were soon out of maids. All, except one...

Despite his great suggestion of marrying off Beatrice, Jane refused, stating that not even *she* could convince people that the spirited elderly lady was their daughter. He believed otherwise because Jane was very convincing. But Jane’s own handmaids volunteered themselves and who could refuse. They soon found themselves with more money than they could have dreamed. And although Mark was very sad to leave his *amazing* manor, he soon moved into the largest, most extravagant castle he could find, and very quickly forgot about his old home.

Mark was seated comfortably by the fire in the great hall of Jane’s palace. He looked away from the fire to meet her curious gaze.

“What?” he asked.

“What made you start all this? This scam, I mean,” she asked.

“I was broke, barely able to stay in the manor I had. Tricking people into loaning me money and then finding myself with no way to repay them. I was desperate,” he admitted.

“And you just wanted to repay them out of the goodness of your own heart?” Jane asked.

“Um, yeah,” said Mark. “Also, one of them threatened to kill me.”

“Oh, it was serious,” she said, holding back a smile.

“Yes. What’s funny about that?” Mark asked, frowning.

“Nothing, I promise,” Jane assured him, but she erupted into laughter.

“You care so much, don’t you,” Mark muttered, his scowl darkening. She managed to stop laughing.

“Ok, sorry,” she said, wiping away tears of laughter from her eyes. “So, you’ve repaid them, or are you still in”—Jane fought back a laugh— “mortal danger?”

“No, I’ve repaid my debts,” Mark added.

“And then what?” asked Jane, raising an eyebrow. “Are you going to stop?” She knew the answer.

“No,” he admitted. “It’s so much fun. Those idiots believe every word I say. The maids are so eager to play along. I was going to keep going till I ran out of maids.”

“You did,” Jane reminded him.

“No, I still have Beatrice,” Mark insisted.

She rolled her eyes. “Not this again. It never would have worked.”

“I beg to differ,” Mark said. “I don’t know if I ever want to stop,” he admitted.

“How much money would it take you to stop?” Jane asked, smirking.

"You don't get to ask that. You weren't in debt, you did this for the money. You're as greedy as me," Mark told her.

"I didn't do it just for the money," Jane remarked honestly. Mark scoffed at this but she ignored him and continued. "I think you did a good thing. You helped all these women who wouldn't be able to rise in society. I think it was brave, risking it all," she said. He liked the sound of that. Bravery and good deeds. It numbed the part of himself that questioned and wondered if this whole scam was wrong.

The two partners in crime became closer as they continued to pull off more scams. Mark appreciated the times when he got to see the real her. The difference between Jane's restrained laughter she used in front of nobility and the unrelenting cackle she released when it was just the two of them.

One night at her castle without thinking he blurted, "What if we got married? No longer had to lie that we were." Jane raised an eyebrow and brushed him off as she continued the mindless task in front of her. "I'm serious," Mark added.

"Look, I enjoy this arrangement, why would we possibly ruin it?" Jane asked.

"How would it be ruined?" Mark questioned.

"It would be purely for the weddings to seem more legitimate. Marriages for convenience are not happy; they are just content. And a lot of times they begin to hate each other," Jane told him.

"That's true, but we aren't like them. We could make it work," he said with a grin. She paused, looking at him with an annoyed expression. He slowly got closer to her and said what he felt, finding himself really meaning it, rather than pitching it like a bargain. "I'm falling for you, and I'm scared that after we marry off your last handmaid I won't see you again," he admitted.

For a moment she did nothing, said nothing. Then in a low soft voice she said, "I think I'm falling for you too." He smiled and pulled her close. "I will agree to marry you on one condition," Jane said with a grin.

"What's that?" he asked.

"We share everything 80/20," she said. Mark laughed.

"70/30," he argued.

"You have yourself a deal," Jane told him.

They were married within the year, and, shortly after, had a beautiful baby girl together, who they named Elenore. All was well.

5 Years Later . . .

"The marriages. I thought you were tearing down the system and helping these poor women. It's why I helped you!" Jane yelled.

"Tearing it down? Why would I want to do that?" Mark scoffed.

"The maids had no chance at changing social stations. You granted them an opportunity, a new life," Jane said, her face white with rage.

"I granted myself extra riches," Mark stated, his face devoid of emotion. Jane's

furrowed brows changed to an expression he couldn't read.

"What about our Elenore? When she reaches a certain age, are you to marry her to the highest bidder?" Mark considered this.

"Well, she does have a pretty smile. I bet I could double my prices. With that money I could build a new extension to the castle," he said with a satisfied smirk. Lady Jane remained quiet.

What followed was what Mark remembered as an unfortunate sentencing. Banishment. But what was he supposed to do? His wife had gone missing only to be caught trying to flee with his daughter. She forced his hand. So, he had to watch as the young girl cried out to her mother. And her mother's arms, which sought to reach out and comfort her, were held back as their last words were exchanged. He, of course, raised his daughter to the fullest of his ability. Grand feasts and parades in her honor. He even moved her into the largest room in the castle and said nothing as she decorated it with flowers and vines (which quickly died). She was happy. He was happy.

Elenore grew to be a very kind and gentle soul. She loved to ride horses, explore the forests which surrounded her home and play games. Despite her father's restrictions about playing with the servants, she found great company with them. They were her friends, her only friends. She wasn't allowed to leave the castle without guards to keep her safe. Her father's orders of course. So her visits to the village market were met with fear rather than kindness. She didn't blame the townspeople for speaking to her in empty and short conversations. The guards were mean and thought everyone could be a serious threat. Because of course everyone knew a baker was as dangerous as a wolf—or worse. They were to be executed if any harm came to her. She found this annoying but understood her father loved her and just wanted her safe. But over time she began to realize how lonely she was. No mother, a father who often left for important business often kingdoms away, guards who hardly spoke but to warn her of dangers (like uneven roads), friends who had responsibilities to clean and cook and who mysteriously kept being replaced. She was alone.

Then Cassian entered her life, as handsome and charming as the heroes she read about. He was from another kingdom, just passing by when they met. She bumped into him and almost fell when he tried to catch her, but then they both fell over. They awkwardly scrambled to their feet. The young man brushed the dust from his coat, then looked at her.

"Oh, you've got some too," he murmured, reaching out to brush the dust off her dress. "Um, no," he said awkwardly, realizing he would have been touching the chest of a woman he'd just met.

The guards swept in, their swords at the ready.

"It's okay," she told them. They slowly returned their swords to their sheaths.

"I'm Elenore," she said with a smile. Her cheeks flushed red at the sight of his dark curls and prominent hazel eyes.

"The princess of Arragore," the knights added in unison.

"Oh. The princess," he said with a grin. A dimpled grin. "I'm Cassian, a prince of... um... a nearby kingdom."

"Which one?" she asked.

"How about I tell you over a drink? At the local tavern. Tonight?" Cassian suggested.

“I’m not allowed to leave the castle without—” Elenore pointed to the guards.

“Really? I’m sure you could find a way out of that,” he said walking away.

The maids agreed to cover for her, and so she snuck out finding her way to the tavern. He was there, sitting alone, and his eyes widened and his smile appeared at the mere sight of her. The night that followed was full of laughter and dancing. Over the following months she continued to sneak out under the same lie and meet Cassian. They rode horses across gorgeous paths of meadow and down the sandy shores. They played games and danced. He did his best to teach her archery, but she had terrible aim. The months turned into a year. Elenore was finally happy. At one of their meetings, Cassian turned to her with that dimpled grin, and asked her a question:

“Will you marry me?” to which she replied:

“Yes! I will!”

“Father, I have something I want to talk about,” Elenore said softly.

“Hmmp, what is it?” Mark asked, turning his attention towards her. He was seated in his chair by the fire, his feet raised, dangerously close to the flames.

“I’ve met someone,” she said, her voice squeaking more than she’d expected.

“Oh, that’s splendid. You made a new friend. I’m happy for you,” he replied.

“No. I...” she needed to say it now. “I fell in love and am now engaged with an amazing man. I met him in the market. He’s a—” Elenore didn’t get to finish the sentence before Mark interrupted.

“You what! You got engaged to some commoner?! Some random man I have never met!” he rose out of his chair.

“He’s a prince of a nearby and wealthy kingdom. He comes from a long line of great kings and queens,” she added, hoping that might allow her more time to explain. Surprisingly, he went quiet and sunk back into his chair.

“Why didn’t you start with that?” he said, turning his attention back to the fire.

“You’re not mad anymore?” Elenore asked.

“Why would I be?” Mark said calmly. “When is the wedding?”

King Mark was riding in a carriage with his daughter, following Cassian, who was on his horse, to his home in the nearby kingdom. Mark was trying to get comfortable, but the seats had little cushioning, so he put his focus on the forest surrounding the path and on the sound of birds chirping, filling the air. But then he saw the familiar church coming up on their left. He could have sworn he had been there before. The tall heavy door and the stained glass above them. Then he looked over on his right to the path which led to an open gorgeous meadow and it clicked.

“What was the name of Cassian’s kingdom again?” asked Mark.

His daughter frowned. “I told you earlier,” she stated.

“I’m sorry, I must have missed it,” he said.

The carriage stopped in front of the church and as they stepped out, the tall doors of

the church opened. The king and queen walked down the steps arm in arm, smiles on their faces. Mark locked eyes with the queen, who frowned at the sight of him.

“Cassian, I thought you said your bride-to-be was of a noble and honorable standing. I see no such family here,” spat the queen. Her eyes scanned his daughter and turned away unimpressed. Her eyes widened as she saw her son and she stretched out her arms for a hug.

“My dear boy,” she said. Cassian approached but stopped before he was close enough.

“Mother, what sort of comment was that? I introduce you to my future bride and you insult her family.”

“I apologize. Please come inside,” she said to Mark and Elenore. Elenore went before him making her way to Cassian’s parents and then doing a polite bow before them. The father smiled and returned the gesture. The mother watched as Mark approached.

“King Mark of Arragore,” she said.

“Queen Maria of Blysse,” he replied. The King of Blysse did not seem so bright as this name, despite being that of his supposed father-in-law, appeared to have no importance to him. They continued into the church as the King of Blysse stated that this was a location they were considering for the wedding. Mark watched as Elenore scanned the area, her eyes wide, as a smile stretched across her face.

“It’s beautiful,” she said.

“It’s where we got married,” Queen Maria said, placing a hand on her oblivious husband.

“Really?” asked Elenore. The queen nodded. The two lovebirds held hands, staring at the stained glass images and the open altar with vines running down it. Cassian gave Elenore an expectant look.

“I love it,” said Elenore. Cassian grinned.

“Me too,” he said.

The dinner was going as Mark expected. The young couple sat next to each other, whispering to one another and laughing, while the parents sat in silence.

“Tell me, Elenore, what do you know of your mother?” asked Queen Maria. Mark looked to Elenore who looked at the queen with a puzzled expression.

“I don’t remember her too well as she left when I was young. My father raised me,” Elenore said.

“Really. What a saint,” the queen said, looking at Mark. “Elenore your hands appear to be rough and calloused. Not like any princesses I’ve met. Do you often engage in hard labour?” asked the queen.

Elenore hid her hands under the table. “I... uh sometimes help our servants with their tasks. But no, not often” she answered. Cassian looked at his mother, confused.

“Oh really. I would have thought your father raised you better than to stoop so low as clean and cook with servants. It’s beneath you as a princess,” Queen Maria said.

“I uh...” Elenore began. Mark stood up from his chair before Elenore had the

chance to finish her thought.

“Why don’t me and the queen go on a walk so she can ask all the questions she wants while the young couple enjoys their meal?” Mark suggested. The king, his mouth full of chicken, nodded at this idea.

“Yes, that sounds good,” said Cassian, his hand gently rubbing Elenore’s back as he pulled her close. Mark saw the way this made his daughter smile even if it was only for a second before she lowered her head at the queen watching them. It made him like the boy even more.

The queen and Mark left the dining hall and went into an empty room where no one could hear them.

“Mark, I’m only going to say this once, you foolish man! You will not trick me into believing your lies. I was there behind the curtain watching you pull the strings. This young girl—I hope she does find happiness but it will not be through using my son like you used me. I will never allow this wedding to happen! So snatch your puppet from my boy and leave. Find another idiot to trick,” Queen Maria hissed.

“This isn’t one of my scams,” Mark said. Maria scoffed at that.

“As queen it is my duty to meet with other kingdoms to make alliances and trade. To my surprise, I see half the staff I used to work with sitting beside a king, wrapped in gorgeous gowns and jewelry. I know that you have done this scam again and again! But are you really so foolish as to try this on the person you used in your *first ever scam*?” she asked.

“No, I’m not. She is my daughter. Truly. Her mother is gone and I really did raise her on my own,” he insisted.

As this conversation occurred another conversation was unfolding in the kitchen.

“So, if he is the queen’s father then wouldn’t that make the couple, like, related...” asked one cook. Another cook looked at her, annoyed she wasn’t working.

“They’re royalty, they do things like this all the time. Don’t think about it too much,” said another cook.

“It’s strange though,” the first cook said. The rest all nodded in agreement.

“This actually explains a lot,” said another cook. Again they all nodded in agreement.

Back to the King of Arrgore and the Queen of Blysse...

“Please! You have to believe me!” Mark pleaded. Maria’s expression softened then re-hardened.

“This wedding is cancelled!” Maria shouted, slamming open the door of the dining room. Cassian stood, moving himself in front of Elenore.

“Mother, what is going on?” asked Cassian.

“I believe that King Mark is trying to trick us. Elenore isn’t his real daughter, he’s only trying to get money from the wedding. He is a greedy liar and she is his puppet,” the queen said.

Cassian looked to Elenore.

"It's not true," she pleaded. He hesitated for a moment.

"Leave," he said softly. She tried to grab his arm but he yanked it away.

"I said leave," he said firmly, his voice raised. Elenore stood and walked towards the door, where Mark stood watching this all unfold. The two gathered their belongings and headed back towards the carriage. Neither of them spoke to the other.

"Why did she believe you were lying about me being your daughter? And that you only wanted money?" asked Elenore, breaking the silence.

"I used to... I still pretend maids or other servants are my daughters and marry them off to wealthy kings for the money. It's how I bought our castle. It's how I became acquainted with your mother and it's how I know Queen Maria," Mark answered truthfully. Mark explained the whole thing, and finally told her about why her mother had to leave. *No more lies*. He watched as her expression darkened and her eyes filled with anger.

"That is a terrible thing to do," she said, turning away and ignoring him.

He imagined she would do this the whole way home. He thought long and hard about Jane and the scams. Remembering her words to describe it, brave and good. *Yes, that's what it is. I helped those women. I did a good thing*, Mark told himself.

Then he heard the silent sobs of his daughter as she wrapped her arms around her legs, curling up into a ball. *I'm a terrible person. And worse, I'm a terrible father*.

Mark knew he was an unwelcome guest but he had to try.

"Please just me speak to the queen. I *need* to speak with her," he pleaded desperately with the guards. The guards did not listen and remained in front of the doors, unmoving. Then, unexpectedly, the doors behind them began to open and the queen walked out.

"Mark, I have nothing to say to you," Maria said.

"And I have everything to say to you. I messed up. I lied, many times. I used you and others, only thinking of myself. I'm sorry. Please. Punish me, but not my daughter. She is sweet and kind. She only wants happiness. She found something real and she just wanted to keep it. And with all my lies I ruined that. So please you don't have to forgive me or trust me, but trust her. Trust Cassian," Mark blurted out. She gestured for the guards to leave, and they obeyed.

"Mark, I know you have lied in the past. So I'm giving you this one chance to tell the truth," she said.

Mark told her everything. About how he banished Jane and raised Elenore. About how Elenore was the most important person in his life. About how he had finally realized that his scams were hurting her.

Maria's gaze softened. She believed him.

"We are here today to not only unite these two people but these two kingdoms together as one. As the heirs of their bloodlines they carry their family's legacy of truth, honor and nobility," the priest proclaimed to the packed church. "The kingdoms of Arragore and Blysse will now be bound together in sacred union!" He resisted the urge to add "again" to the end of this sentence. The reception was held in the meadow nearby. There were rows of long tables for guests to sit and feast. But few were seated as the fast and lively music drove everyone to dance. Beatrice was there, smiling, dancing away. She waved at

him. She was finally talking to him again since her large raise. Mark turned back to people at the table and was a little surprised as a young servant grabbed his empty goblet and filled it before he even had the chance to ask.

“Thank you, young man. And what is your name?” he asked.

“It’s Henry,” the boy said.

“Well, Henry, thank you,” said Mark, taking a drink of wine. The Queen and King of Blysse were seated next to him smiling as the newlywed couple danced.

“So, Mark, tell me more about the mother? Which kingdom does she belong to?” asked Maria.

“Well...” Mark began but her laughter interrupted.

“What was that stupid name you came up with in the arrangements? Parternia?” Maria teased. Mark faked a laugh.

“Sorry, you were saying,” she said.

“Well, uh...”

The Bird Cage

Alyssa Flores

The journey upwards is an arduous one, the path uneasy and shrinking to just barely a foothold the higher it winds along the mountain. His fingers barely cling onto the rough stone, and yet, he persists. He continues even as his fingernails rip off and his throat stings with the thinness of the air. The mountain peak draws closer. He does not know how long the journey takes, the depths of the night bleeding into the starkness of the day, with bleak, foggy sunrises and dim, hazy sunsets being the only aberrations in the cycle of the sun and moon's path. Time, somehow, has fallen away like sand in the wind. All he can do, with no time and no other purpose, is climb to the peak of the mountain.

There is a cave at the top of the mountain, a neat arch carved into the stone. The dark beckons him forward, as if it was a bonfire. He steps forward on sore feet. His journey has not finished. Though it is dark in the cave, it is warm, far warmer than it is outside. There is no light, but he knows where he must step. So, forward he steps, and as if in opposition to the winding journey up the mountain, he spirals downward in the dark. The shadowed cavern swallows up all sounds. The all-consuming silence can only be thought of as oppressive and suffocating. Still, he walks on.

The path evens out, lying flat once more. He walks unhindered, still in the silent dark. His mind does not wander towards home, as this is now the only thing that is allowed to occupy his mind. He does not think of his aching hands and worn feet. He must walk on, and he does. He knows where he must go. The darkness, its heavy weight, begins to lighten on his shoulders as there, up ahead, a light glimmers. It is faint, like a fading breath. It grows stronger, like a new heartbeat, as he draws nearer. The tunnel that he has been trudging through gives way to the wide yawn of a cavern. From the ground, flowers bloom, curling upwards in defiance of the lack of sunlight, the stems shining emerald and the petals glittering in pearl. Above the flowers, above the ground, the golden cage hangs.

He sees her sitting on the swing, gently rocking back and forth in the imaginary breeze. Listless eyes do not pin their gaze on him, and she remains rigid on her perch. Only her wings twitch faintly. Otherwise, she is still, fingers wrapped around the stiff rope of the swing, poised and unmoving. It is hard to believe she is alive, save for the faint shift of her chest, rising and falling with her scarce breath.

"Where is the key," he asks, voice echoing in the cavern. She does not answer. She does not spare him a glance. "I can free you," he offers.

At this, her head tilts ever so slightly to the left, all bird-like in her manner. Yet she still does not speak, nor does she bring herself to face him, as if her head and neck have been fixed in place with wax. He waits for the span of a breath, then turns and walks the reverse of his journey, all the way down to the base of the mountain where he lays down and rests.

The same journey he made the previous day is repeated, and he ignores the pounding ache that echoes through his body. This time, his eyes adjust more quickly to the darkness of the cave as he descends. She has not moved since the day before, still staring at something invisible to his eye that captivates her attention.

"It is nearing the end of the winter," he tells her conversationally. "Soon, it will be summer, and the sun will return." He sits down where there are no flowers, the dirt clinging to him. "Have you ever seen the sun," he asks.

Though she does not speak, he does hear a soft whistle, near silent, escape from her. It sounds like a breeze sliding through a single, broken wind chime. Again, he waits for the span of a heartbeat and then leaves. This time, he sleeps in the mouth of the cave. When he

awakes, he is once again at the base of the mountain. So up again he must climb.

This journey is repeated every day, and should he try to sleep anywhere that is not the base of the mountain, he will wake up there regardless. He sits in the same flowerless patch of dirt every day before her cage and he speaks to her for a short time.

“Spring must come before summer. Have you ever had a drink of spring rain?”

“Out here, the sky at night lights up with colors you’d only imagine in a dream. Have you ever noticed this?”

He once offers her a piece of fruit he finds growing on the path of the mountain, which has since become easier to traverse each time he makes the climb upwards. He grows used to the roughness of the stones that cut into his hands and the narrowness of the paths that wind upward and make his feet twist, so he does not slip and plummet. At the sight of the fruit, her fingers twitch against the rope, though she makes no move to grab it.

“It will be sweet,” he says to her.

It is true; the fruit’s sweetness is obvious in the scent that fills the air as he breaks open the skin to the flesh inside, the beads of juice shining like jewels in the soft glow of the flowers. He offers her the fruit through the gilded bars of her birdcage, standing as tall as he can but still only reaching her ankles from her swinging perch. The fruit falls, clattering against the bones on the bottom of the cage. He leaves. When he returns the next day, though, the fruit has disappeared, leaving only its juice to dry on the long edge of a femur.

He does not know how many times he visits her, but he knows that it is many nights and many days, from the chill of winter on the mountain to the unending shower of spring’s rain as the season shifts. One day, when the air tastes green and new with the wet soil, and he brings palmfuls of rain to feed to the flowers, she speaks.

“Why do you visit,” she croaks in a voice that has long gone unused. He does not startle at the surprising sound of her voice, almost as if he’d been expecting her words that very day.

“Because that is what my journey has been for,” he answers quite simply. “So I may see you.”

“Why,” she asks once again in that rasping voice.

“Because I had to,” he replies.

She does not ask him anything more, and he does not carry on. Instead, he leaves to return to the base of the mountain. When morning comes, he brings her water that he collected in a carved wooden cup, fresh water that fell from the sky. He places it at the bottom of the cage, nestled in a skull’s empty eye socket so it does not tip over and spill. This is the first time he sees her move, still holding onto one of the ropes, but the other pries free as she leans down and grasps the cup between her fingers so she may drink. When she is finished, she speaks once more.

“How is the sun,” she whispers.

“It hides behind the clouds, because it is waiting for you to come and greet it. Until then, it asks the clouds to pour you clean water, and so they do,” he says.

“It will have to wait a long while, then,” she murmurs, and leans forward once more so he may take the cup and then she goes still once more.

The rain carries on, and he brings her more rainwater in a cup. She drinks, or sometimes she pours the water on her wings to wet her feathers. Sometimes, the water will

splatter against the bones on the bottom of the cage, collecting in the halved skull under her feet. He does not regard this as odd, and he does not ask her why she does this. She speaks, though it's very few words, and she still does not make much movement, but to him, these moments are as golden as her cage she sits in.

"What color are the clouds," she asks him softly.

"Dark as the tunnel I walk through," he replies. "But gentler. They are not angry."

"Have you seen any mountain birds," she inquires. He is surprised at that, as he did not think she would have heard them sing. "They echo into the cave," she tells him.

"Then they must love you," he says. "They are white, and they hide in the clouds when hawks fly past."

The spring rains pass, the air growing too hot as the days lengthen and the sun begins to push itself into the sky and cling there until the moon must take its place in the short, flickering nights. He does not tell her that summer has come upon them, though maybe she somehow already knows. Perhaps he brings with him the scent of the burning sun and the full wind of summer, or maybe she has spent so many turns of the moon in the cage under the earth that she knows when the seasons have shifted.

"I can feel it," she tells him. "The summer breeze coming down."

"Wouldn't you like to feel it from outside," he asks her. It has been quite a while since he broached the subject of her leaving the cage and stepping out under the sky. Her face speaks, now, instead of remaining as flat as an untouched pond. Now, in that pond, there are ripples that disturb her surface.

"I should not," she replies, and after this, she falls silent, unwilling to speak. Before he leaves on his journey back down the mountain, she moves. She stretches her legs, dangling feet meeting the bone covered bottom of the cage. The bones rattle, the most brittle ones snapping under her heels. Her wings twitch, the frail structures fidgeting against the golden bars. Her hands steady her shaking legs as she leans forward. "I will think. Give me until the last day of summer," she pleads in her rasping voice. "And then I will tell you."

"Okay," he agrees.

"For me to think," she continues, "I need you to not come here to me."

He frowns to himself. "I cannot see you?"

"No," she replies. "You cannot. I wish...I wish to make this decision on my own."

He does not want to. He wants to be able to see her. He wants to make his journey up the mountain as he has been doing since the winter, throughout spring, and now in the early summer. He does not want to spend his days staring up at the mountain's peak, wishing for something he cannot do. And yet, he agrees.

"Alright," he says. "I will give you till the last day of summer. Then, I will come and see you." This departure, the journey down the mountain, is the hardest it has been since the first time he made his way down. He sits at the base of the mountain, and that night, he does not sleep.

The summer days are achingly long, the sun coming early and bullying even the faintest clouds with its heat and light. The moon only manages to creep into the sky after hours of searing sunsets, the gold and scarlet clinging to the skyline. He wanders the forest at the base of the mountain. He collects stories to tell her. He wants to bring her tales of the squirrels and their quarrels in the canopy with the birds for space to build their homes. He wants to tell her of the mountain stream that pours over into a soft waterfall, trickling down

over smoothly worn rocks. If he could, he would bring her the cattails that grow along the edge of the pond, the flowers that gloriously bloom in vivid summer colors, and he would even bottle up the summer storms that rumble overhead so she could see the stark flashes of lightning when they jump between the roiling clouds. Sometimes at night, he will stay up, unwilling to sleep, and crane his neck so he may stare at that mountain peak.

The days dwindle, eventually. Even summer, with its long, lingering days, must come to an end. The brilliant green of the grass begins to lose its brightness and the leaves, full emeralds that cling to the rough, pliable bark, begin to droop, preparing for their inevitable fall. He knows it is time. For the first time in many turns of the moon and sun in the sky, he begins to climb the mountain.

The journey is long, nearly unbearably harsh. His fingernails chip against the rocks, skin ripping and bleeding as he clings to the mountainside. His feet ache, sores building on the soles. The path is so narrow that a single ill-timed breath would knock him off and send him plummeting. He continues with the sun beating down on his skin, burning it red-hot to the touch. It is with great effort that he reaches the peak of the mountain to see that wide, gaping maw of the cave, pitch black as ever. He steps forward, winding down, down, down. It does not get brighter, curiously enough. He knows why when he reaches the cage. The flowers, with all their pearly splendor, have wilted. They are crumpled petals and stalks that lay scattered on the floor. They do not glow, and it is impossible to see her face. He can still feel her eyes on him.

“Do I have your answer,” he asks.

“Yes,” she answers. “I will tell you if you answer a few questions.”

“That’s fine,” he agrees. “I will.”

“Can you free me,” she asks, weak voice hardly above a whisper.

“Yes,” he replies. He can hear her sharp, whistling breath, like the breeze through a reed.

“How can you free me,” she asks, and this time he can hear her ribcage rattle against her skin as she breathes.

“With this,” he tells her, and brings out a golden key for her golden cage. It is the one thing that shines in the dim cave. He knows she can see it, hears when her breath draws sharp.

When she speaks, it is a soft warble. “How did you get that?”

He licks his dried lips. “From my father. He gave it to me on his deathbed.”

“Ah,” she whispers, “So it will work.”

“The man who caged you will not do so again,” he says. “He cannot. So now, you can be free.” The cave is silent. He waits patiently in the dark. There comes the rustle of bones, clattering against golden bars, moved by feet displacing them.

“Free me,” she says.

He steps forward. The key slides into place, the clicking of the lock rusty and echoing all throughout the cave, shaking in his jaw, in his ears, in the bones of his hand. The cage door creaks open. He holds open his arms and waits for her to fall forward into them. She does.

When she is secure in his arms, he can feel the weak frailness in her bones. Her skin is paper thin, ready to fall away with her splintering bones. Her wings jut out awkwardly, having been broken long ago and never healing correctly. They are useless, rendered so

before she had been placed in the cage. He turns away, listening to her laboring breath, and leaves the cage with the bones of his sisters in the permanent dark.

The sun is setting when he leaves with her. The sky blazes more golden than ever before, the summer's final farewell before autumn ushers its way in. The sky has saved its most beautiful day for her, alight with all shades of coral, scarlet, rosy pink, and dusky blue. The last of the summer breeze reaches the mountain peak, the sweetest and cleanest it'd ever been. It will be a warm night, the sort of warm that brings soft dreams.

"Oh," she murmurs. "I had forgotten the sun."

"Will you stay to see the stars," he asks. He knows. He knows she will not stay. She is the last day of summer herself. The wind ruffles her crooked feathers, warming her skin.

"No," she whispers, hands trembling, "I cannot."

"I know," he replies, his voice hollowed and resigned. He steps forward to the edge of the mountain, bringing her close to see the forest that stretches out for miles beyond their eyes. The forest, ready to begin its hibernation for the winter, is washed in the colors of the coming night, bright colors bursting before they dim into the shadows of the night. Her breath comes hard in her rattling chest, her heartbeat fighting to remain in pace for just a few seconds more.

"Please," she whispers. "I wish to fly."

"You cannot—" he starts.

She interrupts him, begging, "Please. One last time." How can he deny her this last request? He walks forward, cradling her as carefully as he would a newborn bird with a broken wing he has taken off the ground. "Thank you," she murmurs. He lets her stagger those last steps forward, her bony knees knocking together. She spreads her thin, weak arms, and her broken, misshapen wings. Before she takes flight, she turns back to him.

"Farewell," she says.

When she jumps, she is held in the air for a moment, then two. This is the first time he's ever seen her smile as she plummets her brutal way to freedom.

"Goodbye," he tells the wind as feathers carry off into the breeze, "Mother." And he turns to make his final journey down the mountain, leaving behind the cave, and leaving behind the bird cage.

The Withering of a Sunflower

Penny Lanae

He called her his sunflower. The sunshine he was waiting for to brighten his mind, to refill his heart with passion. The greenness of her stem offered a hopeful source of nutrients, a new environment to change his. He was a gorgeous tall tree who carried years of wisdom within his rings; with dark bark and yellow leaves.

What you don't know is she started out rooted in the Earth before she grew her wings. Before the Sky was her place of peace, she grew amongst beautiful, flowered weeds. Here she didn't understand what was pulling at her feet. Before she was an ethereal being, she was a sunflower; *his* sunflower.

What she didn't know is that her Soul planted her willingly near this tree as her withering was destined to be. As she reached for the Sky, the blades of grass shrunk smaller. Her petals were all sorts of colors, changing over the years. She was the color of yellow when she noticed him. With childlike wonder, she gazed at his well-grounded feet, her eyes slowly admiring the grandeur of his physical being. He was settled, mostly calm, but when her attention was near him, his branches laughingly swayed in the wind. Her tiny leaves held a big embrace as her petals gleamed gold.

He was a complex soul and held an opposite stance in everything she was taught in terms of how to grow. His rings of wisdom intrigued her curiosity. His dying leaves pulled her heart to nourish his entire being. As the color of his leaves was not just a signifier of the changing season; it was the essence, the reflection of the present path his soul was seeking.

"I love everyone," he eased, "I have two other beings, would you like to be my other?"

"It's either me or nothing," she said, as her smile fluttered.

"Well, then you will be my everything," he said willingly. "My sunflower. My golden gleam."

She had never felt more seen; however, she was only eighteen, but that did not matter, she was a sunflower that gleamed. She grabbed the new knowledge of what she was said to be, brought it into her heart, and with pride performed to be *just* what he said; his everything.

As she grew alongside him, the greenness of her stem paled in color, harnessing the same likeness of his dark bark. What once were her golden petals had withered to beige, finding their place on the blades of grass. Oh, how she was filled with knowledge as her body grew. Oh, how she gained intelligence of the world around her, everything looked entirely new.

She was his everything and this is what caused her to be nothing. She could not explain the suffering she grew into, as she was in denial of everything she went through.

"I feel like a tree. I am living, but so many parts of me are dead, withering," she cried in silence.

She stood in the mirror wondering where she wandered off to. Wondering how she strayed so far from her colored petals; red, pink, orange, and blue. Her eyelids were puffy, and her cheeks glistened with tears. She was a blank page now with no form of expression, not even fear. Her eyes trailed to her short, choppy hair. Her skin was paler than ever, and the inside of her thighs was lined with red grief for the loss of her once golden gleam; it was nowhere to be seen. She had given him everything, yet felt she gained nothing in return; but deeply she knew it was the experience she had earned. She could not leave for he

would never let her. Guilt he had placed on her, as she was naïve; he made it known that he carried wisdom in his 26 rings. She reminded herself of the man he was to be, their potentiality. They were too far in to ever go back. She reminded herself she was the one who was filled with lack.

“I love the man who loves me. The man who cares no matter the swing. Of ups and downs and in between. The love of the man is entirely sweet. Always remembering the hurtful stings, but remembrance never enough of the love he brings. I know the man who loves me and that’s the man that’s perfect for me.” She recited, closed her eyes and exhaled deeply.

“Where is your golden gleam?” she remembered him asking accusingly, “You are no longer a sunflower. What happened to all the love you used to bring?”

She gazed at the mess in the mirror, finally deciding a break from it all would surely help make everything clear. She would get her own golden gleam back, but not here.

Elwin's Beginning

Matthew Phengdy

On the continent of this world, Gaia, there is a legend. A legend that has been passed down from king to king, from noble to noble, from peasant to peasant, about the legendary swords known as Caliburn and Alrisser. Twin swords that are functionally the same, but polar opposites. These swords, whenever there is conflict on the continent of Salria, would emerge to do battle once again.

The dark blade, Alrisser, was said to have been forged by the dark God, Gendrasil, the embodiment of Chaos. It was a giant two-handed sword that was made from a black alloy stronger than even that of steel. Alrisser is said to grant its wielder great power, great power at the eventual cost of their life. The blade was said to be able to give a single man the power to fell entire armies, level cities, and bring great destruction against its enemies. So feared was this weapon that the origins of Alrisser's last resting place is a mystery. Some would argue that it never existed and instead mistaken for another sword that existed at the time of the great kingdom of Lethead.

The other sword, known as Caliburn was the opposite. Said to be a bronze sword like no other, that when wielded in the hands of the chosen and righteous was said to shine like the fires of the sun. It was created when the Goddess of Light, Lishieris, brought to the earth a piece of the Heavens and then had it forged within the ancient fires of the Saraia Mountains by the ancient dwarves.

So, it has been foretold that when conflict rears its head on the continent of Salria, the two swords would once again meet on the battlefield. An intriguing story if indeed true, for the continent of Salria has been embroiled in petty disputes with warring kingdoms and fiefdoms since the death of King Ethread.

And so, our story begins not in a grand castle filled with adventure and princes and princesses, or of knights of honor and their tales of heroism. Instead, this tale begins with but one step.

#

The sun shone down heavily on the desert plains of Amaras. A lone figure, wrapped in a beige cloak walked through the shimmering heat. His every step left imprints on the ground. His face was young, but drained. As though he had seen many things that had left him a world-weary traveler. On his head was a silver tiara, sculpted to have one wing reaching out from the left of his head. Set in its center was a dull, amber-colored gemstone. Even as the sun beat down upon his head, the gemstone reflected barely any of the sun's rays back towards the sky. The traveler had fair skin, dirty from the sand dunes, and sweat that had perspired from his forehead, running down his face, then his body. Reaching the zenith of a nearby sand dune, the traveler reached within his cloak and produced a metal canteen of water. He uncorked the top, rose the sprout to his lips and waited for the cool refreshing taste of life.

The canteen only produced a single drop. Returning it back under his cloak, the traveler continued on, staggering, slowly trying to keep pace. The sun that was high above the sky looked down and baked him. Vultures soared above, waiting for their next meal. It was not by chance that he was here. He was not dressed in the common garb of the people of the Desert Plains of Amaras. He was from the southern region, where there was grass, water, streams, butterflies, and temperate weather.

In the distance, the traveler could see what appeared to be an oasis. His eyes grew wide under his red bangs, and his equally magenta-colored pupils went wide. "Water! There is some hope!" He began to pick up the pace, running and thrashing about. The sand

near his feet went everywhere, and he lost his footing, slipped, and then tumbled down the sand dune. He was not undeterred. Rising to his feet, he scrambled back on all fours and like a madman dashed towards the oasis.

It was only until he managed to reach around 200 feet of the oasis did he realize his mistake. The oasis that he had seen was simply not real. It was too real to be true. It was a trick of the sun, the sun's rays combined with the heat had lured him into a false sense of security. "No...! Another trick of the light!?" The traveler fell to his knees and screamed at the sky. "Goddess of Light! Why have you forsaken me!?" He clawed at the ground, punching the sand. It made no difference in his situation, yet the traveler continued to pummel the sand as though it were a mortal enemy. "Gods damn it!" With a deep heave, he rose and began to stagger once again.

The Traveler only made it a few more miles before the strength had left his limbs and he collapsed under the weight of exhaustion and the unbearable heat bearing down on him. As his consciousness faded, the traveler's Tiara reflected the sun's rays and shone a deep red.

#

With a start, the traveler awoke. He was no longer in the burning heat of the sun among the sand dunes. He was in a small hut, furnished with sparse belongings and furniture that could best be described as spartan. His heavy armor was in a corner, along with his cloak that was hung up on a stand, and his sword and its scabbard lie upon a small rectangular table. There was a thin blanket of cotton over his person, worn from repeated use and the elements. Removing it, the traveler swung his legs over the small cot he was on and stood. The world around him spun for a fraction of a second before his body centered itself.

Looking around, the traveler began to inspect the hut. It was filled with odd knick-knacks and tools such as hammers, a spinning machine, and other devices he could not quite recognize. After inspecting some sort of glass-like orb, the door to the hut, which was more like a thin tarp was moved to the side. The traveler turned. There, he saw a woman, slightly smaller than him, lithe in build, and with fawn-colored skin arrive. She had long dark hair that was tied back, and the tail end ran down her back. She wore a red robe that was modest.

"Ah, you've awoken? I was beginning to fear that the desert had claimed you." She spoke with a melodious voice that was not too airy, yet also not too deep. "I see that you are of able body. Welcome to my simple home. I am Jessica." The woman introduced herself with a smile.

The traveler blinked several times and placed down the orb.

"Thank you, for rescuing me from the desert. I almost believed that it was my end there." The traveler once again looked around the hut. "My name is Elwin." Elwin gave a slight bow. "If you don't mind me asking, where am I?" The woman called Jessica smiled once again.

"You are in the city of Karalla. Fifty miles away from the capital of the Kingdom of Joubata. Karalla is a medium-sized city, which specializes in trade and commerce." Jessica explained, she grabbed a stool made from weaved bark and sat down. She motioned for Elwin to sit across from her. Elwin did so, noticing the stool giving slight way under his weight.

"The city of Karalla? That means I'm a long way from home." Elwin folded his arms, his brow furrowing. "Does that mean that we're within the domain of the Algasts?" Elwin glanced at his sword within its scabbard.

"We are not, Elwin. Their kind tend to stick to the desert plains to waylay travelers.

They are not welcome within the walls of any city here. Much less one that is protected by the royal guard of the Joubata.” Jessica had a look in her eye at the mention of the Algasts. With a sigh of relief, Elwin allowed his shoulders to droop. “You were lucky that I had found you. The Algasts would have spared no mercy for you,” Jessica explained.

“Then I am thankful, once again for your rescue. I may not have much besides my sword, but I promise that I will make it up to you, somehow.” Elwin spoke with a certain kind of conviction that was evident in his eyes.

“Good, then perhaps you would like to have a tour of Karalla?” Jessica stood up from her stool with a certain grace. There was a brief sparkle of light that made Elwin flinch. When the light had dissipated, Jessica was now wearing the same colored dress, but now it fit her form more closely. Elwin blinked several times.

“You’re a magician!” He said, dumbfounded.

“Sorceress, Elwin. There’s a difference. Come.” And with those parting words, left the hut. Still reeling from this revelation, Elwin grabbed his sword, wrapped it around his waist and began after the Sorceress Jessica. Little did Elwin know, that this was the moment that would push him on the path towards King.

Drama & Film



Strawberry Short Circuit

Anna Rinaldi

Instagram: @jannarinaldi

Wherever You Want Me to Be

Omar Ahumada

AN EXCERPT FROM THE SHORT FILM:

WHEREVER YOU WANT ME TO BE.

FADE IN.

INT. BANK – NOON

Dom is at the window again, cashing checks, depositing and withdrawing with the same lifeless look as before. He scans around the lobby distracted.

We see Lupe, his coworker, next to Dom talking to her customer.

WOMAN

Excuse me?

Gary is out on the lobby helping an old man navigate through the kiosk.

WOMAN

Excuse me?

It's Sarah in the white dress from a couple nights ago. The ambient noise of the bank falls silent, and the sound of Dom's heartbeat grows louder. Sarah glares at Dom with an impatient look. Dom stares back in disbelief, unable to process what she's doing here.

Dom begins to hyperventilate and stumble off his chair and make his way to the bathroom, all while holding to the wall and desks around him to keep his balance.

Lupe shakes her head in disappointment. Raises her hand to catch the attention of the woman Dom left.

LUPE

I can help you over here, ma'am.

The woman Dom saw was not Sarah but had similar features and a white sundress compared to the longer one Sarah wore. She walks over to Lupe confused while looking at the direction Dom stumbled across.

LUPE

I'm really sorry about that. How can I help you?

Gary notices the incident and marches towards Lupe after he finishes helping with the old man.

GARY

Is he okay? What happened?

LUPE

I don't know. He just saw that woman over there...

Lupe points towards the woman who's leaving. Gary follows Lupe's line of sight.

LUPE (CONT'D)

... and ran off.

GARY

You see where he went?

LUPE

The bathroom, I think.

Gary looks over at the bathroom across the hall.

GARY

You think you can take care of yourself for a while? I'll cover
Dom when I get back.

LUPE

Yeah, yeah go take care of that. I got you covered.

GARY

Thanks.

Gary walks over to the bathroom.

INT. BATHROOM – CONTINUOUS

CUT TO:

Dom frantically turns on the water faucet and washes his face, trying to catch his breath.

He looks in the mirror in an attempt to compose himself. Gripping each end of the sink.

DOM

You're okay, you're okay, you're okay.

We hear a knock on the door. It's Gary.

GARY

(from outside the door, yells) Doing alright, man?

Dom tries to calm his breath still, responding shakily.

DOM

I'm...I'm fine.

Gary shakes the knob and is surprised to see it isn't locked. He takes a deep breath, enters and closes the door behind him.

He walks over to Dom who's still trying to catch his breath and rests his hand on Dom's hunched over back.

GARY

You know that woman?

DOM

(calmly)...no... Gary thinks for a second.

GARY

She remind you of someone?

No response.

GARY (CONT'D)

Lupe tended to her already she's gone now.

Dom nods and straightens himself.

GARY (CONT'D)

You gonna be okay to work still or do you need the day off?

Dom takes a breath. He's much more composed.

DOM

(calmly) Yeah, I'll be fine.

Gary smiles and pats Dom on the side of the shoulder.

GARY

Good. Let's get back to work.

They both walk out of the bathroom.

GARY

I'll cover you on window and you go over there on accounts.
Slow day today so you won't have that many appointments.

Dom nods.

DOM

(quietly) Thanks.

Gary pats him on the back once before heading over to windows and Dom walks over to the cubicle. He types on his keyboard until a middle-aged couple greets him.

The woman startles Dom, but he catches himself before he spirals again.

Dom gets up from his chair.

DOM

Hello, please take a seat.

They both sit down with all their paperwork in hand.

DOM

How can I help you guys today?

HUSBAND

We're here to open a new joint savings account.

The wife chimes in.

WIFE

(smiles in excitement) We just got married. She holds up her hand to show her ring. Her husband follows.

DOM

(smiles) Congratulations. I'm happy for the both of you.

HUSBAND

Thank you.

WIFE

(at the same time) Thank you.

Dom types in their information.

DOM

Okay, can I see proof of income for the both of you?

HUSBAND

No problem.

WIFE

(at the same time) Of course.

Dom takes the paperwork from both and briefly looks over them. A puzzled look grows on his face.

DOM

Um, Selena correct?

WIFE

(smiles) Yes, that's me.

DOM

I see here that you're receiving financial benefits from a Ronald Kent. I just wanted to clarify—

Selena interrupts.

SELENA

Sorry, that was my late husband. He passed away while in active duty.

DOM

I-I'm sorry. I didn't mean to pry into your business. We're all grateful for his service.

SELENA

It's okay, it was a while ago.

Dom continues to type on his computer. He pauses, unsure of whether to speak his mind or not.

DOM

I'm really sorry to ask but, h-how did you get through it?

SELENA

Through what?

DOM

Through the loss.

The husband straightens himself in his chair and leans forward.

HUSBAND

(sternly) I don't see how that's relevant to—

Selena interrupts again.

SELENA

It's okay Mark. It's fine.

She reaches for Mark's hand, and she holds it close to her. Mark leans close to her and Dom moves his hands away from the keyboard and faces her.

SELENA

After I lost him I was a complete shell of a person. It felt like I was present in the flesh, but absent in the soul. I just wanted to sleep forever and dream of our memories together. God, how much I missed him. My parents, in laws at the time, and my siblings all cared so much for me and I kept questioning "why does it matter what they do or don't do? He's gone."

SELENA (CONT'D)

Eventually I was able to start doing simple things on my own and take care of myself but the missing warmth from our bed made nights so miserable. With time I learned to cope and accept things for what they are and that's when it started to get better. It's all thanks to my friends and family that I was able to start living and...

She looks towards Mark and kisses his hand. They smile at each other.

SELENA (CONT'D)

...find love again. At first it feels like a betrayal, but I understood eventually that moving on doesn't mean letting go and forgetting, but to live the life he would've wanted me to live.

Selena notices the ring on Dom's finger and sees that he has the same face she used to have. She understands now.

SELENA

It will be okay. I know it feels impossible but every day it gets a little bit easier. Let the people around you help.

Dom smiles and the camera pulls back slowly. Though the conversation becomes less audible we see that they shift back to the topic of the joint account.

CUT TO:

INT. BANK – NIGHT

The bank is closed for the night and Dom logs off the computer. As Dom gets up, Gary and Eduardo stop by the cubicle again. Gary leans on the edge of the opening like he usually does with the same smile he's always had.

GARY

We're gonna go out for drinks tonight if you care to join us?

Dom looks as tired as he always has been, but his eyes have a bit more life to them. He thinks about his question for a quick second.

DOM

You know what, h-how about next time?

Gary raises his head in surprise and his smile grows.

GARY

Alright! Sounds like a plan.

He steps aside to let Dom pass.

GARY

Let's get out of here.

They all exit the front door and like usual, Gary and Eduardo stay behind to lock the front door while Dom carries on.

Dom turns around halfway to his car.

DOM

And uuhh, Gary?

Gary turns around.

GARY

Hm?

DOM

Thanks again for earlier. I appreciate it.

GARY

(smiles) Anytime!

Dom walks to his car and drives off.

EDUARDO

(mockingly) Next time!

They both laugh.

GARY

See, all he needed was a little encouragement.

They both walk to their cars.

GARY

We can go a little crazier this time.

EDUARDO

Sure buddy, I already know what you're gonna say after.

EXT. CLIFF/OCEANSIDE – NIGHT

CUT TO:

Dom pulls his car in the lookout point, same place as before, and sees that Sarah isn't in her usual place. He looks around.

DOM

(concerned) Sarah?!...Sarah?!

Still nothing, no one. He slowly walks over to the edge and Sarah in the white dress appears from behind, and hugs Dom from the waist.

W.D. SARAH

(whispers in Dom's ear) Come with me... jump.

She raises her arms from Dom's waist to his chest, letting himself become enveloped in her arms.

W.D. SARAH

(whispers) jump for me, so we can finally be together. I've missed you so much.

Dom hesitates a little.

DOM

I just want to talk about my day baby, like we've always done.

W.D SARAH

(yells) We always talk about your day! We've had the same conversation for three years now Dom! THREE! (sternly)
You need to choose, me or them.

Dom tears up and chokes on his words.

DOM

Don't make me, please. You know I love you.

W.D. SARAH

Do you now?! I am sick and tired of your indecisiveness! Too sad to live, too afraid to join me. Your wife!

W.D SARAH (CONT'D)

And that's why you keep coming back here. You don't miss me. You sit there, waiting for the perfect moment to jump but it never comes Dom, you want to know why?! Because you need to make it happen!

W.D. SARAH (CONT'D)

So choose Dom! What do you want?!

Dom crumbles and balls up on the floor, plugging his ears with his palms, crying. Sarah lowers herself and massages his back.

W.D. SARAH

(calmly) You don't have to suffer anymore, baby. We can be together again like you wanted.

Dom shuts his eyes, and his life begins to flash before his eyes. He's remembering all the happy moments they both had together: the dates they've been to and always eating a burger in this spot, the day he asked her to marry him in this spot too, the wedding, when they found out Sarah was pregnant, when Holly was born...

W.D. SARAH (V.O)

(softly) Look how happy we are.

Holly now a toddler sitting in Sarah's lap while on the swing and Dom pushing them from behind. Dom and Sarah laugh while Holly shrieks with laughter as they get higher and higher.

He's remembering the day he got the phone call notifying him of Sarah's death, the funeral, the day he dropped off Holly to David and Melissa, him doing nothing but cry at his framed photos of Sarah in his dirty apartment.

W.D SARAH (V.O)

(softly) It's okay my love you're almost there.

Then he remembers Gary and all the times he's invited him out, and today when he helped him out in the bathroom, Selena and the conversation they had at the bank, and the pep talk David gave him a couple nights ago.

Dom opens his eyes and sees he is at the edge again but this time his head hangs over. A breeze blows through his hair.

DOM

(sniffles) I can't, baby.

He slowly picks himself up. With his hand on the edge a piece breaks and he falls to the ground again. This time he hangs off completely, with only his arms to support him.

Sarah in the white dress stands in front of him, watching him struggle to hold on, slipping little by little.

W.D. SARAH

All you have to do is let go and you'll have everything you've ever wanted. Why are you still fighting, Dom? It's pointless, you even said yourself.

Dom catches his breath from the shock, grunting as he tries to hold on.

DOM

I was wrong!

Dom manages to get a better grip.

DOM (CONT'D)

God only knows how much I miss you!(grunts) But it's not just me, it's everyone! And Holly. I miss you more than anyone can imagine, but our time has passed.

He crawls up from the edge and picks himself up. He stands face to face with Sarah in the white dress.

DOM

What I want (pants) is to be there for Holly, to be her father again. I can't lose her too.

Sarah in the white dress says nothing, just glares at him. They hold eye contact for a moment and Dom limps to his usual spot.

As he crosses through the frame, Sarah in the white dress disappears behind him. Dom sits and the camera moves to the side revealing the first Sarah sitting beside him.

They both stare into the horizon, where the sky and ocean meet.

DOM

I've neglected our daughter for so long, Sarah. Please forgive me.

Sarah leans her head on his shoulder.

DOM

I'm going to fix this.

SARAH

I know you will. That's what I love about you.

Some moments pass.

DOM

I can't keep seeing you anymore.

Sarah smiles

SARAH

I know Dom. I wish it wasn't like this either. Just remember...
I'm wherever you want me to be.

Sarah reaches to kiss his cheek. Dom smiles and closes his eyes. Black.

SARAH (V.O)

Now go take care of her.

He opens his eyes. It's just him.

A wide shot from behind, with Dom sitting down facing the oceanside.

We hear the waves crash, pull back and crash again against the rocks.

What Now?

Jacob Atlai Cota

The bar is very minimalist, the only thing being the bar itself with the shelves full of drinks. At center stage left there are tables and chairs. There is a row of chairs that line up against the Bar.

(A radio is set on the bar table playing Spanish radio.)

(It appears to be dead hour where no one seems to show up.)

(SARA, wearing a standard bartender uniform, no-sleeve V-neck t-shirt with the company logo and jean shorts, stands at the bar by herself trying to keep busy while listening to the radio.)

(MIRIAM, wearing a black floral V-neck dress with lace trim and a dark blue sweater, enters the bar cautiously, making sure nobody followed her. She carefully walks to SARA who has been staring at her.)

MIRIAM. *(Broken Spanish)* Hablas Inglés?

SARA. A little.

MIRIAM. Oh good! I'll try to make it easy.

(MIRIAM looks around.)

SARA. You okay?

MIRIAM. I just, can't believe I'm in here.

SARA. Welcome to La Lluvia! Please have a seat.

(MIRIAM slowly walks to the bar while testing her weight every step of the way.)

SARA. I don't bite, I promise.

MIRIAM. It's not that, it's just. *(sigh)* Here we go.

(She finally sits down at the bar and takes a second to look at the Bar full of various liquors.) (SARA notices immediately.)

SARA. Drink?

MIRIAM. Maybe later. *(beat)* Do you mind if I vent?

SARA looks at her confused on the word "vent."

MIRIAM. Ummm, talk to you about something.

SARA looks interested and turns off the radio.

MIRIAM. You see I had to go to anyone who would listen, even if you don't understand what I'm saying. Which is fine, because some of the stuff I have to tell you will make you wish you stuck with Spanish.

(MIRIAM stares at the drinks and looks behind her back.)

SARA. Are you waiting for someone?

MIRIAM. You know what, I will ge that drink.

SARA. Sure, what'll it be?

MIRIAM. I don't know. I've never drank before.

(SARA looks at her with an understanding. She turns and gets a bottle off the shelf and starts making a drink.)

MIRIAM. Where do I start? *(Sighs)* My name is Miriam by the way. I'm sorry for being rude.

SARA. No no no no no no it's okay. I understand. I'm Sara.

MIRIAM. Nice to meet you Sara. *(Beat)* Can I ask you something?

SARA. Sure.

MIRIAM. What's the worst thing you've ever done?

SARA. The worst thing?

MIRIAM. You don't have to tell me, just keep that in mind, because what I just found out will make whatever you did seem like an awkward fart in the car compared to it. I don't know if you've been listening to the news lately but a man was arrested on sex charges.

SARA. Really?

(While SARA says this she pours out the drink and presents it to MIRIAM.)

MIRIAM. Yeah.

(MIRIAM takes the drink and stares at it for a bit before finally taking a sip. She winces harshly.)

MIRIAM. God that's strong. You know this is my first drink ever?

SARA. Is it?

MIRIAM. I wasn't able to all my life. You know why?

(SARA shakes her head.)

MIRIAM. Because drinking, of ANY kind, is considered a sin. You know that was the only thing I knew about for so long. What's wrong with this, what's wrong with that and the whole world but not once did they ever tell me what I COULD do. The only good act in this life is serving God and his Apostle.

SARA. Apóstol?

MIRIAM. Yeah! You didn't know? Ah well, everyone should know who the apos-
tle is. There's been three of 'em. He's a man called directly from God and God guides
him. So whatever he says is God's Law, and I think you know where I'm going with
this.

SARA. No!

MIRIAM. Hope you got time cause we're gonna be here for a while. *(Sips)* Wow!
Okay. Let me tell you a little story that is very legitimate in every way. So the second
apostle, sorry I can't even call Him that. Thomas, passed away, no sorry, DIED. Any-

way, he died and thousands came to his funeral, me included. So for a whole week THOUSANDS of people were trying to figure out what this means for the church, no sorry, the CULT. *(Sips)* So after a week of not sleeping, and praying because sleeping is for laziness and laziness leads to sin. *(eye roll)* Anyway. After all that *(gasp)* A miracle! God strikes again and tells his successor that he will lead the people. Now we have Anthony as the current a..po..jerk face.

(She covers her mouth in shock.)

SARA. It's okay. Keep going.

MIRIAM. So he's in charge now and everybody's happy and we all get to go home and "testify" on what we saw that night, which I just did. *(She sighs and turns away for a brief second).* *(To herself)* Last person you tell and no more.

SARA. Can I ask what he did?

MIRIAM. You didn't think I'd leave the best part out did ya? Well let me tell you. *(Drinks)* He's made a lot of sex tapes.

SARA. What?

MIRIAM. Oh yeah apostles can have sex with multiple people didn't you know? I mean king David had concubines, so Anthony has that same glory. I'm sorry if I sound crazy it's just. All my life I thought I was a bad person. The worst of the worst. I mean look at the way I'm dressed, I mean did you know that I'm 26. No! Who would in this stupid thing?

SARA. Why did that matter?

MIRIAM. I thought I was pleasing God. You wanna know the worst part? I actually believed in Anthony's ministry.

SARA. ¿Sabes que? I remember my cousin talking about an Anthony and his ministerio apostolico.

MIRIAM. See! I told you he's known everywhere.

SARA. What else can't you do?

MIRIAM. I can't cut my hair. Ever. Who knows if I even like my hair like this. I might as well shave it all off. I can't go out with anyone outside of the cult. Did you know I've never kissed anyone? Yep, a girl in her 20s never kissed a boy. Who knows if I even like boys. Look, the point is while I'm over here freaking out for liking, LIKING a boy, this piece of garbage can have orgies and have little girls spit in his mouth! Look it up if you have the time, it's all true. I'm sure it's all over the news so that's why I had to come here.

(ANTHONY appears out of the shadows wearing a suit and hat but all we see is his silhouette. MIRIAM stares at him with absolute panic and fear. She looks back at SARA who doesn't see Anthony.)

SARA. What else did he do?

MIRIAM. He had it all. God anointed him and he had my support, my hobbies, my interests, my life.

(ANTHONY walks to the first chair of the bar getting closer to MIRIAM.)

(MIRIAM tries to ignore him.)

(She breathes very heavy, almost hyperventilating.)

(She takes a sip.)

He told us that all we had to do was believe that God has chosen him and he will talk to God personally and he'll just answer my prayers. Funny enough every time we came to church, the first thing we had to do was to admit our faults. *(Mocking)* No don't go there remember even if you think you didn't DO anything, you still somehow, someway offended him with your bad thoughts!

(Miriam gets up and paces the room for a little bit to get away from Anthony who is still at the first chair of the bar.)

MIRIAM. I had to put up with him for a long time because I remember how he helped my mom during a rough custody battle. Honestly, thanks to him I was able to escape from my biological father. His Grandpa saved my Grandma's life so he's literally the reason I even exist.

(Miriam fights back tears, sits back down and takes a deep breath. She sips again. Anthony gets closer.)

MIRIAM. With all that in mind I should just forgive him right? As the good book says, honor those who deserve honor and forgive those who harm you. *(Mocking)* But he saved me from an abuser, surely that constitutes honor.

(Anthony gets even closer. He stretches out his arms to offer a comfort hug.)

MIRIAM. *(To ANTHONY in full rage)* You ruined my fucking life!

Lights out.

(Spotlight shines on Miriam standing as if she's standing in front of God at the pearly gates awaiting judgment.)

(Miriam looks shocked and afraid as if she told Jesus Christ himself that he ruined her life. She breathes heavily and starts crying.)

MIRIAM. What is wrong with me!!!

(MIRIAM paces the room again cussing herself out for about a minute but soon turns to a newspaper with a picture of ANTHONY sitting in court with an orange inmate uniform.)

Lights up.

(MIRIAM looks back at ANTHONY who is now sitting at the first chair, far away from her, in an orange jail scrub, facing forward.)

(MIRIAM smiles.)

MIRIAM. I'm GLAD you look humiliated in these hearings.

(MIRIAM immediately stops smiling and she now, for the first time, stares him down with murderous intent.)

MIRIAM. But it will NEVER compare to how you humiliated your victims. You deserve EVERYTHING that is happening in that courtroom. You have hurt not only your enemies, you also harmed the people who LOVED YOU! You are now shown in every news outlet, in English and Spanish, as an extremely dangerous man, a sexual predator, and someone inmates and guards alike HATE the most. Did you know those

sheriffs who were listening in are DISGUSTED with you? If you think this courtroom is unforgiving, wait until you face the courtroom before God. You are responsible for thousands of souls who believed your falsehood and accepted it. You told them with absolute clarity and pride “I am your master, your lord AND your god.” I am so close to saying I’m free. Look I’m having a drink! (*Miriam finishes the drink.*) And look! Despite your grandfather’s warning God hasn’t struck me down. But then again you used to have a little drink yourself with Jody, Suzanne, and, who was it, Rodriguez? Don’t think I don’t know about your friends. They still talk about you and they SCOFF at your new High and Mighty attitude. In fact, they are just as baffled as I am that you were able to keep this cult going for more than a year given your history of just say whatever you want and saying a bunch of regrettable bullshit!

(*ANTHONY stands up. He stares at her and looks like he’s about to say something. MIRIAM stares back at him with rage.*)

MIRIAM. Oh no you don’t, you snake!!! (*Sarcastic*) Even though I might go to hell for saying this. (*Seriously*) I’m done with you. I’m done with your words and your half-assed attempt at an apology, which we all know is just gonna come right back to me and I’ll be the one at fault. (*Screaming as loud as possible*) Just get the fuck out of here!

Lights out

(*Lights come back on and ANTHONY is gone.*)

(*SARA looks at her in awe at what she just heard.*)

(*She thinks for second.*)

SARA. Give me a second.

(*She exits.*)

MIRIAM. I probably scared her away.

(*SARA comes back with black jeans and a shirt with the Bar logo on it.*)

SARA. Try this on.

(*MIRIAM looks at it and does nothing at first. After a couple of seconds of doubt, she takes the shirt and black jeans.*)

(*SARA shows her the break room.*)

(*MIRIAM exits.*)

(*SARA turns the radio back on.*)

RADIO V.O. The leader of the megachurch “Awaken Our Souls” was sentenced Wednesday to more than 16 years in a California prison for sexually abusing young female followers who said he made them his sex slaves. Anthony J. Campbell, 53, abruptly pleaded guilty last week in Los Angeles Superior Court to three felonies on the eve of a long-awaited trial. Prosecutors said Campbell, who is considered the “apostle” of Jesus Christ by his 5 million worldwide followers, used his spiritual sway to have sex with girls and young women who were told it would lead to their salvation — or damnation if they refused.

SARA. Hijo de la chingada!

(*SARA begins to leave to check up on MIRIAM but she steps out in her new attire before she can knock on the door.*)

SARA. Wow! Miriam, you look amazing!

MIRIAM. Thanks, and thank you so much Sara for listening! How much for all this?

SARA. It's your first so it's free.

MIRIAM. OH MY GOD! Thank You!

SARA. Now you go out there and live your life. I promise life has so much to offer you. You have been heard.

(MIRIAM tears up a bit.)

MIRIAM. Thank you.

(She goes to the door looking nervous. She stops in front of the door. She thinks about the things she will do. She takes a deep breath in and out and exits.)

BLACKOUT.

Chronicles of Astris

Miguel Juarez Garcia

[The following is a short excerpt from a video game currently in progress]

Search for the Master

01. The Lowland

Long before time could be measured, before the first thoughts or even the first noise was made, there existed a being capable of great power. The being possessed the ability to manipulate the very elements of the Cosmos. Fire, Earth, Ice, and Lightning all bent to the will of this being. For this, he was given the title of the singular Master of the Elements. At the pinnacle of his power, he created the floating island of Astris.

After securing peace for his people, the Master mysteriously disappeared. His absence inadvertently led to a power struggle among the people. Without the guidance of their leader, a rift was formed between the elite who lived at the top, and the “unworthy” of the Master’s miracles. To this day, the people of Astris continue to fight, they can only hope their leader returns to end this conflict.

The scene drifts to the Lowland, where scum and villainy reside, and where the Tree’s roots are harvested to create a blue substance known as Fooshu.

The results of the drug trade had devastating effects on the people of the Highland. Calling for the interference of the Green Corp Army. Tonight, however, there would be a Fooshu drug trade that would change history.

The drug trade is interrupted by the arrival of the Green Corp Army, and so everyone is forced to flee. During the panic, a young 12-year-old boy known as Chosen leads the rest of his orphan siblings down the back alley, leaving the fighting between the Green Corp Army and the remaining buyers of the product.

However, this would prove to be Chosen’s greatest mistake, as awaiting him there, standing perched on top of the lamppost like a predator stalking his prey, was 12-year-old Arthur. He was a member of the Emerald Special Forces and ranked 10 in the entire Green Corp Army.

Unexpectedly, Chosen was unshaken; he had always wanted to fight someone equal to his skill. Equally, Arthur also anticipated this fight, but before either of them could even attempt the first move, the previously mentioned buyers of the product attacked them, believing Chosen to have sold them out to the Green Corp Army.

For the first time, both Chosen and Arthur had to band together against a common threat. And so, with their goals intertwined, the greatest prodigy the Green Corp Army has ever admitted fought alongside a common criminal who seemed to be at the same level as himself.

GAMEPLAY (serves as a tutorial for the game mechanics)

After the defeat of the notoriously dangerous drug buyers, Arthur turned to arrest Chosen, only to find that he had been thwarted by the common criminal. The Green Corp Army had decided to arrest the orphans who had attempted to hide throughout the fight. Arthur found it unjust that they tried to arrest kids. Surprisingly, Arthur had given him a clue as to where his siblings were hiding and made his way to break them out of prison. He was understandably shaken, for they had been taken to the surface of the island, uncharted territory for anyone such as himself.

The stories told by the people did not pierce through Chosen's determination, and with his heart set in stone, Chosen moved towards new terrain.

2. The Highland

After a long and tiring climb, Chosen has done what no man has ever dreamed of doing and has managed to break into the prison. Believing that he had managed to sneak his way into the prison. However, awaiting him with his arms crossed stood Arthur, who looked like he had been waiting for him.

Unexpectedly, Arthur offered Chosen a deal: if he could help him find something he was looking for, he would help release his siblings. Chosen accepted almost immediately, and so they both made their way to the surface. To Chosen, this was his first time seeing any light that wasn't from the dimly lit lamp posts, or from the lit cigars of Fooshu junkies.

The Highland of Astris was one of the most beautiful things any person could experience. The Tree that held the island in the sky was also the source of light for the surface land. Its fruit glowed like stars; if the people knew that the word "star" existed, to them, there was no other source of light that didn't come from fire or the Tree.

Arthur brought Chosen back to reality and reminded him of their mission. He gestured towards the temple of the Emperor, possibly the most guarded building in Astris; anyone caught trying to infiltrate would be executed. Chosen was shaken; he believed that he had just reached the peak of his own stealth and could not manage to make it far. If he failed, he and his siblings would be doomed. However, Arthur showed his own determination and his dream; he served the Green Corp Army to serve the people. Despite its obvious faults, he believed that it was the only way to help others; what he seeks is to help everyone.

Chosen, however, only cared for his siblings; they had been the ones who had been there with him from the start, so as long as they lived, nothing else mattered. Nonetheless, Chosen admired Arthur's determination, and so, with both of their motivations at an all-time high, they made their way to the temple.

GAMEPLAY [introduction of the second weapon]; You fight a lot of enemies, (I cannot emphasize this enough; you fight the army) Also, they find out the tree is diseased.

After fighting through everything the strongest legion could throw at them, the boys made it to the temple's treasure room. After all the hard work they put in, their goal lay before them: a small wooden box. Chosen asked Arthur what was inside; he replied that he hoped for there to be a route to the Master's location.

Chosen was now convinced that Arthur was, in fact, insane; no one had seen the Master in 12 years; he left no trace behind; and even if he did, there was no guarantee he could be found.

Arthur opens the box. The ancient wind held inside made him nauseous, and as he stepped back the box fell and from the depths a green sock, tied by a ribbon, rolled out. As Chosen picked up the sock, his anger bubbled. He questioned why he wasted his life and why he risked the lives of others for the footwear of a myth. Right before he could rip it, the treasure floor cracked, and the ground began to rise up. Suddenly, from all angles, they were surrounded by the greatest fighters in history.

The top nine most powerful humans in the Green Corps Army, with their overwhelming intensity, stood still, staring at them with the same gaze that Chosen felt when he first encountered Arthur.

The Emerald Special Forces stood before a common criminal and a traitor, both soon to be dead men.

GAMEPLAY (the voices coming from the sock are getting louder) (the Emerald Special Corps know something about the Master)

The Emperor walks into the room, and in a drunken fashion, he spills his goblet, which had been filled to the brim with Fooshu. Arthur stares dumbstruck; he silently questions just how corrupt the law he has been enforcing has become.

Chosen, with his quick instinct, decides to listen to the voices and unties the ribbon of the sock. Among the other surprises that had occurred throughout the day, this was the cherry on top. From the moment that the ribbon was untied, the sock began to glow a bright green, and flames and lightning sparks emitted from almost nowhere. The sock began to glow brighter and brighter until suddenly, an enormous, green-scaled dragon flew out. At first, it was a terrifying sight; a creature so big should never have existed; it was unnatural, but at the same time, its beauty outmatched anything the land of Astris had ever seen. The world was shaken as the 12-year slumber of the mighty Argus Raizen came to an end. With his awakening, the doomsday clock began to tick.

03. The Truth

Shocked at the fact that a dragon had come from seemingly nowhere, the Emerald Special Forces were dumbfounded. The boys used this opportunity and quickly ran outside, only to find that a large crowd of religious zealots had surrounded the Emperor's Temple. They began to chant and worship the dragon, and among the crowd, there were mentions of the Master. They believed the dragon was a sign that their leader was soon to arrive.

Before the boys could react, the dragon flew towards them, and in one fell swoop, he grabbed them. The boys were surprised at the dragon's precision and speed. The dragon held them tightly and then introduced himself without needing to speak.

Unrelated to the cheering and the first explosion when the dragon was summoned, the Tree broke its first branch, and the island began to shake as it slowly descended.

Argus was forced to let the boys go as he tried to avoid the falling debris. The boys were once again forced to fight on the ground, as the Emerald Special Forces had once again found them.

GAMEPLAY (Dodge the falling debris and try to make it back to the prison to Chosen's siblings)

Failing to make it back to the prison, it wasn't long until Argus found them again, and they were forced to retreat onto his back to avoid the prison collapsing. Begging to go back, Chosen stupidly threw his staff at the dragon. However, Arthur explained to him that he had lied about his siblings being in prison and that they were safe as they were not on the bottom of the island; instead, they were in Arthur's own private suite. Chosen was understandably mad at Arthur, but he defended himself by saying that he had to get him on his side.

This, however, still didn't answer the question present in both boys' minds: why did the dragon target them? Argus then spoke the very fact that would lead to their destinies changing forever; they were now permanently intertwined. A positive or negative change was yet to be seen.

Argus slowly spoke, and the children listened.

"You are both direct descendants of the Elemental Master. You two are blood brothers; I could see it in your eyes."

The boys both had mixed reactions. Chosen couldn't believe that he had a real brother or that they had been apart so long. Arthur couldn't believe he was related to Chosen. The boys stared at Astris; the screams of people could be heard; it worried Chosen; he hoped his siblings could help themselves. Equally, it hurt Arthur; his people needed him, and he was unable to do anything. The trio knew that the only way to repair the Tree was to find the Master, who had created it long ago.

04. A Land Abandoned: Old Astris

The trio began to fly downward, hoping to find some solid ground. Argus claimed that the Master would have left some trail in his journey when asked if he could remember where he went. Argus said he could not remember; he had been sealed for too long to remember. Eventually, they touched ground on Old Astris.

Old Astris was a land of myth during the long war between the evil spirits and the Master; the spirits had corrupted the land, making it uninhabitable. This led to the Master creating the floating island to protect the people from the spirits remaining. However, it was rumored that some people decided to stay behind for unknown reasons.

As the boys landed on a clearing in a forest of dead trees, they surveyed the area. The grass was light gray and would crumble at every step they took; the trees were barren from any fruit they once had; and the sky was a gray color. In summary, Old Astris was a depressing place to live.

Before deciding what to do, they heard screaming outside the forest. In quick succession, the boys headed through the forest. With Argus turning back into a green sock, they went towards the cries for help.

GAMEPLAY (The trees can talk) (new enemy type known as the forest spirits attack the people of Old Astris) (Joint Art known as the Brotherly DAP is given)

Upon saving the people, our trio met with the locals. The people themselves appeared to look anything but human. They had gray, stretched skin devoid of any color; they fed off the branches from the forest trees, which was the main reason for conflict between the people.

The people immediately recognized Argus and brought the boys to a golden triangle. The boys stared at the mysterious object in their hands as it began to glow and spin around; when it stopped, it faced East. The triangle was clearly a compass that would form a map once the pieces were all connected. To the boys, this meant that they were one step closer to finding their supposed father.

After promising that they would return to help the people, the trio flew east, towards their first clue: The Sky Temple.

05. The Sky Temple

On their way to the Sky Temple, Chosen asks Argus how he met their father. Argus happily tells the boys everything:

“Long ago, before Old Astris got its name, I used to live on a farm. I lived with a family; they had a young girl who would always take me on a ride and feed me carrots. I never faced hunger or loneliness. Until one night, the little girl stopped coming. I waited days for her. Inevitably, I broke out, only to find her butchered on the floor. I ran towards her, hoping I could help, but there was nothing I could do. She was nearing her end. I couldn’t even hug her in her last moments, and I couldn’t thank her for everything she did for me. Even after her death, I couldn’t even make her a proper grave.”

The boys stared in silence; they couldn’t believe they were on the back of a being that had lived for so long with so much sadness. Before either of them could ask Argus to continue, the Sky Temple came into view.

The Sky Temple is a collection of buildings located at the highest peak of Astris. It was said in the old days that the original Elemental Dragons communicated with the people of Astris via this building. They would pass on their wisdom and their techniques. It was how they blessed humanity with the power to use the elements. However, now that it was nothing but an abandoned temple, devoid of the once-heavenly presence, it lay only as a testament to sadness and nostalgia.

GAMEPLAY (spirits of old students who must be put to rest) (Before revealing the final piece, there is a puzzle)

The boys grab the piece of the triangle, but then the temple begins to collapse as a consequence of their fight with the spirits of the old students. As the brothers escape the collapsing building, the spirits of the students chase them; suddenly, Chosen trips and falls, only for the spirit to pick him up and throw him ahead. Confused, Chosen later asks Argus why they helped him. Argus explains that during the fight with the evil spirits, the Sky Temple was the first to fall. Every soul that died by a spirit would never be allowed to move on; their soul was permanently bound to the place they died.

The triangle spun once again and pointed south. As they made their way, Arthur’s mind lingered on the temple, now laid to rest.

06. The Jungle

Arthur asks Argus to continue his story:

“Eventually, I began to walk; I had no idea where I was going; I only continued to walk. I was then hunted by a group of hunters. It was a desperate time, and I felt that if I was going to die, let it be to help others. Then, I heard the voice of a child, not older than you boys. He called for the hunters to give up. I remember thinking that the boy was a fool; until he began to fight, you would believe that he had bombs for hands with the way he punched. Every hit could be heard for miles. However, he was one, and they were many; although he was able to scare them off, he was still injured. As he released me, he spoke the first words I ever heard from him: ‘Live your life.’ I had no life to live, so I stood by his side instead. He was now my life.”

Arthur sat still, and as he took Argus’ words in, the dragon chuckled. Arthur asked him what was so funny, to which Argus answered:

“You really are his son. You sit just like him. You both have his determination, and his eyes, those lonely eyes, are empty. That’s how I knew he was your father; you both need each other to be whole.”

Arthur answered that he has never needed anyone and that his life will always be the way it is, no matter if Chosen is his brother. Before their conversation could continue, they arrived at the dense jungle.

The Jungles of Astris, even during the old age, not many dared to go inside; it was their most terrifying location yet. The Jungle gave off a mysterious vibe; it had no walls to climb over or warn any intruders. It welcomed everyone with open arms, like a beast with its maw open; they felt like their dinner as they slowly passed the first few trees.

GAMEPLAY (mostly just walking, avoiding traps, completing puzzles) (they’re listening).

The boys awakened from the tranquilizers to find the noises they were avoiding were from evil spirits that had inhabited the forest itself, mostly composed of vines and fruit. The Jungle “people” made plans to cook Arthur and Chosen, as they believed that by eating them, they would look more human. Arthur released himself and Chosen.

GAMEPLAY

After the fight between the Evil spirits, Chosen finds the last triangle and connects it; it begins to glow, and they all point towards the west.

The trio then moves west; their journey has led them to this moment, the moment where they will uncover the secret of the Master’s disappearance. The answer will determine if Astris will continue to stay afloat or drown in the abyss below.

07. The Oldest Fear

Chosen asks Argus to finish his story as they make their way to their final destination.

“Of course... I became your father’s steed, and I would serve him in battle against the Evil Spirits. Combined with my tenacity and his skills in the Elements, we were unstoppable. Until we greatly misjudged a single Evil Spirit, this one was the most powerful of them all. It went by many names back then and took many forms. The Gray Grass, the incurable disease... but your father and I gave it another name, The Curse of the Departed. I cannot explain to you what it was. All we knew was that we were facing an enemy out of our league. Just as we were retreating, I took a fatal arrow to protect your father. I still remember how he begged for help. He reminded me of that little girl. I didn’t want to die weak. Your father understood this, so we made one final effort, one final charge, and then I began to be enveloped by green flames; sparks shot from everywhere, and I became the mighty Argus Raizen. We continued to fight in more battles afterward, until we eventually defeated the Curse.”

The boys stay quiet as Argus continues, saying that the Curse wasn’t fully defeated; it was only sealed... in the same location they were heading. Arthur and Chosen stared at the Triangle, which had begun to glow as they approached the location.

GAMEPLAY (Explore the caverns, more evil spirits)

As the boys reach the door, they take off the lock, the door swung open, and they could smell the ancient air inside. As they stared into complete darkness, they could sense a presence coming towards them. A voice spoke from within, then multiple spoke; what began as only a few transformed into millions of voices as a dark shadow enveloped them. The boys could not move as the voices went past them, and with it, they also took away the shadow. The voices went silent as they inhabited the skeletons that laid around them. The skeletons gained life, and they slowly began to move forward.

They break through everything in the cavern, trapping the boys in the cave after all the dangerous attempts to find their father, the salvation for their people. It ended with them underground, the curse being released, and no one left alive to remember.

Arthur understandably gets frustrated; once again, he is unable to protect the people he swore to save.

“I swore to protect them; it was my duty as part of the Emerald Special Forces to protect them. I betrayed them to help my people, and now I’ve also betrayed the people I swore upon my life to save! What kind of purpose does a traitorous failure serve!? What future do I have now?”

Chosen tells him that he should calm down. He reminds him that not all is lost; they still have the chance to save their people if they find their father. Arthur gets mad at him and says that they can’t rely on a person who has abandoned them with no reason. The man they pursued had abandoned them and left them with no purpose. Chosen angrily tells Arthur:

“Maybe you feel that he left YOU without purpose or whatever, but I’m going to save my siblings, and I’m not going to abandon you here”

Arthur was silent, but eventually told Chosen thank you, and they continued their way down the depths of the caverns.

GAMEPLAY (Departed enemies, they eventually find a door to connect the piece, it slowly opens, and the trio jumps down, into the unknown abyss)

We are Orpheus,

A student-run editing team dedicated to publishing beautiful works of art, writing, photography, and painting. As we embarked on this journey to complete the journal, we were met with an outpouring of creative imagination—each piece a testament to the talent and vision of our contributors. While only a selection of works could be included in this issue we recognize the artistic dedication of each creator. This semester, our focus was celebrating the diversity of voices on CSUB's campus. We wanted to highlight the depth, diversity, and brilliance within our campus community, offering a platform for expression that transcends academic disciplines. Orpheus welcomes submissions every spring semester, and we encourage all students, regardless of major, to share in this collective celebration of creativity. We extend our deepest gratitude to our advisor, Professor Adam Schuster, and the CSUB faculty and staff for their unwavering support. We hope this journal serves as a reflection of the extraordinary artistic and literary talent at CSUB—a tribute to the imagination and passion that define our student body.



