

A hand is shown at the bottom of the frame, holding a lit sparkler. The sparkler is the central focus, with a bright orange and yellow flame at the top. From the flame, a thick plume of teal-colored smoke rises and spreads outwards. Numerous small, bright sparks are falling from the sparkler, creating a trail of light. The background is dark, making the light from the sparkler and the teal smoke stand out. The overall mood is celebratory and artistic.

ENJAMBED
Spring 2019

Enjambed

Spring 2019

The *Wyrd*: Discord, Ruin, and Rebirth

Medieval English men and women used the term “wyrd” to refer to what we call “fate” or “destiny” – the force that crumbles down our buildings, our societies, and our intentions. But they also recognized that there is another force in the universe (either inside ourselves or outside or both) that helps us rebuild out of the ruins.

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Soy de un Lugar...

Mildred Ramos

Soy de un lugar,
Que le llaman Chapín,
Es un lugar muy bello,
En donde abunda el chipilín.

Soy de un lugar,
Ubicado justo en el centro,
En donde hablamos Español,
Y uno que otro dialecto.

Soy de un lugar,
Que contiene las bellezas de Tikal,
El gran Río Dulce,
Y el Biotopo del Quetzal.

Soy de un lugar,
En donde su gente es muy especial,
Saludan dando la mano,
Y diciendo: hola vos, que tall!

Soy de un lugar,
En donde las mujeres hacen tortillas en el comal,
Cocinan churrascos, cocinan tamales y cocinan pepián,
Y por supuesto no puede faltar el trago de Venado Especial.

Soy de un lugar,
En donde nos gusta la cumbia y nos gusta el son,
Pues estos son dos bailes,
Que se bailan muy sabrosón.

Soy de un lugar,
Con un clima muy tropical,
Como mi Guatemala,
No hay otra igual.

Seasons

Pamela Acosta

I ache for you
like bad bones
in the wintertime

I think I know what's real
this time
Only the summertime will reveal its
authenticity
like the first flower that peaks in the springtime

Until then
I'm stuck in this sad
city,
call me when you're home
please? Losing you again
would be such a pity

I can feel the rough breeze of Autumn
creeping on my shoulder, approaching
like a distant whisper
old memories of heartbreak
closer,
calling my name,
blowing me away like
the cold winter wind once again

The rough, threatening air
between seasons
reminds me
of how many days
you've been away
but the Summer Solstice will melt the ice,
our love will be clear as day.

Talking Knife

Pancho Villa

I hear the strong winds
blowing your way;
I can duck them, I think.
Maybe I don't want to.

I see the knife
digging into your back over, and over, and over.
Your blood splatters on the floor
like when Jesus died on the cross.

I've had my share of battles,
I'll be the first to admit it,
this is not foreign.
I've yet to see a knife this persistent.

I too have human blades,
very sharp indeed.
I have not forgotten how to use them.
I don't want to use them.

Often, the only way out,
the only way to make it through,
is to go in. Yes, go in, access anger,
and fight knife with knife.

My knife has burgundy stains,
thick residue
from previous wounds
inflicted on others with madness.

I am ready to dig deep into my gut,
yank out my anger, my human blades,
slice your ego, your persona,
and place it for public display.

It's not time though,
yet the time is coming.
For now, I shall be the shadow
that devours your soul.

Second Grade Aliens

Matthew Hernandez

In second grade I met my best friend –
Of course, we didn't start that way.

He was
an immigrant – he fled some war-torn place that his
parents never escaped.
Adopted by the good Christians of a small, white
picket fence property in this flat expanse of America.
I grew to hate him – he was too smart,
too fast, too good at jumping fences, too strong, too alien from the
rest of us.

So, I employed the small, six-year-old army of pale faces
and played at cowboys and Indians.
Paving the school yard with tears
during forced-march-lunch-play-time.
Fall in line or fall by the wayside.
I became the villain of the story – self-righteous and right –
like all good villains. I was convinced of my rectitude.
I would tolerate no insurrections to my organizational directions.
And ultimately, like all good villains, I was laid low by my own power.

On sharing day, I had my mother visit – unknown
to me how it would alter my course.

She told the class about being a nurse, about working with burns, about
the saving of lives.
She didn't speak at all about being Mexican or about the struggles of
American life.
She didn't mention being a single mom until, some other small blonde
child's hand went up and asked,
“What does your husband do?”

The pause was palpable.
Uncomfortable.

“Um, well you see he's not around anymore.
We didn't live in the same place and, well he went back to where he was
born, and um, there was an accident and he's not around anymore.”

The teacher, instinctively –
too late – interceded and tried her best to interject.
Too late – I was still me in every way, except
for the sight of the six-year-olds of class 2B.

I fell from power into the
Brave work of

being chased.
Condemned by the rules
that I helped create.

I didn't bear it well, in fact,
I warred – angry child,
“Is everything all right at home?”
It was, until I was told it wasn't.

“Your mom's not from here.”
“Your dad had to go home.”
“You should go there too.”
“Ay-lee-in. In-dee-in. Mex-eee-caaan.”

I warpainted my face
In hues of hate-red and crimson.
I screamed war chants
and made battle plans
but I couldn't fight against
their apathy.

The novelty wore off and the fight was lost;
I was relegated to a “them.”

But the “them” was an army of two, not one.
Two apart.
Two alone, together.

“What's your real name?
I know it's not Clark.”

My former foe, the best of us,
A never-enemy that I made into one.
His benevolence,
His forgiveness,
I never earned it.

He looked at me with empathy.
Never pity.
A hero's stare –
Given to me
to bolster my resolve.

“One day, they'll grow up”
he said to me – my former-foe-now-brother-in-arms,
“and when they do, they'll have to look up to see how far we've gone.”
I felt the air beneath me.
His words were a wind
carrying me aloft with him across the skies.

“You're right, my name's not Clark.”

And he lowered his tanner-than-mine mouth to
My paler-than-his ear
And whispered,
in his soft, oh-so-slight accent,

“My Name is Kal... and you were right,
I am an alien”

Reflections

Melissa Figueroa

I was at a stop light today, and I watched this girl sob in her car. She had on a pair of sunglasses, not wanting to be seen by those around her, because there wasn't any sun out on this gloomy day. She was ashamed. Tears ran down her face like bullets and she'd subtly reach under her glasses to wipe them away. The light lasted perhaps a minute, but watching her sob felt like an eternity.

She looked so hurt,
So helpless.
She looked like me.

She stared back at me.
Our eyes met,
And interchangeably reflected.

Who was this distraught girl that I didn't recognize?

Vermont/Wilshire and Western Olympic

Christina Yoo

An array of cars and trucks scurry across the dirty street like a horde of busy-body ants getting to their destination. Sirens wail in the distance, possibly an unknown who has gotten hurt or maybe a patrol car who finally captured that pesky off-road driver with the Hummer.

The sour odor of smog pollutes the air, yet there is a faint smell of delicious and unhealthy fried food.

Your eyes lock on the polka-dotted sidewalk, ancient and filthy with chewed gum by many people who have spat on the surface of the concrete slate.

And yet, there is a question.

Why DO people visit Koreatown?

The countless shops, restaurants, and service centers...perhaps it's there to attract locals or flip-flop wearing tourists.

Maybe it's there to keep businesses active.

...Or maybe it's there to preserve thriving cultural customs and traditions.

The Clown

Matt Darrow

In ancient times when work was done the clown, Woodruffe, did sing.
The people loved him for his mirth and his colorful vest.
At the fountain the maid, Gwendolyn, fed doves with fluttered wings.
Woodruffe tried hard to woo her but the maid would not say yes.
Desperate to find a working means to win Gwendolyn's heart,
Woodruffe sought far and wide for an enchanted rose to bring her.
Gwendolyn's Rose, he named it so they would never be apart.
She'd be his without dispute once enchanted by the flower.
Magic thickets were abound, the clown was scratched and stung.
Yet faeries led him to the place where the coveted blossom grew.
He plucked the rose without contest although the maid was young.
Still Gwendolyn refused and said, "I simply don't want you."
In sadness Woodruffe strode through the town, sniffing at the bloom.
Then he spied another maid sweeping with a broom.
Woodruffe asked her, "Share my kingdom though it modest be."
'I will,' she replied, and the friends were the merriest pair to see.

Geoffrey

Matt Darrow

Marching o'er hill and dale, the Knight, Geoffrey, searched true.
His Lady waited valleys yon, whilst her champion the dragon slew.
Numbered many were his tasks, with ne'er a squire to aid him.
Peasants counted on Geoffrey's valor, as did the loyal maiden.
But fortune is a fickle muse, eluded by victory he was.
For the Stone Lord Ahzim felled many with a heart callous.
Spurned by his love the stone troll roamed, wreaking havoc on his
 minions.

Deaf ears he turned to peaceful truce and diplomat's opinions.
Geoffrey vowed to fell Ahzim and bring harmony to his land.
But the stone troll's sword was forged of steel made by a Titan's hand.
The two trolls clashed in full combat, which rang out o'er the vale.
And both warriors perished from their wounds and thus shall end this
 tale.

The Soldier Who Met The Orphan

Veronica Jacobe

I have seen what fire does throughout my whole life.
Fire destroys everything.
Fire burns,
Fire hurts,
Fire starts, and everything is in ashes.

Fire pushed my family to their limits,
Igniting their own flames and watching them burn
One by one,
The one I first loved burning right in front of my eyes
As I'm whisked away to safety
In the arms of a seasoned soldier,
And immediately I became one.

Always looking out for the little one,
As Sir would always point out
Time after time,
I watch as the one I grew to love throws gasoline into the fire
Without abandon; now they're fighting
And the flames grow again.
With a fiery passion he grows into a man and leaves me
With Sir, watching the sprites of fire leave tracks to follow.
The fire burns and hurts inside my chest.

Time passes by and the seasoned soldier finally leaves
With a burning passion for revenge.
He's in a mission all alone and gets consumed in flames
After burning a whole forest.
The fire in my chest still burns painfully
As I watch the remaining sprite of my life
Living and thriving under the fireplace he settles in.
I am all that's left
Of that massive fire all those years ago
All I have with me to remember is the fire in my chest
And the sprites of fire in my eyes, leaking clear gasoline.

I have seen what fire does throughout my whole life.
Fire destroys in wars with enough firepower.
Fire burns,
Fire hurts,
Fire keeps flickering, and my hands dance over the flames.

Fire pushed this family to their limits,
Igniting their own flames and watching them burn
This one child,
The first orphan I see since the war to Hell.

As I whisk him away to safety
In my arms as a seasoned soldier,
And immediately I became a father.

Always looking out for the little one,
As I start to do with this one
Time after time,
I watch as the one I grew to love ignites his first flame
Of passion; now we're reliving life
And we grow together like flames inside a chimney.
With a fiery passion he grows into a man and I'm still there
With him, leaving sprites of fire in our tracks with my car.
The fire no longer burns or hurts inside my chest.

I have seen what fire does throughout my whole life.
Fire sparks light inside everyone.
Fire warms,
Fire cooks,
Fire energizes the spirit, and we can rebuild over the ashes.

Behind Closed Doors

Veronica Jacobe

Born in a family of fame,
Of propriety and probity
In front of cameras,
There sat in the house a lonely child
With the name meaning discretion and beauty.
Behind closed doors,
Propriety becomes corruption,
Probity becomes distrust,
And the little girl learns.

Sometimes the child prays
For someone to save her,
But no one listens.
They see the flash of cameras
And everyone is convinced
Of the sharp smiles and perfect posture,
Never knowing how those smiles turn upside down,
How those lips make the loudest noises of anger,
And how those postures tower over her every night.

The lonely child meets the salesman
With the cold dark eyes,
Promising of freedom at a price,
And because the little girl learns from behind closed doors
She looks into those cold calculating eyes
And says yes.
A mother drowns in a pool of wine,
A father burns in a child's bedroom,
And a young heiress faces fame with cold dark eyes.

The little girl grows up into a fine beauty
And has no regrets with the price of freedom.
But the teachings from behind closed doors
Stay with her.
Corruption still happens,
Distrust grows among clients,
But it's on her terms this time.
She changes her name
And lives life on the run.

The salesman later comes back to collect
But the woman with the cold heart
Of a lonely child
Locks herself behind closed doors
In fear of the price for freedom.
She hides but never escapes

From the salesman with the
Cold dark eyes,
Eyes that watch her fall into the pit with glee.

The woman drowns in her worst memories
And can't escape the pain in her soul.
The fires in the pit flicker across her smooth skin,
Burning her slowly until the madness envelops her.
Before the spark of her soul dims from the darkness
A bright light shines upon from above,
And a hand reaches out to grasp hers
Tightly in the woman's hand she is pulled out of the pit
And into the arms of an angel.

When the woman wakes up from the dark,
Her eyes are no longer cold and wary.
She looks up at her savior
With a small spark of hope
And he smiles back with warm eyes,
Grasping their hands tightly together
As he promises to help her repair her soul.
To him, her soul is like a young phoenix,
Reborn from the dark ashes to bask into the light.

Beauty in the Disorder

Jacqueline Aguilar

Artists have sold the idea of beauty in disorder.
There is nothing beautiful about it.
For who has truly seen anything other than order.
Whether it be civilized or broken,
No one dares be the recorder.

The beauty comes from what is most feared;
Because what really is "Beauty in Disorder"
But the unknown.
If only this message hadn't been so revered,
People wouldn't be so caught up in destruction of order.
But it is set in stone.

Madness is what creates the beauty.
So do not follow the ways of an artist,
Unless to go mad is your sole duty.

Under the Starless Eon

Christopher Raya

Under the starless eon
In this black hearted city
Lusting for your affection
Bleeding for loveless pity

Envyng those who can love
Why should they have all the fun?
Pale embers of Love's first glow
Have long died and turned to coal

All that remains is now gone
Only this moment exists
Our empty vessels intertwine
A moment of carnal bliss
Frees the callous and forlorn

I'll never be free from you
You leave flowers in my hair
I am infected with you
You wish you could somehow care

The lonely heartless lovers
Disappear into the night
In this black hearted city
Under the starless eon

Ode to You, Under a Neon Moon

Sarah Johnson

I subconsciously search for you everywhere I go. I cannot go to our familiar places or I start to see your face, vivid as the sunrise. I struggle to find comfort in the patterns and the cycles of life. As souls we are never over, we are constantly evolving – through lifetimes and alternate timelines. I cannot grasp the art of letting go ... let alone putting faith into all that I do not know. Peace cannot befriend me. Even after all this time, I still consider it to be a foe. I have attempted to repress the emotions I feel for you for oh so long. But we have memories. And memories are slowly coming to the surface ... popping up steadily like cavatelli noodles in a boiling pot about to overflow. Memories are just a figment of imagination. Imagining what had happened in our encounters from the last time I thought about you, remembered you. Simply remembering a memory from a memory from a memory of a moment in time when I could still feel our embrace intertwined. All I have left is our memories, but they are fading. Falling. Relinquished with you as you peacefully and bravely partook onto the next step of your journey, into an abyss of unknown. At least unknown to this world. Unknown to me. I hope you have figured out by now how to come and go, in between this dimension and yours. I pray you are capable of sending me a sign, so I know you are okay on your own. But I hope that you are not alone, or at least do not feel alone. Please know I am always waiting to hear your voice – in a song, in a psalm, in the wind that carries you forever onward.

New Maria De La Torre

To time of the unknown,
Is a place of Regrowth.

Color and love are grown.
My love for family has grown.

As a new generation I plan to grow,
Show what I know.

Explore what I learn.
Be a first generation.

Now my time has come to show.
Something new will come.

Falling into Orbit

Danielle Smith

He spun my whole world like a quarter too close to the edge of a table
Falling to the ground shattering
Even the most stable things with enough force starts breaking

There were cracks on my body
The smell of dust and chunks of concrete
No hope or life left
Pieces of me scattered, for years

A world destroyed
Another planet forgotten by everyone, but me
I was destroyed after Pluto and no cares enough to speak of me
But then he showed up

I felt my grounds shake
And it wasn't like
The earthquake that made elementary teachers put me under tables I
wish wasn't there
More like, holy hell I'm quaking

I was weary
The last man to walk on my planet started WWII and destroyed
everything
I was able to grow limping patches of dandelions
Just to make wishes to be how I used to be

For years, my world was not welcoming to any man or woman
Everything they did was just like him
Walked into areas with red do not enter signs and hid pieces of countries
from me
I couldn't use my sodium filled raindrops to grow new life, so they took
rivers and any flower they could see

But when he landed on my planet, he trodded safely
He approached and researched things carefully
He's the definition of the stars that use to orbit around me
Being close enough for me to be curious without crossing boundaries

He spun my whole world, but I'm enjoying the ride
He's the one visiting a brand new planet with no helmet, and yet he
makes me feel like I can't breathe, like I'm on the high
Why am I like this?
I just met this guy

Find someone who makes you feel bigger than astronomy

Not someone who makes you feel like Pluto, but they caused all the
destruction
Find that person who gives you a reason to star gaze again

He was different
He didn't hand me broken old pieces to prove he wasn't like the last guy
Instead, he made his own
He took his time, precision before presenting continents, countries,
states and cities to me

My world was an old crumpled 1960 picture
When you fly pass, you can now see blue streams and white clouds like
it was HD 2018 movie
Fields and fields of sunflowers as a reminder that I do have a sun that
comes up every morning

You know, he could have chosen any planet
Earth, Mars
Men choose Neptune, the coldest planet they may not survive on because
it was too pretty to resist
But can you believe he chose me?
That he was the first to plant and grow?
A rose at that

Sequester

Ashley Smith

He watched his thoughts bounce unto the wall,
the room dark and
spinning,
his thoughts spinning—
they spiraled down.
The edge of his sanity a
second home,
and the shadows of depression a
mistress
he could not shake.
His eyes stared into the
night,
the night which
escorted a stillness
into his bones.
The numbness of these thoughts
brought a pain that
echoed
louder than any
stroke of
ego
any
secret
snuggled
beneath his
soul.
The sun rose
over his head,
the light shining into his room.
He hoped a touch of
a feel of
life
could finally
bloom.

Sorrow

Ashley Smith

He was running and running.
He tripped.
“Help!”
He opened his eyes and cried.
Oh, how he missed his legs.

Haiku For People Who Don't Get Outside Much

Paula Sherrin

Funko Pop figures—
shake their heads in judgement of
procrastination

unobtainable—
nowhere outside of dreams does
perfection exist

sharpening pencils
hoping for inspiration—
a finished thesis

a story to tell
demands to be written down—
but who will read it

academia
ever my heart's desire...
will you love me back

Pomegranates

Mikey Bachman

From the tenants of titled men
I drew my blade, not a sword
of fury nor a sword of hate,
but wired slicers meant
only to sever the chain-link
borders of an imaginarily
bordered land; floodlights,
whips of wind and impact,
and I taste dirt, like rust;
from my body, pomegranates.

Vampire Parents

Mikey Bachman

the ignifoam rocks disclose a subtle form of masquerade,
their brown-red aperture lining the gray-blue spotted circle
stones, opening a passageway to the man-made waterfall,
filtered on and off by a radiant, almost unnoticeable light-switch,
just off the beaten brick backyard path of my childhood home;
Sam, cousin of the same age, runs just beyond the green radiator,
guardian to the white corner alleyway gate, chubby and scared,
avoiding the grandparents discussing their nonsense at the oval
glass table inside, getting at the heart of things, fluttering their
social feathers ravenously at the nostalgia of past times—and my feet
glide along the bricks, forming a foundation next to hers, our corner
deep back at that flower gate becoming the sky our roots, our hands
the ties of solidity, our soft glance the neighbor's trees, as she reaches
my hand out to touch them, as we each wrap our arms around them,
our vampire parents, exchanging our invisible bodies heat, she says:
“we must be mirrors; their reflections aren't showing.”

Pocha Portrait in a Shrunken Mirror

Carolina Hernandez

The deodorant they chose for Issy at Ernesto's corner store had been the same as her sister's, a blue plastic bar with flowers plastered on the front and a sticker of a clock claiming that the scent would last over 12 hours. She remembered going into the store like they had been sent on a secret mission, that the two sisters could have been wearing sunglasses and a trench coat to the store and it would have felt the same. The trip to the store was an answer to the whispers her mother passed to Cece, whispers that had been formed by a message from their father who could not, for some reason or another, state himself.

"It would be too embarrassing for him to say," their mother told Cece. "Your father can't stand how Isidora smells anymore; it was okay when she was eleven, but now that she is a woman, she ought to smell like one."

When it was time to pass the whispers to Issy, Cece fashioned a long story about how "you don't want to go around smelling in the eighth grade" and that "you want to show you smell so nice but that you didn't try at all—like you naturally smell so so good."

She went on about the body's secrets and that the bras kept the nipples secret the same way pads turned the bleeding into rumors, and how those were all good things because women were the quietest whispers in the world. So, the two decided to walk to Ernesto's corner store and pick out a scent before their father and younger brother came back from the construction site.

"I don't want that one," Issy said to a row of Secret deodorants that she recognized from home. The thought of smelling like Cece made no sense, why would she want to smell like somebody else? Issy felt nothing wrong in smelling like sweat from playing a game of soccer, but neither Cece nor their mother took baths as a single remedy for her turning thirteen. She had been told her body would become something of its own and that it needed to be guided by those who knew better like Mama and Cece, not Papa nor Carlitos. In fact, neither Papa nor Carlitos were not allowed to know; this body secret was a slow secret they'd soon discover, and regretfully so. The thought enraged Issy. Why couldn't she stay the same? Changing like this would mean that Carlitos would have to start treating her like a *mujercita*, the old boring and protective way he was told to treat Cece.

Issy even tried to hide the most noticeable and expected changes by dressing in oversized t-shirts, dark ones that would conceal the vibrancy of the new hot pink bra her mother nagged her to wear. Even though it was all meant to be hidden in the first place, there was a strange fascination that came with the secret, that allured and cooed little "peak-

a-boo” sensations among the whispers and made others wonder about the mysteries of the world. This sensation made Issy sick. What happened after cooing? It was not in her control, and it made her feel like a dog performing tricks. The deodorant would only be a layer to that lure, a call to come see.

Covering up the changes with oversized t-shirts and refusing deodorant, Issy knew, could not forever conceal the hints that the process was happening right before their eyes. She wanted the secret to skip her instead because she wasn’t very good at tidying it up like Cece, her sister who had worn long skirts and stayed by their mother’s side in the kitchen. She wanted to be Carlitos and follow her father into the construction sites to place grout into the crevices between tiles. The deodorants flashed at her, reminding her that no matter what, the changes and secrets would happen; the only thing left to do was prepare.

“Doesn’t matter. I’m getting you the same one I have,” Cece reached over Issy’s head and picked up a stick of Secret deodorant, her own scent leaning itself onto her sister. She was seventeen and had mastered the art of feminine scent with a gossamer layer of Jennifer Lopez perfume against her dark chest along with a flux of fruity hair products that held down the frizz and made her look like the young ladies who owned the big houses in the telenovelas and had maids.

Issy wondered how no man had come by Cece, her soft dark skin and fruity smell made her want to steal one of Cece’s sweaters so that she could fall asleep to her scent like their dog had done. Her sister’s long dark hair and small framed body made her preferable to most men at the church, only somehow she was no woman to them. A single flash of teeth and one could see she was a girl, braces and gangly arms, a plain board at the top and toothpick legs, hips absent. She knew the rules of being a modest, respectful woman and followed them strictly, yet the men regarded her as part of a girls’ choir lined up for the convent kitchen.

“Okay. Can we go?” Issy pressed, avoiding Cece’s eyes. She could not stand her sister’s brilliant stare when it came to talks of this change. They were two glowing stones filled with some strange amusement, and Issy’s habit to reject discomfort with laughter did not work to dismay this unwanted amusement. To be the object of a big wow disgusted her; she did not understand how Cece and her cousins welcomed compliments with ease, especially those boasting how beautiful they were or how *guapa* they looked from uncles and aunts when they wore little telltale signs of their change like a spaghetti strap dress or rouge lipstick. When they got to the cashier, Ernesto sat in his usual stool next to his eldest daughter who had gotten married last year. The woman’s eyes hung heavy from the bags below that anchored them, dark undereye circles from what seemed like long work weeks followed by nights of making supper and washing dishes until falling asleep with worry of tomorrow morning’s next meal that needed cooking. Ernesto and the woman waved at the sisters, but something caused the father to get up from his stool directly behind the register and motion his daughter

toward it. Issy wondered what it was, and she was answered when Cece gently placed a box of maxi pads onto the counter.

“That’ll be 10.98,” the daughter’s voice rang out. Cece handed her cash their mother had given them and took the change with a “*gracias*.”

Issy kept in mind how benevolent and silent that *gracias* sounded, how pliable Cece could be to anything, and how it made her mad. She did not want to bow her head in thanks to anyone, nor did she think it necessary for anybody to remain so silent that they become their own apologies; she resented the expectation of maturing this way.

As she applied the deodorant with a sloppy left hand in the small room she and Cece shared, Issy examined herself in the narrow, shrunken mirror their father had purchased years ago. It was meant to be a full-length mirror yet it stood four feet tall, and standing nearly at five feet at thirteen, Issy had to bend her knees and contort her body to see an almost full reflection.

The t-shirt around her neck divided the brown face she knew with the body that was unrecognizable to her—the large, flat face with its familiar deep-set under eye circles and their veiny enclaves, the sunkenness of her cheeks, and the slant of her large nose; the face felt monstrous, and yet all of it seemed to feel like her more than the body below it ever could. She tugged at the flesh of her breasts, begging that they would sink back in or at least stop growing, for they had been the reason her mother brought home the bright pink bra to Issy. The tales had gone around school in which girls hold secrets underneath their shirts and that the boys will discover them one day if the girls were bad, but she put this off and refused to wear the bra.

Issy looked around, peeked out of the door for her mother. She was not there. The two small hands combatted the bra’s clasps and clumsily unhooked them, dropping two sacs of flesh. The strange flesh stared back, gracefully mocking Issy in all its softness. They disgusted her; she did not want to ever catch herself staring at them for too long, but if she could reach into the mirror and touch them, touch their darkest centers, she would.

“Hey, where’s mom?” Carlitos called, his voice heard from the hallway, a boyish tone which rang discordant to the mirror, an alarm to Issy. She scrunched her body and hid behind the mirror.

“What the heck are you doing there?” Her brother stood in the doorway.

“LEAVE!”

“But where’s mom? You never answered me!”

“Get the heck outta here!”

Boys couldn't see, they could never see, Issy thought, but it had been her fault that Carlitos saw a glimpse of that secret, and ever since, Issy made efforts to cover it up so that no one else could see and that nothing would change.

Circle of Light

Everth Sotelo

Sundays were always boring. I would spend it reading, cooking, and sometimes watching a cooking channel to copy the recipes; I don't miss those days. After my day at medical school, I did not wish to return to that state of nothingness knowing that nobody cares about you. Nevertheless, Melissa loves me. After four years of marriage, I can see that she has managed to withstand my whim. Sometimes I feel she hides something from me, maybe because of my bipolar rage or because she has no friends. I learned to be resistant to her melancholy on Sundays. It is hard to be human, especially when life just feels like an endless circle that does not progress.

In Olympian Hills, it was quite common for colleagues to go out for coffee on Friday afternoons. However, she hated when I interacted too much with my friends. I learned to drink bitter espresso with her even if she understood nothing of medicine.

---Take your coat sweetheart it's windy, said Melissa.

---I know what to do!

She is like the patients I practice on, they tell me their symptoms and propose a cure for them. What idiots! Exterminate them! I don't want to kill her, but her ignorance must be crushed. I stare into a painting that hangs in our room. That beautiful young lady with porcelain soft light skin. Those delicate, powerful hands are butchering the flesh of an innocent man. His neck cracks as when you snap a walnut. Her face determined to destroy and her eyes narrowing as she applies more pressure to slice the loose skin. Caravaggio was such a master, such a thinker. Ever since I married Melissa, I have been that man. My shaving knife is nearby. Should I get it? I should end her before she slices me! No! But I can't stand her ignorance.

I shook off these emotions after I realized she truly loves me. I grab her hand and we walk out our door.

We sat facing each other to discern our desires and fears.

---How is the restaurant? I asked.

---It's great, I hate it when my manager yells at me, she said.

---I feel you,

---But my coworkers are very friendly

---Somebody supports you

---Possibly

She takes a sip from her coffee; something is going on inside her. It is usual for me to extract it out of her as venom pours from a wound.

---You ok?

---Yes why?

---I feel something

---What?

---There is something you need to tell me,

---No, did you cheat on me?

---Don't evade me!

That was her perfect excuse. Her father cheated on her mother; thus, it was natural to her. She smirked and looked around; her eyes were getting watery.

---Melissa, please tell me, I said.

---I am pregnant, two months.

Imagine you step into the shower, and the faucet suddenly pours boiling hot water into your body. That shock to your senses, that burning, and itching in your skin! You moan and move your body hoping the pain disappears!

---Why did you not tell me before?

---I was afraid.

I looked at her eyes and smiled.

---There is nothing to fear.

We walked through an alley that held the city's surreal artist. There is a painting of a man looking at himself in the mirror, the circle shaped mirror was squirting blood while the man's face was young, but his body was a corpse, and his hair was gray. She holds my hand tight.

---Do you love me?

---If passion were my weakness and hate my principle, I would not be with you, love does not condone reason.

Absentminded, she mumbled something to herself. A fog began to accumulate with a smell of carrion, the sky became overcast, and the wind blew through our coats. At the end of the street, there was a dim light; it grew brighter as we approached it. It was like the sun trying to shine in an overcast sky; the rays began to penetrate my eye. That circle of light grew, my mind was realizing my existence was above Melissa. There was a child, was it my son from a past life? But it was only light.

---I want a divorce, Melissa said.

I nodded, she detached her hand from mine. At our apartment, I stood out in the balcony looking over the city, the moist from the fog covered my face and the thunder was so loud it made me feel that God was to strike me.

As Melissa packed her things, I felt my legs shaking. It was an agony to see the one you thought you loved leave. I took my coat and left the apartment.

Yusef was speaking to a waitress with his hand on her hip. She was so attentive to his conversation, but he was half drunk. I came in and sat next to him.

---Ginger and tonic please, I said.

---James you madman, you appear out of thin air, and all you ask is a drink?!

---I am a horrible human being.

---No, you are just an idiot.

The waitress served the drink. Yusef kept staring at her; he grabbed my hand before I touched the glass.

---I know what you are feeling, he whispered.

We met at school; he is a mortician who had divorced humanity. After seeing the fragility of the human body, he thought that life was just an illusion that humans created to pretend that death was avoidable, whatever we did in life was useless since in the morgue it would freeze forever. He thought that if life can end at any moment, he might as well finish it with pleasure. Yusef gave himself to extreme pleasures leading to several attempts of suicide.

---We need to experience a good life, my friend, he said, let's go and meet some girls. There is always a girl for a man!

I looked at him in the eye. Spending time with other women was not too bad of an idea, after all, Melissa betrayed me!

We stepped out of the bar and walked over to his car. Yusef had a few drinks, but he was not drunk. I decided to walk the streets. There was that dim circular light at the end of the tunnel. That light cannot just be a street lamp; the warm color burned my eyes.

---Those girls don't wait, they take what they see!

---I need some time to myself, I'll catch up to you!

He shrugged and turned his car on. The wheels rammed down the street. I coughed at the trail of smoke. That thick smoke entered my throat and stopped me from swallowing my saliva. It began to permeate my eyes, I felt like crying, they itched so much. As they narrowed to counter the itch, I saw the light at the end of the street still shining. I walked towards it; the smoke began to dissipate. The wind blew, my face cringed as it froze my lips. The light took shape. It was the only light in a dark alley found under a bridge, away from humanity. Olympian Hills University was just across the river.

How abhorrent, why did it had to be me the one to experience this monstrosity?! A woman held her child by the leg. Her eyes were red as blood; her mascara smeared in her face. She tried to cast the child into the river, but the cry made her cringe. That cry! The innocent child! No witnesses! What should I do?! If I interfere, the child shall have an opportunity to realize the importance of his existence. It would not be fair that this child dies and mine survive. Religion cannot help me. Law cannot force me. The rain came, that cold-water soaked me so much it felt like a burden on my body — the burden of being. The cries heighten, and I could not stop these thoughts. What is my existence worth? I took a step. That voice in my head grew louder; do it, do it! I did not want to, but there was no stopping. I took my decision.

I open my eyes; my clothing was damp. My living room is quiet; my head felt as if I had taken the deepest sleep of my life. Melissa was on the sofa wearing a white dress, the dress she wore when we first met. Her luggage is next to her, and her face was facing downward. The last thing I remember was walking in a dark alley. Thunder rolls, the lights go off, and the apartment is now the abyss. My eyes see clusters of light, Melissa sobs. I stand up to reach for her with my arm extended.

---The child is not yours, I just wanted to have a family, she whispered.

My legs froze.

---Everybody lies, even those whom you trust, she said in a severe tone.

I found the curtain lever and opened them; the sun's rays began to penetrate through the clouds allowing a dim light into the room. Melissa was right. I smiled and left the room. Despite my decision, there was a great feeling of joy within me as if I had taken a perfect decision. My being felt valorous.

It was now Monday, and there were few cars in the bridge, classes were in session. The view was pleasant, I could see Olympian Hills from the top. There was that secluded alley under the bridge. My head began to hurt, something impulse me to come down there.

The alley was peaceful, it was as if I was the only person there. Suddenly, a toddler crawled to me and touched my leg and gave me the most beautiful smile I have ever received. He was so familiar; he looked like me. His grandfather appeared and smiled at me. This old man looked very familiar too; he reminded me of my father! The same smile, the same style of dress, and even the same factions. My father taught me to walk. He showed me that life required sadness to feel happy. I handed the child to the grandfather. He kindly took him from me. In his bright blue eyes, I saw myself aging happily.

---You will be a good father, the old man said.

A mist began to pour; the grandfather walked away with the child. My cell phone rang, it was Melissa.

I placed the phone on my ear but had no wish to speak to her.

---James?

I didn't answer.

---Just wanted to announce that Yusef's ex-wife called; he died in an accident last night.

Immobile, my eyes filled with tears. My friend had now begun a new life. My father mentioned this cycle, and now I feel its spin.

At the Olympian Hills library, a student who sat with a stack of books asked me:

---Hey, are you ok? You are wet, and it's cold out there.

I smiled at him and replied:

---I have started a new life.

He quickly wrote it in a notebook; the cycle progresses with knowledge.

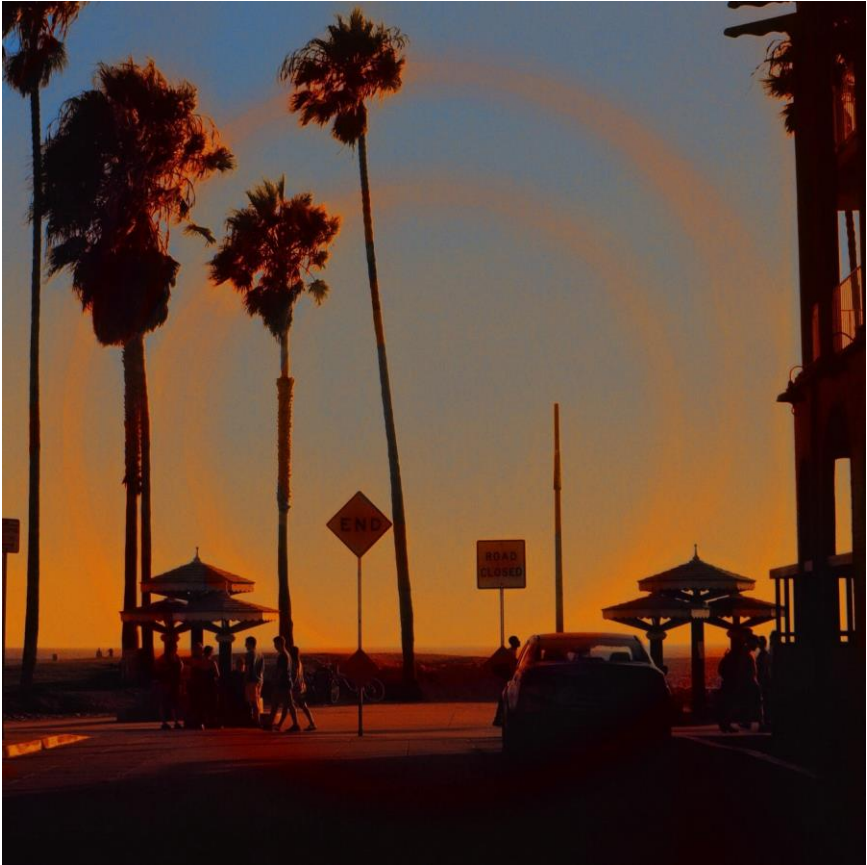
David Reza



David Reza



David Reza



Kaleb Tapp



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Lynda Rodriguez



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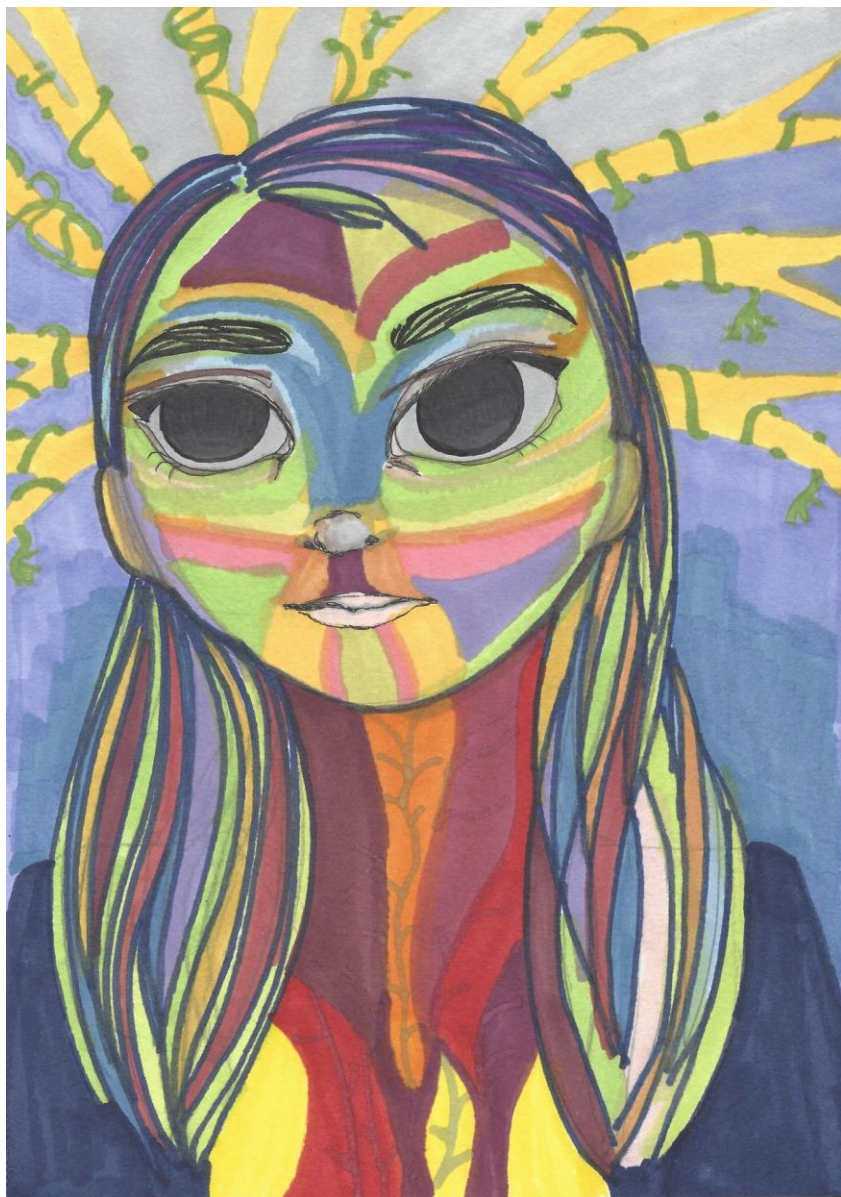
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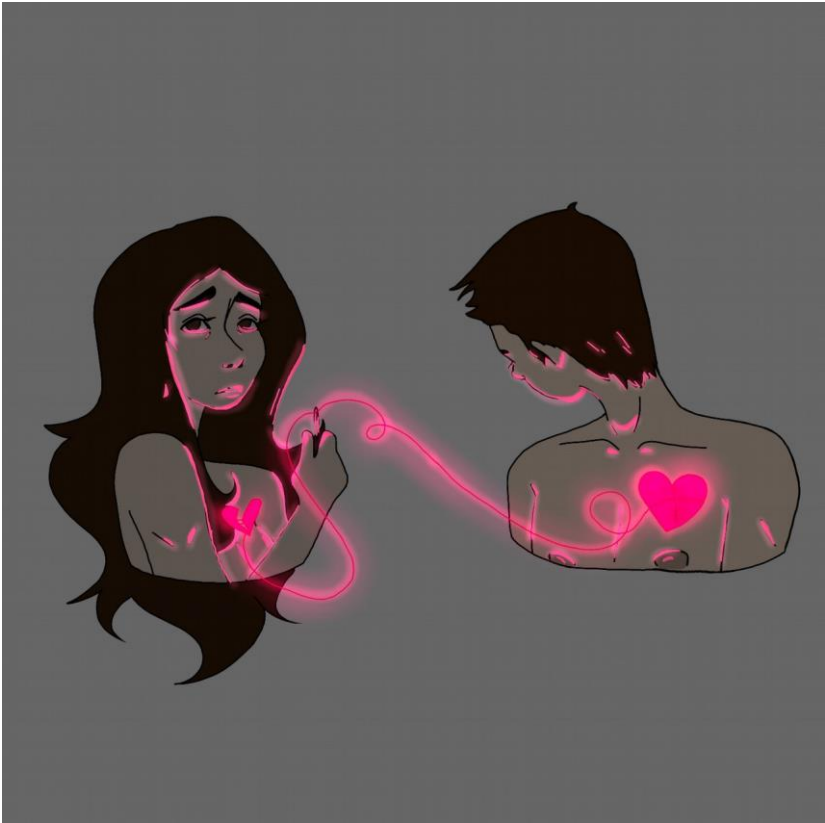
Carolina Hernandez



Ashley Hester



Jacqueline Aguilar



Josie Macias



Josie Macias



Josie Macias



Josie Macias



Josie Macias



Girl. 2020

Tony M. Smith

She was not shivering.

Luckily, he did not crash. Luckily.

Speeding...it was the sight of her that removed him from behind the wheel and placed him in a cold museum; a painting, she was.

The kind of painting that could kill Basil Hallward.

The middle of winter. It was that period in Los Angeles when although the day could reach 80, to sleep without socks at night meant a sore throat in the morning. Her mild case of a season was a punishment and a confusion to her own children.

Hoodies and swim trunks. Hoodies and damn swim trunks, they wore though.

But he did not expect to see her there, in front of the abandoned park. Gated off since the cops said it was a "No-Go Zone." Next to the tennis courts that lost the war with the weeds. That park.

She should have been wrapped in a huge coat with the fur stuff around the neck part.

It was cold that day.

Though she was not shivering.

The wind pushing the palm trees back and forth waving to the smog.

An empty Cheetos bag bounced against the dirt.

Her eyes were hidden behind huge sunglasses that kind of just floated around her face. She was wearing a thin white V-neck that lifted in the breeze exposing a belly that could make a guy want to just ... digress ...

Red peeking at him underneath her frayed denim shorts ...

She was not supposed to be there. Not like that. Who placed her there!?

Her toes playing musical notes in her sandals. Sandals!

Dante's hell. That's what it felt like. Where the devil was.

Though she was not shivering.

And luckily, he did not crash.

One of her hands was holding a diamond studded leash. The end of the leash was connected to a tiny, fluffy, silky-looking dog.

She exhaled.

He slowed as smoke drifted from her mouth and lingered around her hair like a halo made of a billion stars.

She looked in the opposite direction as if she heard a familiar voice call to her.

But there was no one there.

Crash.

Expectations

Ashley Smith

“Jimmy?”

I heard the brokenness in her voice. I sighed quietly and closed my eyes.

“You be careful now. You hear?” I nodded my head as I looked down at the porch. There was a loving eeriness flowing between us. Her protection mixed in with the world we live in. She touched my back gently and I turned halfway to face her. I could feel how much she wanted me to stay.

“I’ll be alright, mama. Ain’t nobody going to bother me.” I wasn’t too sure about that but thank God I sounded like I believed that. She believed me too.

I walked down one step when she stopped me again.

“Jimmy, you sure you don’t want to change your sweater? Do ... do you really have to wear that one?” It was a plain dark blue sweater. It’s either this one or my school one, and to be honest — I’m not trying to look like I care about school that much. Ain’t no telling who I could see.

I turned all the way around to look her in the eyes once more. Her small frame was filled with fear. She was gripping the door as if she expected it to comfort her back. One leg hiding behind the other. She was slanting and looked as if she were going to throw up. I nodded my head and walked up to hug her. “Mama, you have to trust that I will be just fine. It’s a quick trip past grandpa’s, Ms. Ann’s then boom, the dentist. Don’t nobody want to deal with someone with yuck mouth.”

I got her to laugh that loud, yet warm laugh.

“You wouldn’t have yuck mouth if you went more often.” Her laugh trailed on for a while until it eventually stopped. Her attention focused on the street across from us. She wasn’t particularly staring at something, but just allowing her thoughts to roam and take her elsewhere. This had been going on for a while, and always when I was around.

I leaned all the way in front of her so she could snap out of it. She gave a small chuckle and pushed my face away, which I rebelled against to give her a kiss on the cheek.

I walked back towards the stairs, hoping I could get past the first step. Which by miracle, I did. I don’t remember it being this hard getting down 3 steps since I was 2.

“I love you Jimmy.”

I walked to the sidewalk. "I love you too Mama."

She always told me to look forward whenever I sensed something was off.

I did that.

She told me to always reframe from my anger getting the best of me.

To listen to the police, no matter what I felt.

As my face was pressed against the street, tasting the debris of tar and millions of other things that should remain underneath someone's foot, I tried to remember mama and her words.

Her words that meant something to me, but would never mean anything to them.

If I had only worn my school sweater, maybe they'd think I had enough sense. Enough to not be seen as a threat but as a decent white man.

From Purgatory I Write

Anthony Chuy

It is dark down here. So dark that it is like drowning in a sea of darkness and nothingness. Nothingness. That is pretty much what explains this place. I cannot tell how long I have been here. I just now that I still feel cold, tired, and hungry. Yet I cannot rest, and I cannot leave. Every soul here is stuck until the chains have completely broken loose. Chains. If I had known mine would be this long I would have lived a different life. Yet I fail to remember what I did to get mine. What you should know about purgatory is that it is not exactly hell, nor does it mean you made it to heaven either. Purgatory is the place you roam until you figure out what you did to have earned your stay. You only get to leave when you truly have learned to let things go. Each soul here died without having made amends. They left their old life holding onto a grudge, hating someone, wishing harm upon others, or self-loathing. No one here leaves until you have truly let everything go. The thing about purgatory is that it is a battleground. I do not mean a place where souls fight each other, but a place where each soul fights their greatest enemies: themselves. Being stuck in this place you are left to wander endless with nothing but the noise of chains rattling, moans, and the thoughts inside your head. Sooner or later you become a prisoner of your own mind as you start to remember the things you did to get here. That is the easy part, but the hard part is actually letting things go. The more you think about it the stronger your hatred gets. This is because the negative emotions were the last things in your soul before you were laid to rest. Purgatory is a test to see if you are fit for paradise or condemned to damnation. The way you know how well you are doing is simple. If you are going about things the right way your chains get lighter. You start floating and make your way towards the light. If you let your hatred consume you then your chains get heavier. Eventually you will start to smell sulfur, then you will feel the heat of the flames of hell (how else would I be able to write in this darkness). Eventually you will see the red glow, which is the only light you start to get. Then you feel the flames from the lake of fire right under you. The moans you hear are from the souls that feel the burn under the soles of their feet. One can only relate that pain to having a blow torch at your feet. Your destination depends upon your choice. Purgatory was meant to be a place of rebirth. A way to leave the old life behind and start fresh in the afterlife. Yet it is so difficult because every bad moment feels so real and so recent. The anger grows stronger each time. Purgatory becomes a personal prison. You can be here for all eternity unless you know how to break free. Not many souls succeed at being freed. It takes your eyes a bit of time to make out silhouettes of the other poor souls. You can tell who got freed and who got damned by the color of a light that either came for above you or below you. When the soul first enters purgatory it is levitating at a middle area. From there is where your mission starts on which way you will go. I do not know how much longer I will be lucky to stay afloat. I smell the sulfur grow stronger at times, and the red glow brighter. I really try to free myself but I do not succeed

much. I can break a chain one day, yet create two more the next hour or vice versa. If you get this learn from my errors to avoid this place at all costs. Make amends. Correct your errors in any way. No matter what you do make sure it comes from the heart. An apology can go a long way here. Second, let it go. Do not hold on to a grudge for it does you no good. It blinds you from seeing opportunities. You cannot heal a burn if you keep holding onto a hot coal. Third is to forgive yourself. Remember that you are only human and you too are bound to make errors. Your imperfection do not mean you are not perfect. Learn to live with your flaws and use them as learning tools. Lastly is to enjoy life. Learn to be optimistic in the toughest situations. That will be a strong mindset to have if you ever get here. Keeping in mind that you never lived a terrible life will get you that much closer to paradise. I must go now, for I can start feeling the heat of the lake. I do hope to be strong but I feel my attempts are getting futile. If you receive this use it as a warning. May it help me break a few chains as well. From purgatory I write.

The Heart That Bleeds Its Color

Mikey Bachman

In the corner on the gray tile floor of the barber shop was a small Panasonic TV with a built in VCR surrounded by newspaper playing a rerun of *Rugrats* – “The Sky is Falling” — the one where the kids are convinced the world is coming to an end. On the floor next to it was a brand new Bop-It, a half-finished Lego spaceship, and a beat-up red-headed Cabbage Patch girl in a blue dress striped beige. No children were around; no voices rested in the shop save those of the hollow echoes ringing from the low volume of the TV.

I thought to call out but hesitated when I heard shuffling in the back.

“Coming,” a grunty voice said from behind a pale wooden door.

There were three red leather barber chairs, each with different scarrings along the haphazardly cheap metallic-like material surrounding their edges. I picked the farthest one on my right, closest to the back wooden door, as to not arouse suspicion of my unmonitored movements. In front of me was a width-wide mirror lining most of the wall. I examined myself in it, noticing all the shaggy edges of my brown, permanently graying hair: I did not look at my face. Instead, my eyes moved to a plaque on the wall, engraved at the top in golden letters with “Jack Crawford Jr.: I Stand as On a Battleground,” and what looked like a poem in smaller letters underneath the title.

I heard the door open and looked to greet the man previously behind it.

“Hello,” I said casually, waiting for a response before providing details on my desired cut.

He drew a barber’s cape around my neck, tightening the sanex strip a little too snugly, and then pulled out a faded brown satchel from the counter drawer. The smell of hair chemical products, like cough syrup and gasoline, filled my throat.

“What’ll it be?” He demanded an answer in a question-styled grunt.

“Just give me a low-style flat top. I need something easy to maintain. Something I don’t have to gel too often, but that I can make look good for occasions.” I paused, examining his perfectly kept green army coat. There was a diamond patch over his heart, with two black stars and two green stars parallel to their mutual colors in each corner, and lines connecting each star to a small circle in the middle. Under the diamond patch were the words “4th Infantry” in brown letters. “Just nothing too messy.” I don’t know why I added that.

He responded by kicking his foot down repeatedly on the chair's rising lever, pulling out scissors and a comb, deeply wetting his hands in the counter sink, and then running his wet hands through my hair. "Sorry about the heat," he grumbled, "A/C's broke." I hadn't noticed I was sweating. Now the collar felt excruciatingly stuffy as it nipped around my neck.

"It's alright," I said. "It's not so bad in here. But why don't you turn on the fans? They look like they're ready to go."

"Electricity," he said.

As I waited for further explanation, he measured the length of my hair between his thumb and forefinger, cutting edges off briskly with his scissors. After a few snips, he paused, still gripping strands of my hair, encapsulated by some foreign entity. I looked up into the mirror to see what was going on; he was staring into the mirror, directly at me. When my brow furrowed questioningly, he shook his head and resumed cutting fragments off my hair.

"You look like someone I used to know, s'all." He breathed, closer now to my ear, my face, and I could smell the whiskey on his breath. How much had this guy been drinking? His eyes were glossed over, tired or lazy, and sad. It was then I noticed that with every footstep he took around my head, there was the slight sloshing noise of liquid against metal emanating from his inner-jacket pocket. The *Rugrats* rerun was still playing on TV.

"You aren't wearing a wedding ring. You have kids, though?" I wanted to diffuse the awkwardness of the situation.

"Gone," he grumbled, and had a coughing fit. He coughed into the arm of his jacket repeatedly, a sound like the overheating of a professional race car engine, and then wet a towel and meticulously wiped off some inner-fluids from his sleeve.

"Not many customers, then?" The sun pierced through the front windows, shining directly on me now, the heat rising.

The scissors clipped and a huge chunk of hair fell onto my apron. "Shit," he said. "Wait." He put down the comb and scissors and walked back through the pale wooden door.

I looked in the mirror but from this distance I couldn't tell if he'd made a mistake with my hair or not. I looked down at my apron and saw it decorated with pieces of all my brown, graying hairs: some fallen to the floor, most resting on my lap. I stood and as my hairs fell, moved over to the mirror. A big chunk on the right side of my head was missing: a subtle yet noticeable bald spot dampening its flow.

I ripped the apron off at the collar and let it fall to the floor, adjusting my shirt to give my neck some breathing room. Just as I started moving toward the front door, he burst out of the back with a hard push, flinging the door's edge into the mirror. The door and mirror neither cracked or shattered.

"Now hold on a minute, wait," he said, stumbling a bit as he moved forward. He had another coughing fit and fell to the floor. "Wait just one minute, there," he groaned, in-between coughs and short breaths. "Wait, wait."

"You're drunk," I said, examining him more calmly now. Bent over on the floor, he looked like some sad, ragged old animal: his long light brown beard and hair disheveled, reaching down to his chest and shoulders—his skin all flaky with pale white patches, his face flushed with violent red, eyes hollowed and not in the moment—his beige pants torn and faded, ripped at the knees—his limbs shaking—his begging like the concert of a church choir nobody bothered to attend.

"I'll pay you," he started, grabbing at the chair to rise to his seat, getting my lost hair all over his clothes and hands. Our hairs, mine fallen and his still on his head, seemed as if they might meld together. "I mean, I'll give you a cut free. I mean, no, cuts free for a lifetime. Come on, please. Stay." He gathered himself slightly, holding his body up with shaking arms by the false-metal rims of the chair. "I need the business."

Untitled

Hope Ezcurra

I have some serious issues, but the most pressing one is that in order to deal with my other issues I have started to self medicating with opiates. High dose oxy's are like a really good orgasm. I'm talking about the kind that leaves you deaf and blind for a moment, the French call it "La Petite Mort", the small death, you are at one with the f***** universe as your genitals pulsate. You feel so much that you feel nothing at all. Orgasmic transcendence. Minus the pulsating genitals that's what really good opiates do for me, I check out in the most blissful way possible.

I can't quite remember where or when it started. People presented in the media always seem to have a neat and tidy answer as to where it began. "I had a car accident"; "My neighbor was a drug dealer." I would love a drug dealing neighbor. I'm freaking sick. I should want there to be no drug dealers so I could quit this so I wouldn't have to feel like I want to crawl out of my skin. I guess that's where it began. Even before the drugs, I wanted to crawl out of my skin, depression, an early childhood molestation, suicidal tendencies. The drugs were a way for me to forget for a brief moment that I hated being alive and wanted more than anything to end it. When I nodded off from the synthetic heroin it was like a suicide that didn't hurt anyone. I wasn't here and didn't have to think about the cruel meaningless of human existence for a moment, especially mine.

I say it doesn't hurt anyone because although it's killing me, none of my friends (outside of the gravity of the drugs) or family know about my addiction. For the moment I have it "under control", have for years now. Or as under control as you can have an opioid addiction. I have a roof over my head, I pay my bills, and I haven't resorted to sexual favors to pay for my drugs. Barely functioning heroin addict. I feel I am on the precipice of something really dark and horrible. Some vile "Requiem for a Dream" imagery awaits me at the bottom of the abyss I'm dancing the tightrope over. You don't hear about people keeping it together too often, I guess that's not a good news story though. I've met many other working professionals, with decent jobs and decent lives, through my guy, that just have a terrible addiction. The nurse, the physical therapist, the accountant and me all orbit around him. I make enough money at the moment to lead a comfortable life. I travel, I go to museums, I see concerts. But I prefer to do those things after I've downed 120mg of oxy.

I guess my major problem at the moment is when I run out. It's not even a money thing, I luckily make enough to keep up with my "needs", but because my demand has outpaced supply. I got a second pill dude, and I still can't avoid the come down. It's a horrible feeling, everything hurts, my knees ache, my intestines are tied up like a pile of angry snakes. My mind is exhausted I just want to lay down and sleep through it. What I

really want is some more drugs so as not to feel this, this brutal reminder of being alive, my whole body screaming at me “you exist!!!” When I'm high I'm the closest I can be to happy, numb. When I'm dope sick like I am now, I wish I could kick this. Now I really want to die, even more than I did before the drugs. My body feels like a toxic soup that hates me for poisoning it. Sometimes I fantasize that I'm one of those statistics on the news, one of those overdoses, that would be nice.

I was going to give it up. My tolerance has gotten too high. It's gotten so high that I need to take so much that it makes me sick. My body can't handle what my brain needs. I spent all day puking, my body was afraid that everything I was putting into it was more poison, so it would refuse it. At one point it was churning out what looked like seafoam. Wish it had tasted like seafoam, it tasted like one would imagine the blood of Ridley Scott's alien. And all along I had to hold it together at work. I was miserable. I told myself I needed to quit, or at least take a little break. But my guy roped me in. I helped him out and took him some dinner, so he gave me just enough to get me high. I have no self control so I took them with me. Right now they're burning a hole in my mind. Like a weird Mobius loop of thought that I can't shut up: “Can I handle them? Is my stomach up to it? Only way to find out is to take them, but can I handle them?” Maybe I'll try to ignore it for a couple more days. Maybe I'll give in after I finish writing this.

So I “quit.” The quotation marks are because I don't think I have the will power to keep this up. The urge to kill myself is like an unfeedable hunger at the bottom of my gut, slowly eating my insides until eventually all that will be left is this thought of ending it, and finally touching the void. The problem is I care too much about the people in my life to saddle them with the pain of loss intentionally. Does that make me kind or weak? Is there even really a difference between the two? The internal struggle between sweet self annihilation and pathetic human devotion. I miss that quiet, do I need that quiet though, am I able to survive without it? What did I do before the drugs? Drink too much and have insane sex with wildly inappropriate men and before I discovered alcohol I landed myself in the hospital twice trying to take my own life. I almost feel the drugs are a healthier option to take the edge off of my nihilism. I haven't had any for going on a week now, but I don't think I'll be able to stay this way, the urge to kill myself is getting too strong to ignore, and as an adult with a grown up moral compass I really can't let myself do that. I feel really shitty especially for my fiancé and best friend, they are such golden human beings, I feel like the biggest turd for wanting to leave them alone. That guilt only makes this suicidal undercurrent worse.

I knew I was too weak to avoid the drugs.

I came down with a cold, so I bought some codeine. Honestly I feel much better. It makes me think perhaps I just need to find a balance. People have all sorts of coping mechanisms. Mine happens to be drugs. Not proud of it. But at least it's not actual heroin. I'm not contributing to a cartel in Mexico or a gang in South Central LA. My drug dealer is a

grandfather who gets more than he needs. Perhaps all these synthetic drugs are not the healthiest thing for a body, but modern living is not the healthiest thing for a bodies. I like pills and as long as I do them responsibly I guess there's not a problem with it. Sadly I'm incapable of responsibility at this junction in my life. I want to find peace and balance at this moment, but with the ravenous momentum that I shovel pills into my face I don't know if that's possible. I want to be okay with who I am and what I do to make myself feel better about my life, but it's not the nature of this coping mechanism. Your tolerance increases and your body needs more than it can handle or you can afford to get that high you require to cope.

I don't know if I can handle this depression it just takes over my entire life, I can't do anything I can't think about anything I just need to disassociate from myself. I don't know if I can go sober being dope sick sucks and shooting my brains out isn't an option. I just want to lay in bed and be sad and depressed, my shitty knees hurt, I am so lethargic I can't even fathom going through the gestures of life. I really didn't truly appreciate how much energy goes into maintaining the facade I of life. I didn't realize what junkies went there until I was a junkie; I am a f***** junkie. I wouldn't do anything but I think about doing crazy things. I'm a rational adult and there's a line I won't cross, I'm not quite sure where it is but the crazy things that run through my head are definitely past that line. Neither of my drug dealers can get me anything right now, so I looked up buying drugs online the other day. I stopped myself from ordering crazy Chinese synthetic heroin, whatever the f*** that s*** is that killed Prince and Michael Jackson. I wish I could end up like them, dead before their time. I even fantasized about doing porn, I would never ever do that, but my hunger fabricated a day dream where I could easily get some more. I don't know if I have a soul, I don't know if people in general have souls but whatever that bark of consciousness is that is inside of me f***** hurts. I just want to I want to make it go away. I'm incapable of that though, I'm barely capable of going to work right now. I have two good jobs I'm almost done with school and I am so f***** depressed in between having pills that I'm willing to throw it all away because I can't handle life without drugs and those spaces in between the drugs are just getting too much for me to handle.

So I took some money without asking, that's not okay. That's not who I am. So I've got some pills coming, but after that I'm going to NA. I can't afford what I need anymore, so this little adventure is over. And I'm going to pay them back. Maybe vacations I can still get my pill party on.

Maybe I need to go to rehab instead of NA waiting for my last hurrah of oxy to get in I'm crawling up walls almost, it's not even noon yet and I've thought about texting my guy 3 times already.

I'm sick, circling insanity as if around a doped up drain. I really wish it would all just fade to black.

Can you give yourself terminal cancer, asking for a friend?

Night Song, or, Story of the Bird

Christopher Raya

It's 3 AM and I'm in the bathroom because I feel like I need to throw up. Sweat is beading across my forehead, but my eyes wander to her, lying on the bed with her breasts exposed and lacerated. It happened again last night and I'm starting to think that I can't control myself anymore. I turn on the faucet and splash my face with cold water. It always feels like a dream, but I know it isn't. In the mirror I can see my sopping reflection and I see the quills sticking out that make me come to terms with it. They poke out of my neck like a displaced beard. I pinch one of them and pull it out slowly. It hurts like I'm pulling off a skin tag. I keep pulling harder and when it comes out is when it always cements in my mind. A black feather is in between my fingertips. It glistens a purplish hue when I hold it up to the bathroom lights.

"Fuckin' hell," I say under my breath.

I can hear Janine moving around in the bed, I've woken her up. She walks into the bathroom and I see blood drip near her bellybutton. She looks at me with calm contempt, but then smiles as she reaches under the sink to pull out the antiseptic wipes.

"Really lost control there, didn't ya?" She says wiping the blood off her navel and up around her breasts. I watch almost hypnotically.

"How're you so fucking cool about this!" I say in the loudest whisper I can manage.

"It's not like you haven't been turning for awhile now." She says looking at herself in the mirror and pursing her lips "Did you take my chapstick yesterday? The expensive one from Whole Foods? I need it."

"It's in my jacket by the door." I tell her and she walks away.

I've already come to terms with it. The dreams about my hands turning into talons, the feathers, the violent dispositions. It doesn't scare me knowing that it's going to happen, what scares me is that I just don't know when. It usually becomes more apparent during anything stressful or emotional so if I just stay calm then I should be able to last how I am and it's worked so far apart from the occasional outbursts ... and last night. It's already been a year since I started experiencing this. I look at myself again in the mirror and notice the quills have sunken in again. I also see Janine leaning against the bathroom doorway. She still hasn't put any clothes on and she's smiling at me.

"Hopefully, you turn into one of those cute birds with the red cheeks. I always wanted one of those. They're so cute."

“I seriously doubt that I would Janine.”

She comes up from behind me and hugs me.

“I’ll miss doing this though.” She says and she squeezes me tight. “If I did this while you were a bird I might kill you.”

“Depends if I do turn into one of those birds with the cheeks. The hell are they called anyways? Cockatoos?”

“I think so.” She ducks under my arms and starts to arrange things around the sink and get ready for work in front of me.

“Hey!” I tell her. “Rude.”

“Well...I need to go to work and so do you.”

I look at the clock: 3:40 AM and I need to leave for work at 5:30 to get there on time.

“Are you gonna go back to sleep?” Janine tells me with a mouthful of foamy toothpaste.

“Doubt it. I’ll just stay awake ‘til 5:30.”

“Then come wrap gauze around my chest.” She says as she spits into the sink.

I unroll the dressing and she puts her arms straight up. I hold out the roll and she spins around a couple times until she’s all covered up. She stretches the gauze around her breasts to make it comfortable then she hands me the clips and I stick them on.

“You’re getting better at this.” She tells me as she walks over to the closet and grabs her scrubs. I watch her dressing and she looks back at me, smiling every time. Her short blonde hair is in its bed head tufts as usual and she doesn’t bother combing them. I’m sitting on the toilet seat still not sure if I’m going to shit or throw up. The beads of sweat start to collect at my brow again. Janine walks in with a black scarf and hands it to me.

“Wear this when you go to work to cover up those quills” She says. “Call me when you get off work.” She pushes her stomach against my lowered head and when I look up she has her lips pursed waiting for her goodbye kiss. I hold her close and kiss her deeply. Not sure if this’ll be the day.

“Stop that!” she says. “I don’t want to be horny at work. Also, I left the chicken from last night in the fridge. Bye baby.” She leaves and the apartment feels so desolate without her jovial self.

I wrap the scarf around my neck and throw on the work clothes I have scattered on the floor. Black shirt, blue pants. Keys, wallet, phone. Okay I'm ready. It's still early, but the earlier I get to work the less shit I have to deal with from the managers.

The sun is barely peeking over the horizon when I get into my car. I adjust the rearview mirror to my own specifications and start it up. Another glimpse in the mirror and I notice my pupils look a bit dilated, but I don't let that bother me. Not gonna stress today. Not at all. Life's too short to worry, human life anyway.

I get to work before anyone is there so I park right up front near the building and scroll through my phone and juggle through 3-4 different apps before I get bored and decide to head in. I check my eyes one more time and they are even more dilated than before. My entire pupils are black. This shit isn't gonna fly with the three different managers floating around. I see the paisas walking up to the restaurant.

"Oye!" I shout. I know enough Spanish to get what I need.

"Dame tus lentes!"

"Que dijiste?!" the one with the sunglasses responds.

"Tus lentes! uh...para el sol!" I say as I reach into my pocket and pay him double what I'm sure his gas station sunglasses are worth.

"Y este pinche hijo de perra" one of his friends says to him. They're laughing at me for some reason, but I don't care. He hands me his sunglasses to me and I put them on. No one should be on to me except that I'll be the only one wearing sunglasses inside of the restaurant. I start prepping the bar and coffee counters. Coffee beans are full, espresso machine is cleaned and ready to go. Fruit is sliced up, all the liquor is stocked and ready with their nipples ready to be poured. Today should be a good day. The first manager, Anna, walks in taking excessive amounts of time doing nothing. As she walks in, I feel a quill poke out of neck, but I take a deep breath and the quill slowly slides back inside as I say good morning.

"Good morning Anna!" I say with a smile and she smiles back as always. She'll be in a great mood until we have customers.

"Good morning Eric, How're you doing today?"

"Doing great Anna!" I respond, but I know damn well she isn't listening to me. I don't care I just want to make it home as soon as possible, because I feel the sickness creeping up again.

"New look?" Anna comes back inquiring.

I look at her through green tinted lenses. "I'm sick."

“That explains the scarf.” Anna says smiling at me, but I’ve seen that smile a million times and it means that she wants the new attire off immediately. Normally, I’d abide, but given the circumstances I ignore her and continue my prep work. Once I finish everything I can leave early. My phone vibrates violently in my pocket. I take it out of my left back pocket and look at it:

J9:”Hope work is going good -3- kisses”

J9:”Also my boobs are so sore :/”

J9:”Can’t wait to do it again ;)”

J9:”You forgot to take the chicken didn’t you??”

“Eric!” Anna disturbs my momentary solace. I can feel my neck quiver in anticipation for the feathers.

“Yes Anna?” I say as polite as I can.

“There is a man on the phone saying that he placed a catering order to be picked up today.”

“And?”

“Well I just checked with the kitchen and they didn’t receive that message.”

“Well, I sent the order to you and David yesterday so one out of the two of you should have...”

“Eric!” Anna interrupts as usual. “That’s not what I’m concerned about right now. They are coming soon to pick it up and we don’t have the order.”

Here it comes.

“Eric! What are we going to do? They are going to be here soon. I can’t tell them no because I told them that it would be ready! Can you talk to them and tell them that David made the mistake?”

I walk up calmly to Anna and snatch the phone out of her hand and take the phone off mute.

“Hello? This is Joshua right? Hi, my name is Eric and I took your order yesterday. I did everything in my power to get the catering order made, but this dumb bitch that answered the phone doesn’t know how to send text messages. The party you’re throwing later is fucked unless you can get a catering order in the next couple of hours. By the way, the woman’s name that was supposed to get your order confirmed is named Anna Elizabeth Sotelo. Her phone number is 323-327-8487 and she’s always available, because she’s basically a four year old child in a forty year old

woman's body and probably spends her free time milking her cats. Thank you, and I hope you have a great day."

As I end the call Anna is staring at me horrified. In her state of shock I rummage through her purse and take out her pack of American Spirit cigarettes and a half-eaten blueberry scone from Starbucks. I bite into the scone and try to salivate enough to swallow the dry morsel.

"I'm going on my break," I tell her and leave the restaurant.

I forgot the last time I had a cigarette, but I'm on my fourth one and they don't seem to satisfy me the way they used to. I exhale sharply and the cloud of smoke disappears into the air. I catch a glimpse of myself in the tinted windows of a Honda Fit and notice my face looks gaunt and thin and the quills are making themselves known through the scarf.

"Huh." I say aloud and light up my fifth cigarette. I notice a group of pigeons congregating around a squished McDonald's bag and I walk over.

"If I were a bird," I start thinking, "the last thing I would want to be is a pigeon."

They bob their little heads to-and-fro and surround the bag like some weird ritual.

I am strangely concerned with what they're doing. They spend their days eating trash and drinking polluted water and here they thrive. Unbound and unburdened by anything us humans do. One pigeon bobs its head and walks towards me. It stares at me with a tilted head and I stare deep into its black eye.

"Come join us." A voice enters my head. "There is a feast that lies before us."

"Oh no I don't want to intrude." I feel as if I'm responding involuntarily.

"There is plenty to go around. We dance before each blessing, but now we shall feast."

My perception is changing. I feel smaller, but the smaller I feel the freer I feel. I am amongst them. They pick apart at cold fries and dollar cheeseburgers. They are ravenous and so am I. We fight each other for the spoils. This is war and we are the unsung heroes of a heroic battle. I am stronger than they are, but they understand and allow me to eat first. My mouth is covered with paper bag and barbeque sauce. I am undefeated on this battlefield.

"Eric!" A familiar voice snaps me out of my trance.

"Yes?"

“W-what are you doing?”

It's David and he looks like he just shit himself.

“I'm on my break.” I reply so casually he can't seem to utter another word until he does.

“I-I need to speak with you. Anna told me about what happened earlier today and I ...”

“Can this wait? 'Cause I'm on my break right now.”

mise en scène

Tony M. Smith

It looked nice from the outside. The building. It stood tall on a very narrow street.

Entrance: front gate with an opened lock (that only happens in the best and worst places in Los Angeles). The people right in the middle ALWAYS lock their doors. But the wealthy and the poor, they care much about liberty. They like to be able to come and go.

And through the gate the stairs were wide. Wooden. They looked like they had been polished without being dusted first, because there were these tiny gray hairs trying to pull themselves free as if a vent hung somewhere above. Yet the air was still and it was thick and it was warm.

The top floor. A puddle of stagnant ... water? Raw lightbulbs hanging from shoe strings. Quiet. Very quiet. Almost too quiet. A long hallway creating its own story of a mad Victorian wife bursting out of one of the many doors; screaming about equality or some other nonsense like that. A home. Broken. And yet, still a home.

The third door to the right.

The little dog and the doggy gate ... he had to step over. Inside the room was one bed. The walls had tiny little mountains on them. The scent of dead cigarettes. Millions of them had died in that room. But the walls were a paradox. The occupant's fingertips were yellow. Dingy. A Lady. Distinction, at one point she carried. A title passed down. Stripped though. Her family was of all the glamour. Once upon a time across the pond. And no more carriages were sent to pick them up for balls nor galas. They were no longer sent for. Subjected to First World poverty ... a punishment. An exile. Formal dresses of another time all rotting in a ruin.

She was a babysitter.

She spoke Spanish.

The Man with The Yellow Bag kept saying, "in her country" and "where she's from."

The Man with The Yellow Bag was her boyfriend. He was a hillbilly of sorts. Nice though with no teeth. Crystal probably. Moonshine recipes passed down. Tank top with accidental drops of chewing tobacco on it.

There were all kinds of snacks on a wooden shelf.

A baby was staring at an animated movie playing on the TV.

He was sitting in a fold-out chair next to an industrial-sized sink.

A little mirror on the wall decorated with razor marks.

Outside the window, across the street sat another building. Some of the windows were halfway open. Some broken. Some had air conditioners. Most didn't.

And it is true that inside that room and inside a drawer was a diamond. Yeah. Apparently, it belonged to a princess, or a princess had been cut for it, or the cut was princess, or a princess cut it with something, or ... it was just valuable was the rumor is what I guess I'm trying to say.

And as he walked down the steps, the doors swung open to the "community kitchen," waving the scent of burning hot vegetable oil and homemade tortillas at him. A frozen gangster was in there. "You-cannot-do-meth-in-this-place!" A woman yelled at the side of his face.

The exit was found through a gate that wasn't locked.

The Hidden Porch

Carolina Hernandez

Genesis pressed her lips against mine slowly, and pulled her weight back up. Holy mantras rang softly in my ear, the gentle guitar of the church choir from the chapel close by played its ceremonial eucharist tunes. Her feet had been close to mine and barred in the ballerina shoes she had borrowed from her sister the night before. I could tell they fit her too small because the flesh of her ankles protruded against tied portions of the ribbon. The choir band continued to play from inside.

“We should probably go, Jodie,” Genesis stood and flattened the yellow dress she said made her feel like a picnic ballerina. Genesis wore what she felt the unconventional art of fashion wanted her to wear—olive green turtlenecks paired with black and red checkered bellbottoms, her mother’s prescription reading sunglasses and her father’s counterfeit Rolex watch, or even my St. Magdalene All-Girls Academy cardigan with detachable cuffs that she had purchased from the thrift store since she was a firm believer in frugal shopping. Despite Genesis’s snide remarks on plain fashion, I preferred the simple pants and a t-shirt or overalls which didn’t seem to bother her. As long as I had a pocket to place a small notebook and a pen for when I heard beautiful words or phrases, I was set.

“We’ll be okay here,” I reassured her, holding her hand and motioning her towards the illustrated shape of Argentina on the faded global map of the green porch. The shapes of the countries were beginning to fade thanks to years of students walking over the painted image where we had once formed straight lines in boy-girl-boy-girl pattern before walking into the halls of St. Bruno Elementary after morning assembly. I remember trying to cut in front of Emilio Cordova who ran past every boy for his treasured spot and took pride in walking behind Genesis every morning because it meant that he could play with her long hair without her noticing. Genesis hasn’t cut her hair since the seventh grade, and two years later I still can’t grasp all of it with my tiny hands.

“Come on,” Genesis put her hands on her hips and looked across the basketball court that lay before the church. “You know they’re all going to come out any second. No matter how good you think this hiding spot is, we should get up. My little sister gets antsy towards the final blessing.” She leaned her body towards the edge of the brick walls that held the green porch and the hallway entrance together, reminding me of when we used to play secret double agent together and peer behind doors or walls as we tried to remain unseen.

I shifted in my overalls and played with my shoelaces, glancing every now and then in hopes of catching her stare. Ever since the kissing started, we agreed to keep it between us until, as Genesis put it, “we were ready”; but we were only ever kissing. Our summer was full of its usual

occurrences—hunting for quirky hairpins that we could fashion our hair with, cutting images of clothes and barely-there silhouettes of skinny supermodels from high fashion magazines so that we can add them to Genesis’s collage, quizzing each other on which Backstreet Boy we would marry, and skipping out on mass together as we pretended to help Mrs. Finegold, a teacher who no longer worked at St. Bruno.

“You’ve been asking me to meet you here for the past two Sundays; I haven’t seen your mom in a while, and I think I should say hi—especially to Clarissa, I haven’t seen her in so long that she’s probably asking, ‘What happened to Jodie?’ with that little chin covered in boogers.” I ran my fingers through the front part of my hair and adjusted the “POW!” comic book style hairpin Genesis bought me for my birthday last year with her allowance. I never really understood the hairpin trend, but it had been something Genesis was fond of that I pushed my notebook aside and began helping her collect. There was nothing in me that would have expected wearing them past middle school. Yet there it was—my hair adorned with various hairpins she had picked out for me all at once because they made my big nose look more “girly.” Even after the haircut, I was surprised that my hair was still able to carry more than one hairpin.

“I’m pretty busy tonight, so I should go alone, and you can walk home again. Sorry. I haven’t been feeling well, you know, girls our age get periods and have insane hormones that make us feel shitty.”

After saying this, Genesis turned to look at me with that stupid innocent stare she tried so hard to keep on her face. It wasn’t real. What was real in that stare each time was the feeling that she convinced herself that I bought into it, and I had no choice but to run with it; if I had chosen to act against it, she would burst into a chorus of “you must be on your period!” My only other option was to shyly inquire, pose as the inferior and less-experienced friend who did not quite understand things so clearly the first time, find her unravel in her own act of convincing.

“Why don’t you let me see your parents? I want to ask them if they’re still throwing that quinceanera of yours! Maybe I can even ask my brother to sneak us some beer in those giant, gas-tank looking things like in the movies, and he can move it towards the kiddie table.” I wanted to see her unravel.

“Listen, I can’t. You can go home, I already said it! I’ll see you tomorrow or something,” she said, agitated.

She ran towards the crowd of churchgoers that flooded the basketball court. Families of three to five children and overly perfumed mamis and papis inched their way towards the green porch for some shade, the mamis clinging onto their impatient little ones who crawled under the pews during most of the service. I watched Genesis squeeze through the crowd as she tried making her shoulders smaller to pass through until both of her arms were touching one another. In the movies, the boy runs

for the girl who keeps saying no—he pulls her by the wrist and confesses his love for her until she is left with a burn-like mark on her arm because he wouldn't let go. I didn't run.

In the encroaching crowd, I could see Clarissa and Mrs. Jimenez purchasing a churro from the street vendor who had been stationed by the benches and not far from them, I caught a glimpse of Genesis's long brown hair with its copper, untrimmed ends.

"You need to go home, Josie," she gripped my arm like my mother did when I had gotten in trouble for something minor like not finishing a chore; it reminded me of always being told what to do and what to clean without my brothers receiving a single order. Her grasp tugged on my shirt until my bra strap peered out. I stared at her with hard eyes like how I stared at my mother.

"Genesis, let go! What the hell is wrong with you? Why can't I see your family?"

My eyes softened at the sight of hers, and I grew desperate for answers. Meanwhile, dozens of people shouted for their compadres, their hermanos, and shuffled their way through the flux of us, squeezed their bodies by us. Genesis tightened her grip. Some weaved their way to shake Father Julio's hand and were delayed, others shouted, "hijo, get your tío a churro, también!" from the other side of the court. The people and voices and bodies frustrated me, they all did things so contradictory from one another.

"You want the truth, chica?" Genesis lent her voice to the cacophony of Spanglish noise that usually would've sounded like a melding melody if I hadn't been in a mood. "I can't let my parents see you with that lesbian haircut! There, I said it. I can't be seen walking around with a lesbian when I have to meet my chambelan."

I pretended that the invisible weight I felt on my forehead was a cowboy hat whose brim shielded my weak eyes from the enemy I knew could pummel me. Genesis continued to hold on tight to my shirt, so I tugged.

"I thought you didn't want to be near a lesbian-looking thing like me, so why don't you let go and stop being a bitch?" Even though I had heard my brothers call my mom a bitch sometimes, I had never called her or any other girl one before. Genesis let go of my arm. Advertently, I adjusted my disheveled sleeve and concealed my bra strap. Genesis looked me up and down, seeming like she wanted to apologize, but I could tell she was already starting to convince herself otherwise. She was expecting me to apologize like usual. It doesn't matter who starts the fight because I'm always the pendeja who says sorry.

My eyes lowered.

“It should take like a month for my hair to grow out,” I mumbled, walking away.

Abstinence

David Kirby

The tables across the floor of Hugo's Bistro were long and white. On one side, near the back, a table for two sat pressed up against a frosty window. He was late. She was getting ready to leave when she saw him through the window. The clouded sun was setting upon the city as he walked up to the host, and turned to find her waving and getting up from her seat.

She wrapped her arms around him as tightly as she could. When he began to release his grip, she continued to hold him tightly.

"I'm so happy you came. It's great to see you." She said with her head buried into his chest.

She released her embrace soon enough to notice a faint smile retreating from his face. They sat down across from one another and she laid her napkin across her lap.

"How are you?" Her eyes met his as she asked.

"I'm fine."

"Just fine? You know what fine stands for, don't you?" She smiled.

"Yeah I know." He replied at the floor.

"I'm sorry."

"It's okay."

"Have you done anything fun and interesting? How was robotics club?"

"I didn't go."

"Good evening. Welcome to Hugo's Bistro. Can I get you two anything to start off with?"

"May I have a Coke and a water please?"

"Of course. And for you, sir?"

"I'm fine."

She looked at him with concern. "He'll have a root beer, and water as well please."

“You’ve got it.” The waiter replied, as he turned to disappear into the kitchen.

They sat in silence for a few moments.

“Why not?” She asked him finally.

“Why not what?”

“Why didn’t you go to robotics club? I know it’s your favorite.”

“I didn’t feel like going.”

She watched his eyes as they wandered, slowly downwards, until they were left drooping and lifeless.

“Don’t you think we need to do some things, even if we don’t want to? I know I would never go to the gym if I only went when I wanted to.” She smiled at him and giggled, hoping for some response.

“I guess.”

“I think you should go next week. I know you would enjoy it. I’ll come with you if you want. Can’t promise I’ll be much help though.”

He didn’t reply, continuing to stare into the radiant white tablecloth. She stared with him.

“Are you sure I can’t help you? I can tell you’re not fine.”

He continued his blank stare downwards. She couldn’t tell if he was formulating a response, or simply counting the amount of threads contained in the white cloth.

“Here you are. One Coke. One root beer. And two waters. Are you folks ready to order?”

“I think so. I’ll have the greek salad and your soup of the day. Clam chowder today, right?”

“Yes ma’am. And for you, sir?”

“I’m not very hungry.”

“Oh come on, you need to eat. My treat.”

“No thanks, I’m fine.”

“We’ll share.” She gave a pleasant smile to the waiter as she passed him her menu. The waiter turned to see him continuing to hold his menu

tight to his chest, back to staring blankly downwards. The waiter gave a quick glance to the woman, then disappeared into the kitchen.

“I just think talking about it would help.”

“Talking about what?”

“I don't know - whatever's bothering you. Is it your dad?”

“Nothing's bothering me.”

“Oh come on. Even our waiter knows something's bothering you.” She noticed him swallow as he continued to stare downward. “It's completely normal to still be thinking about him, you know. That will never go away, but I think it's important to talk about it. I can't imagine what these last few months have been like for you.”

He didn't acknowledge her attempt to comfort him.

“Do you miss him?”

“Sometimes.”

“What's your favorite memory of him?”

She couldn't tell if he had heard her.

“I remember him taking us to get ice cream and watch football at the school. He would always tell us to eat it quickly before it melted, or else it would be our job to get the stains out. One time we ate so fast that we both got a brain freeze. He laughed and said 'I told you to eat it quickly, not all in one bite!' You remember that?”

“Yeah.”

“I'm sure he'd be proud of you. About to head off to college and start adulthood. Hell, knowing your dad, he would have made you bring him on all your campus tours. You wouldn't be able to get him out of your sight until the first day of classes.”

He managed a small grin, though she couldn't tell if it was out of happiness or contempt. It was brief. As it faded, he lifted his gaze to stare out of the window, into the blackness of the night.

“Is that why you weren't at class today? Because you were thinking about him?”

“I don't know. Maybe.”

“We were all very worried about you. You have a lot of people who care about you, you know.”

No response. She sat staring into his lifeless eyes as they continued to gaze into the blackness.

“Are you still taking that medicine?”

“Yeah. I have to.”

Her eyes now resembled his. Glazed over, preoccupied by thought. “I’m sorry, you shouldn’t have to deal with this. No one should.”

They sat in silence, each staring at nothing - both with blank eyes.

“Here you are. One greek salad and one soup of the day. Brought you guys an extra bowl and plate to share as well.”

“Thanks very much,” she said as she looked up at the waiter, this time having to force a partial smile.

“You’re very welcome. Enjoy.” He disappeared again.

Lost for words, she began to slowly pour some of her soup into the empty bowl, spilling some of the chunky broth onto the pure white tablecloth. She looked up at him, still staring out of the window, cradling the menu in his lap. She grabbed a fork and spoon, transferring the salad bit by bit onto his plate. She noticed him look down, then look across the table into her eyes.

“I don’t know why the tears won’t come. My life’s changed in the most drastic way possible: that which I once loved, is gone. Once, being the key word, cause I no longer know how to feel anymore.”

His eyes retreated from hers, back to the radiant whiteness.

“They said it would help with my sadness, my loneliness, my helplessness. They weren’t entirely wrong - I no longer feel an ache in my heart and an insatiable thirst for a way out; but I can no longer feel: feel the warmth of my mother’s hugs, feel the joy from doing well on a test, feel the passion I once had for painting. I sit in my room and stare at the empty wall, perfectly content with the growing void inside of me.”

The tears beginning to form in her eyes went unnoticed. He maintained his downward glare as he continued.

“The others think I’m lucky - that I don’t have to spend the afternoon doing chores and homework like they do. I suppose they’re right, I enjoy cluttered mess around me anyway - I guess because my messy room resembles my messy mind: filled with useless junk that should have been thrown away years ago, along with the rage I began to feel. For some reason I can’t explain, I began to hate: hate my teachers, hate my loving parents, hate my friends - hate myself. They said it would fix all

that, and it did: maybe I should be thanking them. But there is an emptiness now that I can't fill."

Back to the blackness.

"It doesn't make me happy or sad or anxious or nervous, but I know it's there, and it wasn't there when I was a kid. It isn't there when any of us are kids, but it grows in most of us; only the strongest are able to suppress that agony which consumed me - I envy them all; but I do wonder, in even the most resilient of people, if there is a small voice that they've become accustomed to ignoring: telling them that their lives are a lie, that their goals and dreams will never become a reality, that the money they work so hard to achieve means nothing."

Her gaze joined his, fixated on nothing. A tear slid down her cheek and plunged into the whiteness.

"I came to know that voice all too well, even more than the voice of my family who I remember loving so much as a child; there was no reason to feel that way, but I did, and they helped, so now I don't feel it anymore - they told me it might have side effects, but my father just wanted me to be normal again; he said that he believed I'm strong enough to conquer this, but he was wrong. I'm not strong enough, not like this. Not when I don't have any passions, or interests, or innocent crushes, or warm family dinners. And now he's gone and I can't feel ... anything - I know I should feel pain and sadness, but I don't - I know I should be weeping or shrieking, but I'm not - I know I should feel something, anything, but I can't."

She continued to gaze into his eyes, tears continuing to swell up inside of her. Her blurred vision roamed from his lifeless eyes, to his greasy hair, and back to his unshaved face.

"I'm ... I'm so sorry."

"Don't be. I'm fine."

"Stop saying you're fine. I'm sick of it." Her eyes darted around the room, then met his once again. "You shouldn't have to deal with this alone. Have you told them how it makes you feel?"

"No. And I don't want to."

"Why not?"

"They'll think it isn't helping. But it is."

"Helping you with depression? Or helping you forget?"

He stared out of the window again. No response.

“I can’t begin to imagine what you’re going through, but I know that shutting yourself off won’t help. You need to talk about this. With someone. Anyone. He wouldn’t want to see you like this - I know he wouldn’t. He’d want to see you having fun, learning new things, achieving your goals.”

His resolve was unwavering.

“You have tons of friends who care about you, and we miss you. We miss your long rants at lunch when you would sit with us, we miss the silly jokes you’d always make about Miss Clemin-fine. We miss you, and we want you back.”

Her faint smile went unnoticed. The cheeriness disappeared.

“We all remember when you started to change. Freshman year was the first time you got suspended for starting that fight with Peter Molynaux. We knew something was up, and we tried our best to help you. But you shut us out then like you are now.”

Their eyes met briefly, but the tablecloth did not discriminate.

“When we learned why you weren’t at school that day in Junior year, none of us were able to function. We were all stunned, and we began to blame ourselves. We wondered if it was our fault. If we ... If we were somehow the reason you didn’t want to keep going. Then they put you on those pills, and you haven’t been the same since.”

She wiped the tears off her cheek, then looked up into his eyes.

“I never want to see you sad or angry, but I can’t help but think it’s better than simply not caring. I want to help you. We want to help you. But we can’t unless you let us.”

It took him a while to respond.

“I understand that.”

Silence.

“Will you come to school and sit with us tomorrow? I’ll bring you lunch, you won’t even have to worry about it.”

“Okay.”

“That would mean a lot to me.”

They ate without saying another word, each preoccupied by their thoughts. She called their waiter over and asked for the check. The waiter returned moments later, and wished them a good night.

He stood up after her, placed the menu down on the table, and put on his coat. They walked to the front of the restaurant, and he held the door open for her. Before she could thank him, he looked into her eyes.

“Thank you. For everything.”

Age Unto Obscurity

Christopher Raya

The sun is beginning to set on another summer day and the tinge of purple, red, and orange hues momentarily smudge the blue sky. My eyes lazily wander to my side view mirrors to watch the sun as it slowly sinks away. Another day is nearly gone and I've done nothing productive as usual and as usual I let my mind wander to too many things Old: Things I could have done differently, should have done differently, and scenarios that could never happen in my wildest dreams yet I let them come to life in my head. I often imagine unrealistic scenarios and let them happen. Often times, they are hilarious scenes I act out in my head of memories that are long gone but not forgotten. I add things here and there to spice them up or make them better. A sexual scene or two would make this scenario better, but it would also probably make it seem less realistic ... Maybe I should be a writer? No, that is ridiculous, there is definitely no money in that. Well what the fuck am I going to do? I'm twenty-five and I still live in my mom's apartment. I sleep directly beneath my brother in a bunk bed in the living room. My prospects can't seem to get any worse. My mind continues to wander aimlessly and before I know it the sun disappears and prepares me for the long night ahead. Dark has now set around Hawthorne, California and the air is still warm, but there is gentle breeze passing through this freeway town giving a slight scent of salty ocean mixed with car exhaust some food from some neighboring house. Or is this Lawndale? Fuck if I know. I hear voices that remind me that I am not alone.

"Isn't that gay for him to say that?" A sudden voice rocks my seat and snaps me out of my delirium, it reminds me that I am way too high to function properly. I respond with a perfectly timed and ill thought of "Huh?"

Now that I am somewhere back to reality for the most part I realize there are chicken nugget crumbs all over my crotch and I dust them off haphazardly and try to comprehend what is currently happening in my disillusioned state. My friend Junior to the right of me responds to his cousin Charlie who is sitting in the back. Junior explains the conversation again to reiterate his point "I mean you have to think about it right? How do you know you're gay if you don't think about gay shit and not like it? If you were gay you'd be thinking about it because it's what you like."

"Fool!" Charlie exclaims. "It's fucken gay to be thinking about gay shit period! If you think about gay shit then you're gay." Charlie retorts with the firmest resolve.

I need to participate in this conversation, because I need to tell both of them how retarded they sound, but I can't help but notice that it is becoming harder to breathe. A strange pressure is exerting itself slowly

but resolutely against my chest and every breath I take becomes more and more painful. I begin to count every single one of my breaths, panicking the more difficult it becomes to breathe. This is it, I'm dying. I've done nothing in my life and now I will die a fucking loser in a car with people just as fucking stupid as I am. Calm down! I tell myself. Don't do this shit again. But my heart speeds up according to the amount of terror I am currently experiencing. I try to breathe again, but this tightening sensation across my chest is getting tighter and more painful the more I try to sit up and focus on something other than not being able to draw breath. Fuck, did Charlie lace this shit with coke again? I begin to pray violently in my mind to ease the dread that I am experiencing. Please God, Jesus, Vishnu, whoever the fuck is laughing at me right now just let this end. Please.

"Why do you still have your seatbelt on?" Junior says interrupting my silent prayers.

My eyes slowly wander down to see that I am forcing myself against the seatbelt while simultaneously stepping on the brake pedal which is tightening my seatbelt. My heart slows down to its usual tempo.

"Let's go get beer." I say aloud, my only coherent vocalization since my delirious "Huh."

"Nah, fuck that. Let's go to the strip club," Charlie responds. "How much ya got? I'll buy the lap dances if ya buy the beer."

"Eh. I'm broke," I say reluctantly.

"Same," Junior responds.

"Man fuck ya! Ya both wack as fuck anyway. Hotboxing a car on Saturday night. I'm out."

Charlie hops out of the backseat and walks over to his car and leaves and just as soon as he arrived.

"Damn, he took the weed. How much you got on the beer?" Junior asks me.

"\$10," I respond reluctantly as I had wanted to save that for food later and knowing Junior would have less than me as he always did, but it's hard for me to lie when it suits me.

"Shit, like three dollars. Where were you trying to go?" He asks as he brushes specks of green leaf off his black Pro Club shirt.

"There's a bar right here on Prairie right across the street from the park." I say as I take out a pack of Camel cigarettes and open the box. One bent stogie is all I have left. The stogie is flipped upside to remind me that I've lived long enough to smoke it.

“You mean that white building next to the gas station? That shit is ghetto as fuck.” Junior responds to my suggestion.

At the time, I couldn't really comprehend “ghetto” outside of South Central where I lived. Anywhere else in the South Bay seemed nice and I usually stereotyped any place that had a higher white or asian population as “better.”

“Well,” I start, “We're both broke so the best we can hope for is that we can buy a pitcher or some shit.”

We get out of my car and head toward the freeway exit which is blocked by a thin steel fence that someone bent downward some time ago. Junior pushes the bent steel out of the way and lets me walk through and when I am on the other side I do the same so that he can crouch under. Cars are stopped at the freeway exit and we zig and zag between them. Cars honk as usual for no reason than to vent their frustrations of being in traffic.

On the other side of the street was the freeway overpass. I've crossed it too many times, bums would smoke whatever they had right under the crevice between freeway and the garden of succulents and wood chips. It always smelled like shit under there and today was no different. As we pass under, a homeless man eyes us cautiously. I meet his eyes with mine and nod in some sort of emphatic greeting. He scowls and returns his attention back to a pipe and takes a massive hit of something. As we both pass I smell an acrid stench that smells nothing like weed so I assume it's something worse.

We stop at the gas station to buy single cigarettes, I buy two and give one to Junior. The bar is only a few feet away from the gas station so we walk over. There is no bouncer on duty nor any type of security so we walk right on in.

The bar is dimly lit with only the Christmas lights and the low hanging lights from the pool tables. There are only two pool tables and one is occupied by a trio of young Mexicans. The usual dude with the LA hat, a chunky girl, and a very pretty freckled one. Mr. LA hat mad dogs me as we enter. At the bar there are three black people sharing drinks and cracking jokes loudly and they don't even notice Junior and I as we walk right on next to them. At first it looks like there is no bartender, but suddenly an older man somewhere in the range of ex-drug addict thirty or sun-baked forty makes himself known behind the bar. He is wearing a dirty blonde wig that is positioned to make it seem comical on purpose.

“What can I get for you gentlemen,” the bartender says with an over enthusiastic smile.

Junior and I look at each other for a moment and then back at the bartender with equal parts surprise and uncertainty for what's to come.

“Uhh ...” I begin and continue even quieter. “What’s the cheapest thing you’ve got?” The final words come out in almost barely perceptible whispers.

“What!” the bartender exclaims loudly, oblivious to my signal for any type of understanding for our impoverished situation.

“Cheapest thing!” he exclaims so loud he is almost screaming over hot 93.5’s best hits of that day.

“Cheapest thing is a pitcher of Bud Light for you two. It’ll run ya \$10 bucks,” he finally spits out.

I try to do any kind of math in my head, but I’m too anxious believing the entire bar is staring at me. The bartender hands us two glasses and a plastic pitcher full of piss water. The plastic is so overused and scratched that it gives the piss gold beer a cloudy appearance.

“Fuck it, let’s play some pool,” Junior says trying to make the best of the situation.

“I’m not good,” I tell him.

“Neither am I,” He says and takes the pitcher and glasses from my hand.

The last time I played I was too fucked up to remember what I was doing, but I start setting up the balls in the triangle apparatus hanging from the low hung light.

Now let’s see, I begin thinking to myself. Should the black ball go in the middle? Cause I think if you hit the black ball before any other you lose. My mind starts to wander in all sorts of directions. Junior has poured me a cup and I take a big gulp and forcefully try to swallow the barely cold brew.

The white noise of the bar distracts me from everything and I still feel kinda high so I let the cacophony of R&B hits mixed with the screams and shouts of the other patrons mix and mingle in the head. I start thinking about my life again as I set the pool balls in order. I think every other stripe and solid should be in order, but then what the fuck do I do with the black ball? Should I put it in the beginning? At the tip of the triangle? I don’t know, but the bar is getting louder and somewhere I hear firecrackers go off in the distance and my ears ring slightly. Not as bad as when my neighbor threw that pack of ninjas at me when I was ten. I don’t think my ears ever fully recovered. Does hearing regenerate? I sure hope it fucking does, because I think I’m going deaf. Shit, I left the fucking beans out again last night they’re going to be spoiled by the time I get back home. Okay, fuck it! The black ball is going in the middle. That’s fair. Anyway we hit the pool balls now the black ball will be safe

and we won't waste a dollar on a new game trying to get the balls back out of the machine.

Silence has disturbed my thought process. As I look around the bar I realize that no one is around and everything has gone quiet. "What the hell?" I think to myself. I do a double take to be sure that I'm not having another panic attack, but right before my eyes is the pretty girl who looks like she got shot in the face with freckles. She is lying under the table and her eyes are full of fear. She is mouthing something silently to me:

"Close the door!" is what I think I can make out of her moving lips. I saunter over toward the bar door and close it by her command and continue looking around the now desolate bar room. I see Junior poke his head out of a small corridor I was unaware even existed until now and he waves me over.

"What are you doing?" I ask him.

"Someone shot up the bar!" Junior exclaims "You didn't hear that shit?"

"What? No. No, I didn't hear anything."

For some reason I don't comprehend the severity of the situation and begin to focus on a very dirty mop and bucket that looks like equal parts vomit and oil that has never been cleaned.

"Someone shot up the bar?" I reiterate to Junior in a vain attempt for any other explanation.

"Yes bitch! You didn't hear the fucking gunshots?"

"I didn't hear anything." I say and as the words escape my mouth I try to think back to what exactly I was doing when this went down, but my thoughts are disturbed by a voice echoing through the bar:

"Fuck this shit man. Fuck you I ain't calling the fucken cops, but I can fucken guarantee you they'll be here and I won't fucken be when they do man! I told you I was sick and tired of all this bullshit so fuck you and fuck the cops. I'm gone! I'm too fucken old for this shit man. Too fucken old!"

It's the bartender and as I peer out from our hiding spot I see him pace back and forth from behind the bar over and over again. I look back at Junior and see him quietly laughing at his conversation which is filling the once silent bar.

Junior and I emerge from our hiding spots. The pretty freckled girl is still hiding under the pool table and her two acquaintances are huddled beside her. The bartender is now gone and Junior and I head up toward the bar and the crumpled ten dollar bill we paid with is still there. I reach out and take it back. I can hear sirens blaring in the distance. As soon as

the ten dollar bill is safe in my pocket my eyes scan the bar for any other loot. At the end of the bar there are three freshly poured drinks. The drinks sweat in anticipation of being consumed. I glide towards the end of the bar and pick up one.

“Shouldn’t let these go to waste.” I motion over to Junior to grab the other one.

The sirens are getting closer and as I take a sip from the drink it ends up tasting like a chalky mixture of pineapple, milk, and Alize. The nastiness of the drink catches me off guard and I instantly cough it back up and it shoots out through my nose and onto my shirt. As I am attempting to catch my breath Hawthorne’s finest walk in and greet us with guns drawn.

They dance around with their guns and pace around the bar failing to notice that I’ve already grabbed the second drink and am guzzling it down as fast as possible and Junior is stealing garnishes from the bar. Freckles finally comes out from under the pool table and her eyes are on the verge of tears. The cops immediately go to her and make a report, but it’s the guy she is with who makes the most noise.

“As soon as they came it that shit happened!” Mr. LA hat says and points towards me greedily finishing off the second pineapple whatever. “They both came in like ten minutes ago and said ‘what’s the cheapest drink you got!’ and then some guy just shot up the spot.” And as he motions again towards me the cops walk over guns drawn, but one of them takes out a memo pad.

“Sir.” The lady cop says sternly. I’ll need your name and number so we can file a police report.

I give my side of the story which is basically only one or two paragraphs of what I’ve written here and they release us. The bartender was never found. The black folks sitting at the bar when we walked in disappeared. Nothing happened. I didn’t notice until the cops actually pointed out the gunshots that there was a street sign that basically said jokingly said “No Parking” with the hours of the bar. A bullet hole was sunk deep into the metal sign and was only a few feet from where I was standing. I never understood the severity of the situation, because I’m focused on Freckles. She’s saying something endearing about me. About my obliviousness to the situation. I hope she doesn’t take it as bravery. The cops tell us to leave the bar and before I leave Freckles gives me a big hug.

“Stay safe,” she tells me burying her head into my chest.

I take advantage of the situation and hold her close. She’s soft and smells like flowery shampoo.

“You too,” I tell her.

Junior and I stumble back to my car laughing and shouting at the freeway traffic. There's nothing else to do so we head back to his mom's place. She doesn't seem to really care about what happened to us at the bar, but she cooks us some late night leftovers. After we eat, Junior and I have another beer and I fall asleep watching some random novela I can barely understand.