

Enjambed

Spring 2020

Crisis

A crisis is surprising, creates uncertainty, threatens our ability to reach our goals, and most importantly, demands we act. In a time of innumerable crises, from the environmental to the personal, “it is better to speak” than remain silent (Audre Lorde).

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Contents

POETRY

To Whomever	Ashley Smith
minutes after he's asked what's on your mind	Ashley Smith
PsychoBabel	Rachelle Delle
Natural Disasters	Melissa Figueroa
Titles	Zachary Aquino
Familiar	Felipe De La Rosa
Illegal Fireworks	Felipe De La Rosa
An Unstoppable Object	Anthony J. Velasco
Nothing Changes	Anthony J. Velasco
tree bark spiral	michelle roldan morales
Lunch Pale	Christopher Pigao
Bento	Christopher Pigao
Buoyancy	Pamela Acosta
winter '19	Pamela Acosta
CPR	Pamela Acosta
Chemical Burns	Brenda Sanchez
Don't Bring your Guns to School, Son.	
Leave Your Guns at Home	Kyle Bigham
The Impact of an Athlete	Katie Colln
It's Just a Prolonged Sleep	Willie Robert Heredia
Stretched Hands	La Kierrea Jenkins
Thrive In the World	Maria De La Torre
Mi Family	Maria De La Torre
Affair of Time	Sydney Sonnier
Verses	Daniel Mastache
Loss	Justine Martins
Wine	Belen Mercado
Self	Samuel Meza
Self, Part 2	Samuel Meza
Young Tender Leaves	Christopher Raya
Quality Time with My Dad	Christopher Raya
Iluso	Matthew Hernandez
Static	Christina Cullins
If I Were To Write A Poem	Jean-Claudette Flores

ART

We the People

In-sti-tut-ion-al-ized

Glitchin Sheep

Confusion in Self Love

Careful Now

Impatient

Uncomfortable Comfort

Untitled

Untitled

Untitled

Untitled

Untitled

Ashley Violet Hester

michelle roldan morales

michelle roldan morales

Jacqueline Aguilar

Jacqueline Aguilar

Jacqueline Aguilar

Jacqueline Aguilar

Jeanette Garcia

Jeanette Garcia

Jeanette Garcia

Jeanette Garcia

Jeanette Garcia

CREATIVE NONFICTION

The Eyes and Smiles of Rodolfo Salinas

Paolo Catacutan

FICTION

A Lament for the Child of Euna

In the Wood

The Poor Fatmagool

The Night I Slept with the Devil

The Chance of Rain

Ice Cream and Revolutions

Konysha Wade

Anthony J. Velasco

Everth Sotelo

Jean-Claudette Flores

Matthew Hernandez

Matthew Hernandez

To Whomever

Ashley Smith

I hope that you, dear reader,
are not swayed with fear to the collapsing world around you.
I hope you aren't collapsing with it.
I hope you are standing on something firm –
something that extends you yet is connected to the empowered
pieces of you.
I hope you find comfort,
even if you happen to find a slither of it in this.
I hope you give your energy to something
someplace
someone
that's capable of giving it back.
I hope you know your beauty
extends any external blemish you feel concerns you.
I hope you love, fully, even to those who've hurt you.
It will take time, and it may seem impossible, but one day give it a try.
I hope your tears are provoked from laughter,
laughter that comes back, randomly, in the midst of your silence.
I hope you forgive others to give yourself ease.
I promise you won't have to ever talk to them again, or if it's directed
towards yourself –
understand that you both are worth a second
third
tenth
a lifetime
supply of chances.
I hope I've encouraged you,
and remember that this is to whomever
so you don't feel left out.

minutes after he's asked what's on your mind
Ashley Smith

she paced her breathing as her grasp tightened by the second.
the blanket was wrinkled, her eyes beginning to water.
the room begins to spin
her mind was levitating, drifting, floating to the ceiling –
she gasps and catches herself.
she realizes that she hasn't actually lifted from the bed.
her knees buckled, a ride she didn't know she was taking.
her lips were shivering, yet she felt
the warmth of her cheeks.
her brown eyes met his, and her smile was distracting enough
to allude his attention from the small tears making their escape.
"Nothing."

PsychoBabel

Rachelle Delle

We are wanderers from the four corners
Carrying our mother-tongue like a sweet burden
The inevitable winds of time twisting us together,
Stirring our hearts to pour out our mouths.
Our languages coil upon themselves like serpents.
A writhing clamor of knots.

We begin to mix orthography with our tongues.
We build brick words with our lips.
The edges of our teeth cutting them to fit.
Walls of sentences stretch ceaselessly skywards,
Casting shadows over the mountain's blunted crown
Slicing the slumbering clouds,
Stabbing the widow's veil of the heavens.

One elastic language binds the world together
Gripping her face tightly like a muzzle.
We are her voice now.
We spend our lives, our children's' lives, numberless generations
Building upon our scaffolding of syntax.
All our stories, her stories, his stories, histories, surmounting nonsense,
But we work incessantly into the years.
Just for a chance to touch the face of God.

So, when the last generation clambers up our skeletal tower
Perching proudly on its swaying zenith
Full of exhausted defiance and
Stretching out his beggar's hand —
Where shall we go from here?
Will we collapse into imminent inertia?
Or might we toil on
Until the whole world is buried beneath our industry,
Blackened like oil by our weapons of words?

Natural Disasters

Melissa Figueroa

What does one do when
They've gotten so used to the storms?
The frequency of strong
Ocean waves and winds
Moved in sync with one another.
And then suddenly,
The earthquakes came to an end,
Tornadoes stopped spinning,
And hurricane winds have calmed.
All of Earth's vibrations ceased.
And when all was left in silence,
One could stop and listen to her
As she caught her breath.
Her cries to God had been answered,
And the universe was in her favor.
The Earth was finally free
From her countless storms
That had no mercy on her.
If she could speak,
She'd say she is at peace.

Titles

Zachary Aquino

To feel like you're a destined disaster
For events you can't remember
Is the most frustrating joke one could live;
I'm left with piecing together a home
Video in my head, and I settle
And watch like some scared child that's crying
Too close to all the horrors on TV.
Although I have no memory of it,
I see you with my mother, and while she
Weeps under the roof meant to protect her
I vividly watch you leave us behind.
It is like having a bad trip without
The high as I must live as your spitting
Image knowing I carry your vile curse.
But like the baby I was I will grow
To shatter what you had written in stone
With my teeth for I have my mother's love
To break this cycle for my future child.

Familiar

Felipe De La Rosa

Sitting edge side of the handicap walkway,
he holds a bottle of Familiar.
His broad fingers frantically run through each
pocket of his clothes,
looking for his life companion, a bottle opener.
Instead a torn photo is solely taken out of his breast pocket
from the search for his life companion.
A clear line marking its way flush with his cheeks
can only tell the pain he recollects.
The sadness blooms within his heart and the lines turn
into a stream, a stream of lost faces.
Like everyone else, I can only see
anguish pouring out in torrents.
Esposa, Mamá, Hijo, Hija, Papá.
Wife, Mom, Son, Daughter, Dad.
The torn photo can only be to us the one we would lose
our breaths for.
The photo makes its way back into his breast close to home,
then places his face amongst his torn jacket.
Tenderly he places the bottle onto his molars
and with a downward motion opens his salvation.
The bottle of Familiar steadily flows into him,
nourishing his sadness. Attempting to bring back
those who stay close to home.

Illegal Fireworks

Felipe De La Rosa

Fireworks flew over our roofs that night
A symphony of lights illuminated our paths

A magical moment between the two of us
Long roof top nights; endless rambles

*What if they take me?
We settle down tomorrow mi amor*

Our fear grew immense like the night sky that surrounded us
The only hope of light were the fireworks

Resembling our love,
Passion raging between the two,

Burning illegally in the open sky
Leaving trails of our hot fiery love

A shriek of lights burst through our dream world
Badges thrown in our faces

My heart sank,
My fear became reality

One more day was needed
Before my life was turned to I.C.E

Jointless,
My future vanished before me

Her ride to Cal interrupted
Future family of four evaporated

Who ever said loving was illegal?

An Unstoppable Object

Anthony J. Velasco

The stars above shine bright
With promise of love
Though their distance marks them
Cold.

On an ancient beach
The Ocean smashes against the bluffs
Fierce. Strong.
The assault is endless
Though It slows at times, it never ends.

The Earth
Weathers each attack – impossibly,
Unerringly, stubborn and immovable.
But each attack takes away.
With each assault, the Ocean
Takes a part of the earthrock.

Under the cold, distant gaze
of a million fiery stars,
The Ocean wears down the Earth.

Under the cold, dead gaze of a billion years,
The Ocean swells,
The Earth swept away.

Nothing Changes

Anthony J. Velasco

A day like any other,
No ideation of clouds,
the wind breathless, uninspired.

The sun shines violently on the land
Spreading hands of heat and choking
Always choking
The life below, its anger swelling.

Unbearable, the giver's rage;
A cataclysm of energy bears down on every home.

The barren earth is a hardened veteran
To this woeful reality,
No longer the green earth of years forgotten.

There were daisies in the gardens
Once Upon a Time.

There were children in the driveways
Once Upon a Time.

There were stories in their ears
Joy in their faces
Love in their laughter

Breath in their lungs.

Once Upon a Time,
The clouds rolled in,
Gave life to the land,
Breath to the air.

Too many years; not enough miracles.
The promised rain falls.

Once, there were people
Upon the streets of this town
A clean world, with
Time for the living.

tree bark spiral
michelle roldan morales

In an alternative universe,
I am: a squirrel.
curiosity emerges from
my pitch-black eyes—
impulsively
galloping
parts of the
world around me.

The desire to disrupt spaces
and coexist as a whole
makes my heart rush
to the orchestra
Directed by the fury
of the rain;
droplets
that peck the grass;
beginning
to sprout new souls.

On the cloudiest days—
the shapes and faces
that emerge
from the hypnotizing
iris blue sky
take me on a
never-ending
tree bark spiral—
into the wildest realms
of the underground soil.

I stare at the ant army
that salutes my pursuit
to keep digging and
unleash my wonders to
the world—

a banana nut bread crumb.

Lunch Pale

Christopher Pigao

Blue thermos, silver lining
contains my 1 or 2 options:
krafted or home-made
plastic, color dyed
FDA approved junk
for the generation spazzing over the colorful characters
from a 4KIDZ generational
regurgitation from a land
where the sun shows up
east bound.

Mom reminds me the night before
“pack this and not that”
but she leaves at 6,
and at that time, I
shuffle the bits and pieces
in favor of the products
of the National Biscuit Corporation.

My comrades sit in unison.
nibbling at plastic containers
with white rice
or mashed potatoes
and a choice of meat sautéed
with handcrafted artisan
love.

It makes sense when they
rise to the fields
with an atypical propagandish smile.
All I'm left with is the
dissatisfaction
that my mom never
made the container parties
that my peers enjoyed.

But then again,
my greedy allegiance
to the mascots
who occupy my subconsciousness
overtook my freewill
and became a result of the product.

Bento

Christopher Pigao

You cook rice with
the 1st line of
your index finger.

The meat you
cook should be
brown, if you
see red then
make it brown
don't get sick.

Vegetables are
the most important
part of this
or else you'll
get sick
or won't grow up
and develop
properly.
Don't throw out.

Only water;
no soda
no juice
and please
take it easy
with the snacks
because manufacturing
won't make you
natural.

Cook on the stove
hot hot hot hot
lower the fire
so that smoke alarms
don't hear you.

and create a meal
that you eat
for our days here.
Got that?
“Huh?”

Buoyancy

Pamela Acosta

Drowning myself in fancy liquor,
eating junk so
my heart grows thicker

I wither away purposefully

to erase my steps walking backwards
and forwards
dilute my pain
with your pocket chemistry,
back alley medicine,
forged love
and pill prescriptions

I can no longer make distinctions between real
or fake
or am I
choosing to ignore the signs of an imminent fate?
am i doomed to fail
or rise above
this toxic hate?
of myself
mostly of you, but also of me and the way we think
the world should be,
night after night
my worlds end a little
I feel it as my heart
goes brittle
at twenty-two I am
already an old woman,
tired and teased
with only a glimpse of possibility of what life
could really be

winter '19

Pamela Acosta

living
is so hard
when all you want is to be dead

everyday
theres a war
inside my head, my heart a revolutionary threat

your own worst enemy you sabotage alliances then play dead

because anything is easier than dealing with
your dread

CPR

Pamela Acosta

im choking on my pain
it sits in my throat
inside of my chest
it swallows my words
& asks
if im ok
im choking on vomit
(last night's Pacificos the words
that i said)
ham & eggs
im choking on
my feelings pumping out like a serpent
peeling out of its skin pumping out the gunk the lies the truth
the mess
you left
in my head
heart mind & soul

im pumping out the pain

Chemical Burns

Brenda Sanchez

You live in the walls of my brain and heart, your name etched in blood
right across.

I try to scrub, erase your trace, and write other lovers' names in darker
shades,

But you dug your nails in so deep, you've left a scar consisting of 6
goddamn letters.

Thought if I threw bleach at the wall, you'd bubble and burn and blister
away, but with
every chemical added you just stained more, you seeped in, and spread
your poison
further into my bones.

I'm just glad that I can wash the floor of blood you left behind with my
bedsheets that
you were once entangled in. With the bedsheets that you once suffocated
me in, so I
can hide the relationship you once suffocated me in.

And once I'm done, I'll hang you up. I'll let you soak and simmer and
scorch in the sun,

much like how you left me waiting for you when you were done.

In time, I know you'll fade in the harsh rays, and I'll pretend I don't
notice the chemical
burns you caused.

Don't Bring your Guns to School, Son. Leave Your Guns at Home

Kyle Bigham

Our Lady of Perpetual Sorrow watches over her students as
gunfire replaces class bells

And chaos sets in,
 unstoppable fear
 becoming unspeakable reality.
 Recategorized as a factor of life
 Terrifying, but not unexpected, like
 Gum pain after dental work.

**And the suffering ends,
And the suffering ends.
Only to begin again,
Prompted to begin again.**

Praying for safety and
 awaiting footsteps.
 It's not the teacher,
 Echoes more sinister.

The squeak of sneakers stop,
 yelling, pleading
 ended with seven punctuations
 so loud your ears melt.
 A laugh, and footsteps fade away.
 Relief washes over you.
 A horrifying realization,
 Jake died,
 You lived.

**That's when your suffering begins
And our suffering begins,
As we mourn the death of the innocent
And as we bury our friends**

Then what's left?

Sifting through the wreckage?
There is more than just desks,
lying in room 321.

While the news cycle demeans the sacrifices
and heroics of everyday people,
for a 20 second sound bite.
"Take me instead!"

And now... a word from our sponsors.

As common-sense bills
sit on the blood-soaked desk
of those too compromised to lead.

**And the suffering never ends,
And the suffering never ends.
No need to begin again,
Because the news cycle knows, it'll happen again.**

The shouts of children,
"Oh god, please help"

Ignored, called CRISIS ACTORS.

As parents go home to empty bedrooms,
teeming with unrealized dreams.
In exchange for cash... and votes
and built on greed.

A fair trade it would seem,
this American dream,
has always been built
on the back of suffering.

**But this suffering will eventually end,
But this suffering will eventually end.
When all the children are dead,
And all the money is spent.**

The Impact of an Athlete

Katie Colln

The greatest success is to impact a heart,
to live a life full of passion and generous love.
A man who does this well finds his art.

His art was sport and that gave him his start.
But since his reach was wide and far above,
his greatest success was impacting a heart.

As that mamba mentality set him apart,
no goal was too big when push came to shove.
A man who does this well finds his art.

By carving his own path but creating a chart,
laying the groundwork to follow and one to be in awe of,
his greatest success was impacting those hearts.

Retirement brought him a beautiful restart,
sharing with young Gigi his basketball love.
A man who does this well finds his art.

We break for so sudden they had to depart.
But we remember, as our tears follow the mourning dove,
his greatest success was impacting our hearts.
Kobe did this well and lived out his art.

It's Just a Prolonged Sleep

Willie Robert Heredia

Stitches in the shape of a horseshoe
with dry blood, on your left temple.

Two tubes spill out your mouth
and wires attached to your chest,
connected to a monitor.

The mountainous lines flicker
from left to right in a steady rhythm.

Your chest rises in a slight,
almost robotic-like manner
but just enough to give me hope.

I see a bag full of urine,
means you have not given up.

Your hands are cold but I can feel
a sense of life pulsing within, fighting.

I know you are there, wandering about
in a wilderness deeper than the ocean.

Maybe you're reliving the day you
officially became a mechanic.
Maybe you're talking to your mom
trying to justify the Mexican flag tattoo
on your back, or the dragon one on your leg.
Grandma always hated those tattoos.
Or maybe we're playing catch again,
with the football you bought me
just a month ago ... remember?

I know you can hear me.

I despise the bullet that invaded

the privacy of your skull.

Grandma told me to stay strong,
she said, "Siempre confía en Dios."

I guess she's right,

they say moms always are

so He must have a plan.

Please stay with us tío junior –

may these words keep you tethered to this world.

Stretched Hands

La Kierrea Jenkins

But that day was different
That day she was tired
That day she listened to the ancestors
When they told her to call God
To go after everything her heart desired
That day she became bold enough to stand against her fears
That day she made no excuses
Patted herself on the back for wiping her own tears
She let go of everything that disturbed her peace
Went searching for the open door that would finally set her free
She was no longer a shadow and wanted to let her light shine
She told the Lord she'd use this day as a testament of His Glory
She'd tell the world how much in shambles her life was in until He
changed her story
How she wanted to give up
How she was in a dark place
But because of Him she was saved by His Mercy and Grace

Thrive In the World

Maria De La Torre

Passion and Sympathy are alike.
Like two worlds underneath each other.
The colors of the rose,
Grow as fast as the road.
Two miles away, are like the feathers in the zone.

A new territory has grown.
No matter the size, it's as wise as the sky.
You can grow up high.
Like the mountain sky.

Tears and comfort are near.
The thrive begins, as the mountain roars.
Curiosity and Compassion are alike.

The sun can come up alive.
It's the heart that keeps it alive.
Never underestimate two worlds apart.

Mi Family

Maria De La Torre

My family is I all I got, it's me who asks a lot.

Do I know what I want?

The concha's in the night.

The family I always love.

It's the leader of the years that flies, but family's always around.

Cherish those to the side, left and right.

One mighty fly and it will elapse.

To papa and the lady, I say you can.

Like money can fly from the other side.

Never let go and never fail.

You have the power inside to look around.

Glaze the sides and know that people will always be by your side.

Affair of Time

Sydney Sonnier

There was a time, where everything was perfect
birds chirping, flowers growing
people smiling and the sky bluer than blue
a time of the unthinkable
there wasn't any drama nor jails to be found
everyone was who they were supposed to be

falling in love wasn't something unbelievable to happen
it was a part of the normality
it was unimaginable for someone not to be
children playing joyfully without any worries
and to those who'd stay inside would be questioned why
a time of the impeccable, unimaginable, superb society.

However, look at time currently
the time of the flawed, defective, substandard society
it's like we throw away time as if it was worthless,
but ask for it again when it's no longer available
what are we actually doing to our community?

Drama here, drama there, drama everywhere
people agitated, angry, and miserable on a daily basis
is this really what we became?
To a world that is apparently so perfect
it has a questionable way of showing it
why can't we go back to a time when it was actually complete?

It's like our mind wanting more, but our hearts saying no
a constant fight at war
that led our society to be what it is today,
but unusually time is the only one losing
the moments we could have shared,
the hours we could have been laughing,
the days we could have been exceeding
sadly, "we could" wasn't enough, so time began to vanish.

Second by second
minute by minute
hour by hour
day by day
where did the time go?

Just as humans, time also has feelings
it hates being taken advantage
it hates feeling less important
it hates knowing something is out there being treated better
so, it starts to disappear
quicker and faster as moments past
and one day it'll cease to even exist.

Verses

Daniel Mastache

Poetry soothes my wounds,
Wounds that won't heal
Overnight

Words that convey peace,
At a time the soul
Is not at ease

Loss

Justine Martins

I woke up one morning
Except it wasn't like any other morning
I woke up **the** morning
The morning my whole world would change

Everything around me seemed *normal*
Normal at the time
Then suddenly the phone rang
Then my whole world stood still

By the urgency I knew
Something profound was about to reveal
Moms voice shook
I thought it was my dad

I was wrong
It was *you*
You were gone
There was nothing I could do

Curiosity turned quickly into panic
Shock transformed into anger
I wanted someone to blame
I couldn't find the villain

I soon became the monster
The one that I was looking for
The morning that you died
A part of me was no more

The bottle couldn't numb
The smoke couldn't fill me
Music seemed dull
Life didn't seem worth living

I put the pain in a little box
Kept it deep within me
Then I became the pain
Then no one wanted to be near me

I hated everyone who spoke of you
Their condolences filled me with misery
I wanted someone to lock me away
And throw away the key

It hurts every single day
I can't remember what it feels like
To not think about you
It keeps me up some nights

I wasn't closest to you
So a part of me feels guilt
Not because I didn't love you
But I can't imagine how your family feels

I don't know how to deal with death
I wasn't wired this way
For now I guess I'll try my best
Just have to take it day by day

*In loving memory of
John Carlos Martins*

Wine

Belen Mercado

Lately I am drinking too much wine.

I am trying to remember who I am and who I was.

Trying to understand where I went wrong.

I had too many options to stay strong.

But I was tired of searching and waiting for someone amazing to come up.

I was lonely in this empty world.

My mind was predictable and perspicacious.

But my heart was easily trapped with fraudulent words that had no actions.

Sometimes I wonder if my love is insanely big for this world.

Other times I admit we live in a cynical world and everyone is lost.

Please don't point out my mistakes without experiencing the effects of an emotional rain.

Have you ever wished for something so badly, and when you almost got it, the opportunity left and you were constantly asking "por que."

If my heart could speak, ay Dios mío.

Diría más barbaridades y sin tomar ningún vino.

If I am honest, I don't even like the taste of wine.

All I want is a full glass of you while I am counting the stars.

There are many realities that I am trying to accept.

But right now I choose to sedate my pain.

I know it won't always be this way.

My beliefs in life request for me to live in dignity rather than in vices of vanity and disgrace.

Self

Samuel Meza

I write with a lethal wet pen; how can I stay dry when all I do is sweat.
All the mind games which cause stress.

All the doubt that pours inside my head. I follow these roads, all alone
and out of breath. Life is great is what I say outside as my soul torments.
It despises joy yet is convinced it needs it to survive, but when it feels a
spark, all it wants to do is die. The light that shined once won't spark
twice. Until then all I can do is curl up and lie.

Lie about how everything is alright, how I don't feel pain nor cry. How I
suffocate just to stay alive, how I stay astray from all these eyes. How
each and everyone one of them looks at me to despise, all I've done isn't
good enough just to get by.

Through the crowd of people with a face like mine, the truth comes out
only when we lie.

We lay in bed and think of all the times we were hurt, talking about how
this is what we deserved. How a friend was an enemy and we won't
amount to anything and all we do is hurt.

We cry ourselves to sleep just to wake up and go through this process
feeling like we would rather be 6 feet under dirt. We don't value
ourselves until someone sees our worth, we dictate our wellbeing by
someone else's words.

We try so hard to please others by doing them favors while they walk
out that door. The same one you opened and tried to keep closed. The
same one with all the locks that were created by past friends who turned
to foes.

The same ones who said you wouldn't make it at all because they
couldn't see your growth. All I'm saying is keep at it and feel the flow.
Reach your full potential and heights don't look below. Keep your head
high never low, stay ahead and afloat. Better things are yet to come and
you're about to glow.

Self, Part 2

Samuel Meza

A lot of us want to be treated with respect, but those that try we neglect. We face our thoughts as we lay in bed, contemplating with them inside our head. We begin to go into the abyss, the darkness begins to swarm in. Anything they tell us we believe; we feel alive only when we bleed. It's hard to open up, we fear our friends will make fun of us. Most of the time we see the good in the bad but give in because you felt you've been had. Oh, "This person or that person said something that made me mad." You let them control you instead, you have potential to be great. Why let it slip away over what they say. Thing is beauty comes in many ways, all colors are beautiful and yes, I mean race. We are all trying to get somewhere at our own pace. Why bring others down for your personal gain? I get people won't change; they are so stubborn they would rather be astray. Talking about how they've been through so much and that's why they are that way. Yet we all have demons who seek freedom, but we find a way to keep them at bay. We all have them, don't try to deny it. We all have, in our head, a riot. Things will change for the better you'll see, all you got to do is dream. Dreaming allows for an altered reality, in which you can see many different outcomes of what you seek. Days are tough when you don't have the energy, but you got to wake up and make some good memories. I'd be lying if I said I haven't felt defeated, but I've gotten back up never retreated. We all have weaknesses and strengths; balance is what we all should try and achieve. Don't aim to be perfect for society, just be yourself and make you the priority. Smile because you have joy in your heart not to make other people stop, stop talking to you in asking what's wrong. They reach out because they care and I know its hard, but sometimes it's just good to talk. Let out your emotions to those you truly trust, not to those you've only talked to once. Your heart has room to hate, and well it has space to love. Appreciate those who actually try their hardest to keep in touch.

Young Tender Leaves

Christopher Raya

I am the snake
Who slithers in these grasses
Young tender leaves to rake
In search of an egg to take
Flicking my tongue to taste
Sweeter air; like molasses
Consumed by sumptuous duress
Upon this mound I rest
The Gods Eye, warms me
Melts me on this mound
Sight unseen, or so I think
You reach
But like a will-o'-the-wisp
Vanished
I am the snake

Quality Time with My Dad

Christopher Raya

As we sit by this river
the maw of time resonates
Between us
I have grown so much
Without you

Your reputation always preceded you
History, gossip
From people who love you
Hate you, or both
I search my mind
For something, anything
To tell you; it's been too long
I want to tell you good things
But at the same time, I want you to suffer

Your beatings
Gave me your violent disposition
To take out on some unlucky soul
Who cares about me
Yet at the same time
They made me timid and shy
I loathe these qualities
But now they are a part of who I am
Thank you

You don't deserve good stories
I want answers:
Could you explain your drug addled
Effacing of Mom's love
The pointless bursts of anger
Why was I even conceived?
Did the one sperm that made contact
Only do so because of the speed
Of Amphetamines?

Or do I owe you some credit?
For making me the genetic monstrosity
That could handle such
Obscene amounts of drugs
that kept me alive this long
Can I tell you how I mimic'd
Your behavior and almost turned into you
But broke the cycle?
Or so I think

But there are no answers
That would satisfy me
You've become so sloven and round
And you only want to talk about the good things
I could return your beatings now that I'm so much stronger
But instead, I smile and laugh
At the same stories I've heard
One thousand times before

Your jovial charismatic nature
Such a stark contrast to my own
I thought you were pathetic
But I'm actually impressed
How you made these racist people adore you
They'd hate you if they only knew
How you invaded their desert city.
Somehow, everyone here loves you
Even I still do

Iluso

Matthew Hernandez

The diaspora of your soul
is kite and string.

Connecting the lines,
the trails, the paths
that lead from our hearts
back to our bellybuttons
umbilical
and all the way home
to the shacks of our fathers.

Iluso you are both
the anchor
and the wings.

And perhaps, the dreams you have
for yourself
are of escape, of a flight to a place,
you can see just beyond
the mountains and the trees.

Or maybe your dreams
can be counted in American dollars
in beds and baths
and a backyard.

Or in digits,
added to your name
the nine-symbol magic that says
I am of legal right to
be paid fairly for my work
not the BOP
eight-symbol curse that follows
you forever.

Or maybe your dreams are of
a family, loved ones sharing
in a meager meal scraped together
for your first daughter
– the first in your family –
to graduate from high school.
Iluso,

Your dreams are paper wings
floating just south of a sun
trying to burn you up.

Bold, against
blue skies.

Iluso,

Your dreams are here
waiting patiently
for you to touch ground.

Iluso. Iluso. Iluso.

Wake up.

And come.

Static

Christina Cullins

With static on my fingertips
My brain fires its synapses
The lightning in my body
Be careful not to get too close.

My body... my body
I think... sometimes I forget that it is my body
And not just some sort of payment or transaction
For an inadequate affection
Or to get someone else's attention
That it is mine and my own to give or keep

I think this generation has a certain proclivity for the sexualization of everything
From movie to music to clothing to TV
The other day a carl's jr. commercial was playing
And there was a woman in a bikini eating a burger
Because burgers taste better when you're wearing a bikini

I get it.
Sex sells
So you sell your sex
But that makes you a prostitute
But you're not on the streets so then you are just a slut
Or vice versa a prude
And friendzone is a trap
And I think I lost my train of thought.

This idea, this social concept we have developed as a community
Suggest that one's value is dependent upon their sex appeal
Am I sexy? Are you sexy?
But I don't want to be sexy
That word has become tainted and jaded
Slipped of the tongue of too many young boys
Without understanding its meaning.

I am afraid of sexy
Became versed in the ways
Of diminishing my light as to not attract unwanted attention
Like attracting mosquitoes to the light.

I have learned to be gentle,
To tame my words even when I want to protest
For the sake of my safety
Have realized the danger of saying no
Have detained my tongue when told to smile
Have adopted the tactic of giving fake numbers
And wearing fake engagement rings
Because not being interested is not good enough a reason

I have comprehended how the abundance of sex is thrown in our faces
And has spilled over in our manners
Coiled it's way around our habits
How it has made the body something to be taken
For the enjoyment of others
What's the point of beauty if it's not meant to please?

Sexy is no longer a compliment
The word implies that I am only worth my body
Only good for my body.
Tell me, are you sexy or are you intelligent?
Because you cannot be both
You must choose and choose well

But I am worth more than my body
And you are worth more than your body
And we are all just bodies...
But it seems as though sex appeal invalidates intellect
Attractiveness somehow negates knowledge
The new American dream: aspiring to be hot, young, sexy
I see it on our billboards, in our magazines and sadly in our schools
Intelligence has lost its appeal
Reading isn't cool
Book fairs aren't fun
Everyone's aspiring to be young, to be attractive, everyone is peacocking.

I am sick of sexy
Made numb and susceptible to its affects
Like cancer it has spread through the organs of our community
Has wasted away our intelligence
And Has atrophied our morals
Like cancer we are killing ourselves
Attacking ourselves

But with lightning firing through my body
I will become flames themselves
Let the parasites of the world be dazzled by my brilliance
And burn in my blaze

Let the community redefine sexy
But do not forget we are the community
We are the society
Let us make knowledge cool again
Because my brain is on fleek
And we should be basking in each others radiance
At the static on our fingertips

Be careful not to get too close.

If I Were To Write A Poem

Jean-Claudette Flores

If I were to write a poem at age 5,
it would have been about flowers.
Their smell, their colors, their debut in the spring time.
“Roses are red, violets are blue,
I could grow a garden full of them,
and so can you.”

If I were to write a poem at age 10,
it would have been about flowers.
Only this time, about how small and fragile they are,
and how easy it is for people to not just walk amongst them,
but also ignore the substantiality that every one of those flowers,
spent many long and treacherous seasons
trying to grow.

If I were to write a poem at age 15,
it would have been about flowers.
I'd then write about their petals.
How beautiful, different, and unique each one is,
and although plentiful, you could only pick out so much.
“He loves me, he loves me not, he loves me, he loves me not...”
How many petals must be picked off until you are satisfied?
Better yet,
Was the trail of abandoned stems and once vibrant petals worth it?

If I were to write a poem at age 21,
it would have been about flowers.
How it only has its stem to carry the weight of seasonal loads,
and how its true heart is not in the hub that holds the petals,
but instead in its roots;
roots that people pull out when picking their flower,
sometimes without the intention to destroy it,
sometimes with.

If I were to write a poem at my age of 25,
it would be about flowers.

Again about its beauty, but more on how each is their own.
Even in a field of just daisies, not one is the same.
One with more or fewer marks of color.
One smaller, larger, thinner, curvier.
One missing a few pieces because of harsher weathers.
They are all different,
as we are all different.
None more beautiful than the next, but the same,
because it is in their contrast,
our contrast,
that makes us as beautiful as every other blooming field.

If I were to write a poem at my last age,
it would be about flowers.
That flowers, too, go through the cycle of life and eventually wither
away
after many winters, summers, springs, and falls.
But then they regrow,
regrow and start a new life growing through yet another series of
stormy winters,
windy autumns,
busy summers,
and blossoming springs,
all to bloom into the flower it is meant to be.

We the People
Ashley Violet Hester



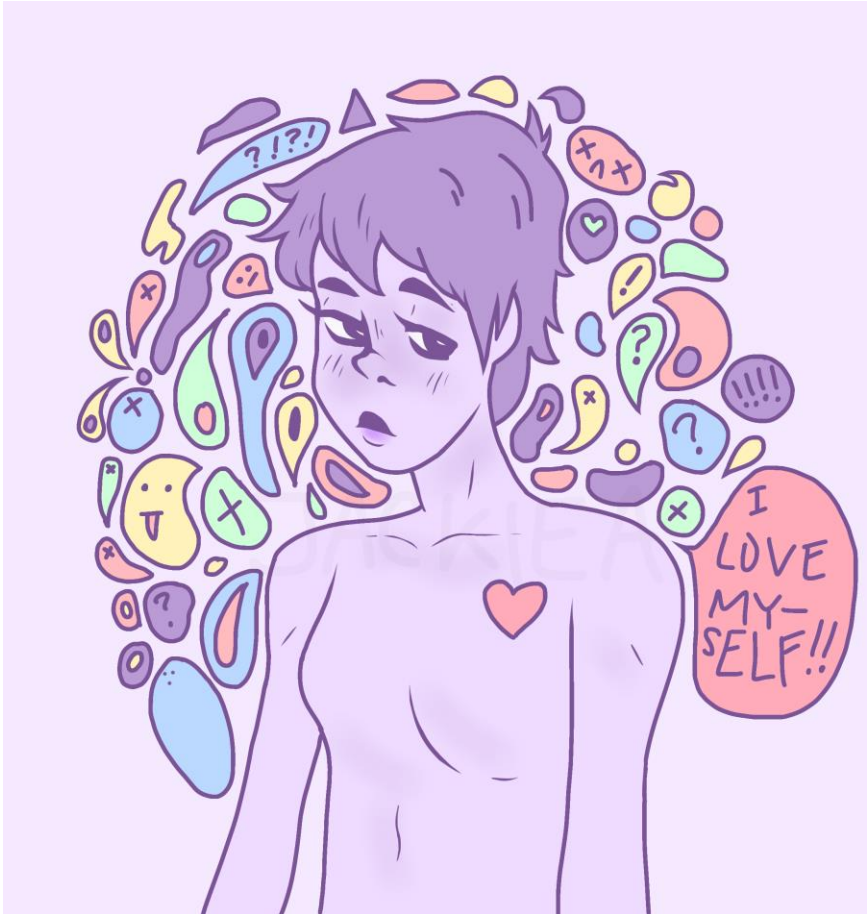
In·sti·tut·ion·al·ized
michelle roldan morales



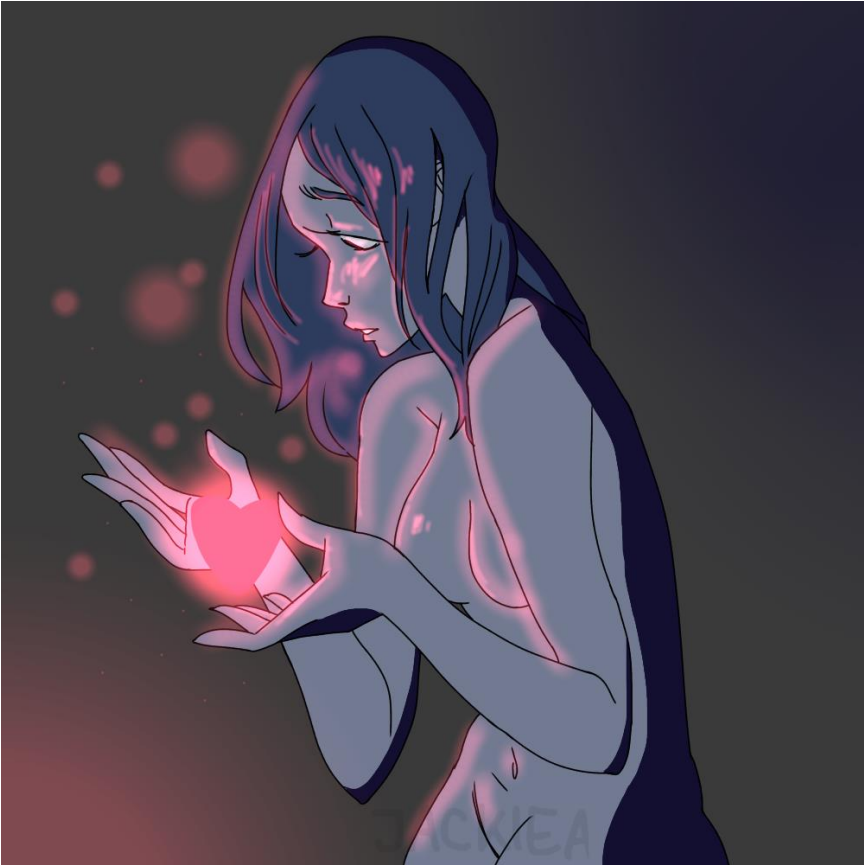
Glitchin Sheep
michelle roldan morales



Confusion in Self Love
Jacqueline Aguilar



Careful Now
Jacqueline Aguilar



Impatient
Jacqueline Aguilar



Uncomfortable Comfort
Jacqueline Aguilar



Untitled
Jeanette Garcia



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Jeanette Garcia



The Eyes and Smiles of Rodolfo Salinas

Paolo Catacutan

In many ways, Rodolfo Salinas is the seminal American. He was born to immigrants, in a major city. He supported himself and his family through odd jobs at his uncles' businesses, along with petty crime. He cleaned up his act to be a college student. And today, at only 23 years old, he's a hotshot intern at the Dangerfield Institute of Urban Problems and a Master's student with a 4.0 GPA. He's even a happy boyfriend. But the year isn't 1919. And he isn't European.

Sitting across an outdoor table on a Friday night, just a newspaper's length from a splatter of rain, it's a wonder his jacket does anything at all. For decorum's sake, he wears his zipper slightly down. But for health's sake he keeps his hood up and, with a swift but chill motion, drawn just against the wind. Yet whether he shelters in it or not, the thin, downy garment adds drama to his size. At six feet tall and an easy 200+ pounds, with shoulders as wide as his eyebrows are thick, he seems less like a kid keeping warm in the cold and more like a mountain cloaked in space-age silk.

But his eyes and smile sparkle, as he shows off his braces. Squat, crooked teeth gleam under a broad, silky grin. "I'm getting new ones on Tuesday. And I'm getting them hot pink 'cuz fuck machismo!" His laugh shows the shadows of fuzz. Apparently, as he says, he used to wear a mustache.

His face quiets down, as he begins to relate his past. "I was born in South Central, Los Angeles. Born and raised – still currently live there." He talks of his single mother, and her raising him. But his gaze becomes one of searching, as he pauses to speak on his father. "My father left us when I was born. So I didn't have a father figure, I didn't have someone to really look up to. So I had to, like, validate myself, figure out a sense of validation and ownership. And understand my emotions and stuff outside of my circle, 'cuz I felt like my mom wouldn't understand and that she didn't know what it felt like to be a man in society." A tinge of guilt and regret colors his expression, as his words trail. "So... that led to the route of, like, drugs and gangs."

Though Salinas never took drugs, his forays into selling them started at 12 years old. Then, at 17, he branched into home robberies, though such jobs were few and far between. "Prior to starting college, during that vacation break, I needed money and I needed money fast, and I felt like that was the quickest way." He was paying out of pocket for remedial courses, but those expenses weren't what he was funding. "No, it was to fund household essentials – pay rent, get by, make sure that I'm gonna eat the next day, stuff like that." Though his mother was providing most of these essentials, as he relates, "There's only so much she can do. 'Til it's, like, you don't wanna eat beans and eggs every day... She wasn't able to make ends meet. I was working with the city part-time, at that time. Still – but it still wasn't enough, 'cuz they had a limit in hours you could work and it, it wasn't enough." He started city work at 13, for the City of Los Angeles Department of Parks and Recreation. He lied about his age. His job there would help him meet, in his words, "a lot of people. That connected me to people, and I was able to sell... I was able to make more money and do less work."

"I'd work at different parks. From 13 to 18 I was helping kids, afterschool programs, making events. And then, when I was 18 up until I stopped I was doing gardening work. Caretaker." He would resign at age 22, to free himself up for internships within his Master's program. But, as he relayed some days before, he also wasn't a fan of the new park manager.

Salinas was matter of fact, as he discussed the end of his criminal career. On the subject of his old crew, he relates: "We don't talk. We don't hang out. I cut them off when I was in college." This was around age 17. But the reasons weren't entirely personal. "I started college and I had less time. It was a time management thing. I had less time, so I couldn't hang out with anyone, talk to anyone, like that." He had grown up with them, until then. "You know, you get older, you outgrow some people. Some people outgrow you. Some people just stick to the same things while you move on."

Throughout all of this, on the clock and after, he was a voracious reader and a top-performing student, graduating in the top three of his high school with a 4.0 GPA. He would even read "The Communist Manifesto" at 13. "But I would ditch all the time. I was able to do all the work within minutes, and it was no problem for me. I'd ditch and – I had a passion for reading, I love a good book." As he says, that helped him learn what he

was lacking in school, and continued to well into college. He was also not taking AP courses. "I tried, and I dropped it the first week, 'cuz it wasn't my style."

He would go on to apply to University of Southern California, University of California: Los Angeles, California State University Los Angeles, and so on. But while he would get into every school he applied to, he would ultimately choose California State University Dominguez Hills. "My teacher told me, 'If you're really considering this based on your grades, you can do anything.' And she's like, 'But I don't want you to be in debt for the rest of your life.' So I thought about it and, like, 'I'm already poor, I'm already in this shit-hole, why would I jump in a bigger hole?' So I just said, 'Fuck it, I'm going with whatever I already know. And my only who I met was George, and I met him at the park, he graduated from Dominguez Hills and he told me about it... and lo and behold, I started going there."

Some years into his college career, at age 18, Rodolfo would be shot. This would be nearly a decade after his first encounter with shootings, at age 10, when a stray bullet would take his best friend's life. That friend would die in Rodolfo's arms, as they took shelter from the gunfire. "That was always in my mind, and I feel that plays a big role in why I went the way I went." Asked about why he kept up the criminal life, after his friend was killed by it, he replied: "'Cuz it felt like it was right. Like I was paying respect to him. But I really wasn't, I was just harming myself and harming people I was selling to." Then, at 19, he would be shot a second time while on a job during finals week, "In the same left leg, the same calf, the only difference is that one is one inch from the other." It would catalyze his retirement at 22. As he would put it, "I got older and I got tired and I got shot."

He would come into, or, rather, upon social work in his senior year. "My professor just instilled to me that that was the best role I could take. I felt like that would be a good position to put myself in to relate to people who have similar experiences to me and want to make a difference." He would apply to graduate school, get in, and gain a stipend. Too many people in his program and his field, as he finds, are mostly about boasting what they know and getting paid. "But it's not about that, it's about the people and the work. And [sic] just being authentic to your story. Being authentic to your cultural roots and how you relate that to

other people. And helping them find their own spiritual connections. And it's, like, I was always learned – I was always taught – 'it's not necessarily about helping people, but helping them find their own jewels so they can shine by themselves.'"

For Salinas, not having to sell to make people feel better was, in all but gospel, a life-saving moment. He screens and processes potential parents at the DUIIP, in the adoption center. He is on track to take a retiring clerk's job, and graduate with honors. And he is becoming more open about his criminal history, with his employer's, mentors, and girlfriends being told of it, firsthand, by himself. And he wears a set of gold chains, owned since his days as a petty crook, just over his work shirt. Perhaps it was glinting not from the streetlight, but from that long spark in his coffee-black eyes. Those bright lines inside his smile.

A Lament for the Child of Euna

Konysha Wade

In the year 1792, in a small Scottish town, Euna lay in her bed with no recollection of her past actions that now shaped the existence of a child unborn; actions that proved fatal. As she drifted in and out of consciousness, she could feel the nurturing of her mother's hands, rubbing her face and her head, comforting her. Her mother, who seemed immovably faithful in alleviating Euna's pain, making every effort to nurse her back to health, was unaware of what Euna had gone through; had done. In the soft light, her mother's shadow portrayed her as the epitome of motherhood, dedicated to the life of her child. Time seemed to create this image also, as she remained at her daughter's side from the moment she found her unresponsive in her bed, to, and during the time in which the doctor arrived and performed the examination. As she looked at Euna, then back at the doctor, she sat with immense anticipation, yearning for the moment in which the doctor would assure her that her daughter would be fine. Then, with the most disagreeable countenance, a countenance that would be permanently painted on the faces of those residing in their town, he presented a question he had already known the answer to. He asked, with repugnance and contempt, "Is she married?" Without hesitancy, knowing that Euna had given herself away, Euna's mother rose to her feet, provided her most civil thanks, and bid the doctor goodbye, aggressively helping him out the door. In the soft light, she no longer looked like the image of an exemplary mother figure. She now looked like a blob of darkness that never had any connection or relation to Euna. Looking at Euna, she said in the most shrilling tone, "Doaty Nighean." She repeated herself, and the third time, she held her teeth together, as if Euna was intolerable. She then turned and abruptly left the room. Euna would never see her again.

Euna lay with no strength. She was unable to get out of the cycle of momentary mental awareness and then the complete incognizance that entrapped her. She could not come out of this state. She lay, her body sinking into the bed, cradling her, claiming her. She felt that her bed was a symbol of her grave. She wished it was her grave. She tightened her eyes, and lay without moving. After a few hours passed, she opened her eyes, and staring out into the room, she noticed the walls encompassing her. They seemed to be trying desperately to suffocate her. She looked at

the light emitting from the candle. The candle, that she felt was a representation of herself, created an ominous atmosphere. She thought about the similarities between her and the candle. She, and the candle, were alone, in a dark place, perishing. She breathed deeply. Her spirit heavy.

Suddenly, Euna began to have fragmented flashbacks. These flashbacks consumed her, snatching her spirit for the sole purpose of torment. Looking out at the shadow that the candle produced, she saw herself vividly. She tried to rub her eyes, with the intention of rubbing away this horrific sight, but she was not able to lift her arms to her face. Tears began to stroll from her eyes, down to her cheeks. As she looked at herself, in a long black hooded dress, walking up to a thick wooden door on a cold wintery night, she began to shake with trepidation. As the door opened, out stepped the apothecary. Its face was mysteriously obscure. Its hand reached forth, and in a deep diabolic voice, instructed her to drink just two ounces. It informed her that taking any more than the two prescribed would not only kill the being growing inside her, but would also end her life. As Euna accepted the medicine, and headed in the opposite direction of the door, she questioned why the apothecary would provide her with two and three-fourth ounces if more than two would kill her. She did not dwell on this thought, but instead physically shook it out of her mind, and continued her journey home.

When Euna arrived at her house, she fought her tears. Her face began to swell, her throat grew a lump, her head pounded, but she was determined not to cry. A result of a sexual encounter with a young man she thought loved her, but soon proved to be untrustworthy, unreliable, and untrue, this baby was doomed to death. She justified her actions of taking the poison by saying that the baby would only bring ignominy to her and her family; that it would be viewed as a curse, an other. Rumors would flow through her town like a breeze passing through a city. She thought about the type of things people would say about her. "She is promiscuous, a harlot, a husband tempter."

She heard the voices of the people talking about her baby. Witch-like voices. "He is a living curse, detestable, fatherless." She thought about the looks she would receive, the pouting and stepping back that people would do when she passed by... She drank.

As Euna looked out into the room, watching herself drink the poison, she snapped back into reality and cried without ceasing. She no longer drifted, she stayed in her current state, and was overcome with sadness. She tried with persistence to lift herself up and get out of bed, and after several efforts, she succeeded. She rose to her feet and began to stumble through the room. When she was able to tighten her muscles, and obtain balance, she grabbed the long black hooded coat that lay next to her bed, put on her slippers, and proceeded through the back door. Into the forest she disappeared.

She ran, tripping over rocks, and tree branches, then getting up again. She sobbed, her saliva dripping down her chin. She cried how her unborn child would have cried in infancy. She thought of her baby, but she thought of her mother too. "How could she leave?" she thought. "How could you abandon me?" She asked the question as if her mom was at a distance, standing in front of her. She soon realized that what her mother had done to her, she had done to her own child. Had she done worse? She didn't even allow the child an opportunity to come into the world.

Euna could not believe the similarities shared between her and her mother. They angered her, fueled her. After running for as long as she was able, she came to a fallen tree. She threw down her body on the log, succumbing to the guilt, grief, and anguish stricken in her mind; her body. She wailed loudly, her voice disturbing the creatures inhabiting the forest. Her voice echoing, sending the birds of the trees in a frenzy, up into the sky. Her cry vibrated the trees and the ground. "What have I done?" she yelled. Euna wrapped her arms around the log, holding it as if it was her unborn child. She cried, "MY BABY, MY BABY, MY SWEET ANGEL BABY!!!!!"

She felt pain in the deepest, innermost part of her being. She wished she had not killed her child. She thought of ways in which her and the child could have survived together. She thought about how she could have fled the town. She could have worked as handmaiden in a town far away. She even thought about the fabricated story of how her husband had died, leaving her with absolutely nothing, that she could have told to her employer. Her thoughts pained her even more.

She came to the conclusion that nothing could bring back her child. As she lay on the log, she heard the piobaireachd tune. She felt it building up inside her, trying desperately to force its way out. Internally, the tune was thunderous, deafening. She felt the notes moving through her body. She reminisced about the moment in which she stood at the door of the apothecary. How she felt the tune within her, but more calmly, more distant. The tune and her baby existed together in that moment. They seemed to be stitched together. It was as if the baby knew his inevitable outcome, and in the womb, created the tune which he would send through his mother's body as a reminder of his existence; as a way in which he could live.

When she was no longer able to keep the tune inside, she slid off the log onto the ground. As it played inside her, she started to write the notes in the dirt. Her tears dried up. As she wrote, relief accompanied her pain. It was as if she was giving birth to her child. It felt to her, like the instance in which a baby has just arrived into the world, and in her pain, the mom feels a sense of relief.

As she wrote her last note, everything grew oddly calm. Silence filled the forest. The birds ceased to chirp, the snow no longer crunched as the creatures moved through it, and the trees stood still. When her last note was written in the dirt, she laid down next to the tune no longer existing in her. She felt free. She did not care about how her mom had left her with no intentions of returning. She did not think about the man she loved forcing her into her current position; how he could have married her and changed everything. She thought of nothing but her child. She thought of how the pain of her decision would never leave, but how she was content because the birth of the tune (her baby) provided a sense of relief. She lay under the sky and wished for the moment when she would see her baby. She closed her eyes a final time.

That night, she was reconciled with her child.

In the Wood

Anthony J. Velasco

Young and spry, Pagothas hopped across the Eupelutes River at its narrowest run. Reaching the bank, she briefly considered the day's adventure and her present course.

She looked up and down the river. Seeing nothing of great interest as the river meandered on South, the adventurer turned to look at the dark trees of the forest and a whisper of a memory spoke to her. It was mother – "Stray not past the River Eu, little one, the Aet wood is beautiful, but dangerous."

Yet, no sooner had Mother's voice spoken than Pagothas dove into the first sparse, then rapidly thick undergrowth – an adventurer without fear.

The Aethean Forest is a land of magic, mystery, and indisputable beauty. At the peak of the Sun's powers, the canopy could only partially block the golden rays, illuminating the woodland wonders better, even, than Pagothas' home in the village and the budding adventurer found herself enthralled by the forest's intrigue. The light played wistfully on the Aet trees of varying twists and turns, sizes and thicknesses so that in the corner of what Pagothas could know, ever there were things fleeting just out of view. She saw here a bird and there a fox, or other times shapes of children and old faces in the mystifying trees.

Pregnant with the expectation of greater adventures in the deep woods, she hurried along. The forest's quiet symphony played in the background while the sunlight continued playing its tricks. A hidden insect chirped somewhere and a bird pecked at the wood while the leaves rustled against her faded white dress, imparting streaks of green and brown on the otherwise blank canvas.

Soon the trees thinned and grew apart in a sudden way and the green adventurer found herself at the foot of a wide, but almost entirely dried up river. A trickle of water snaked along the middle, weaving past the baked rocks and earth where the peaceful Eupelutes River once flowed with immense ferocity. Eager to return to the woodland adventure,

Pagothas stepped into the wide ditch and moved toward the opposite bank.

A roar startled her midway across and, looking up river, she despaired to see a wall of clear blue water rushing along the embankment. The water reflected the clear blue skies above as it crashed upon Pagothas; it twisted her this way and that with a terrifying violence like none she'd experienced before.

With her last breath she recovered and broke the surface, shouting thus, "Lord, I beg you, save me from this cruel fate! How my mother would mourn and her heart wither away in loneliness were I not to return home!"

No sooner, it seemed, had she voiced her sincere petition but the turbulent waters calmed and bore her to the river's edge. With immeasurable gratitude in her heart, she crawled up the bank as though afraid that the river would change its mind, and lay on her back, sucking in fast lungfuls of air.

Not more than a moment had passed but she then heard a great commotion in the otherwise calming river. Looking over, she saw in the shallower end opposite herself that an old man was locked in fatal combat with the river, struggling with desperation to keep his head clear of the water.

Without consideration to her own exhaustion or personal safety, Pagothas leapt into the freshly spawned river and found the strength to swim quickly back across.

Arriving at the struggling old man, she dove underwater and took note that the man's leg had become trapped under a log and a few rocks. Acting swiftly, and invoking the power that only the youthful have, she pushed enough rocks aside to free the man.

The man struggled to escape the water, his body heavy with exhaustion, but here as well Pagothas was of great and unrelenting help. Together they found the riverside safely and happily, but spent by their enormous effort, and lay one next to the other to recover what they spent escaping the river.

At great length, the nigh defeated man gave his thanks as follows.

“Young one, you have saved me when I most expected that no man could. Praise be to you, daughter! Tell me your name that I may say to all that will listen, and all that will not, of the young woman who rescued me from a desperate death!”

Pagothas, being quick of wit at her age, said thus, “Pagothas, Sir, is my name. Though I expect that anyone seeing the danger to your life would have moved to your aid! Thank me not, but the Lord above that saw fit to have someone near!” And the man sat quietly for a moment, not having expected such a reply.

“Oh, Pagothas were it only true that Lord and man are as you say.” and, now holding her gaze, “I have little to my name, but I feel greatly indebted to you. Ask me any question, that my years might grant me some small wisdom to share and find my debt in better pay.”

Her first instinct was to reject the man’s offer, but her curiosity and compassion bade her take the man’s offer so she instead set upon thinking of a worthy question. The request well-considered, Pagothas at length asked the man.

“Sir, had I died in the river, what would become of me and my soul?”

The old man sighed deeply before replying, “Young lady, your question is one all of mankind could debate until the sun dies and the world goes cold, but I will do my best to share what I know. Why, if I had died in the river, my old bones would have washed away to the Great Sea and fed a school of fish or the crabs on the seafloor or one other of the many beautiful creatures of the Sea. I have no family and few people to call friend; I have not been a good neighbor, only lived a quiet life in service of myself. The way today began would have been the way tomorrow begins – in truth, that has not changed.” Pagothas sat startled by the response, but the man continued heedless of the effect his words might have. “You see, I was few a season further in age than you are now when my village sent me to Orristi by the Green Sea – what you now call the Plainsland – and I found myself in a fierce thunderstorm.

“Confident in my strength as a young man, I walked in the rain with little care for danger when I should have sought shelter. I suppose I have always been a foolish man,” he said with a hoarse chuckle. “Well, my foolhardiness was well rewarded. The heavens smote me with an intense and immediate fire, as though I’d offended the lord of lightning himself! When I woke, the meal I had packed was turned to mold and a tremendous hunger and thirst seized my entrails. I smelled of fire and all around me the earth had been scorched as well as the ends of my hair which, mind you, had grown a half inch!

“As I came to the City Hoarth, on the way to Orristi, I found by way of the merchants that a week of my time had vanished... I can find no other truth in it all than that I was gone that week. Out on the vast Green Sea, I was alive. Then I was not, and nothing more.”

The Man’s words struck like ice-water overhead. “If there is nothing but death after life, we should spread the truth and put an end to the lie of false-hope!” she exclaimed.

Looking drawn and weary now, the Old Man rebuked her, “No, I don’t believe that to be best.”

“But how can I suffer my mother to live a lie? If what you say is truth, is my father gone entirely from this world? I will never know him then!”

“Ah, the problem in accruing knowledge is that it comes with great weight. You can either suffer your Mother to live a lie or live without hope.”

She looked then upon the Hopeless, Wise, Old Man and saw a man aged past his years emaciated and defeated. His rags in a similar state of disrepair and Pagothas could not be certain that he was barefoot as a result of his misadventures in the river.

“Young one,” said the Old Man’s shell, finally struggling to his feet, “there is no God and no Afterlife, but everyone I know thinks both exist and for that promise have grown prosperous together and built magnificent cities at Hoarth and across all other lands. Providence was not responsible for their creative genius, only for the willingness to cooperate. The only God that is in our world is the Wild, un-understandable Chaos of life.”

“I ask you now,” he said, pausing just inside the darkening forest, “Would humanity live as they do now – struggling to move the world forward despite the agonies of life – if there were nothing at the end of it all? Or if they knew this to be so?”

Stunned to uncharacteristic silence anew, Pagothas stared at the space in the trees the Man had disappeared into. Finally, she reacted and shouted, “Yes!” but the Man was gone.

She rushed into the Aethean woods in search for him and to give her answer. She searched frantically for many an hour and found nothing until the trees once again drifted apart. She ran forward, her vitality renewed, and stumbled out of the wood onto the Eupelutes River’s sun-warmed riverbank.

She looked at the Aethean Forest and not even the warmth of the noon sun, or even her mother’s embrace, could stay the twinge of fear that grew deep in her heart.

Looking away from the mystical forest, Pagothas stepped onto the first stone, ready to cross the calmly murmuring waters of the Eupelutes River and said to herself or the woods or the world, but more quietly than a whisper so that not even the river underfoot ever really heard her:

“Would they?”

The Poor Fatmagool

Everth Sotelo

This winter has been very cold and wet, it has been raining for the past few days. My furniture are stacks of books and the decorations are scattered old papers. There is barely enough room to walk, just enough to breathe. The smell of mold permeates this place, it enters my nostrils and gives me a light headache, I sleep among humidity, but I am thankful for a roof over my head. My arms shiver from the coldness of this crowded room. I stare at the drops of rain as they fall to the ground but then I can't control my rapid shiver, I feel as if my body is to collapse. I just inhale with my nose and exhale with my mouth. There is nobody to keep me company, nobody to tell me how pale my skin looks from malnutrition or even how horrible my writing is. What is the real purpose of life? Why am I here? What have I done to deserve this? My fiancée passed away from pneumonia two months before our marriage. My parents and sister live in Turkey and my older brother has his own delightful family in Canada. I love being alone, my imagination is my refuge. Gabriel Garcia Marquez and William Faulkner are my friends because they have taught me more about human relationships than anyone else.

As a child, graphic novels were the only way I could teach myself to read and write. My only dream is to become a Nobel prize winner. Who am I fooling? My mind says it's impossible, yet my heart feels as if the dream may come true. Which one should I trust? I do not give up on writing. I hate working at my office, the work is repetitive, and it is the thing that stands between my aspirations as a writer. Mario the office manager is such a disgusting nuisance. He has the habit of placing a stack of papers on my desk and expects to me finish at precise moments of the day. While I take my lunch in the kitchen, he attempts to seduce by serving me coffee and caressing my hand. It is not the first time I reject his advances; he threatens to fire me if I don't accept him. I allow him to touch me but only because I need this job. My rent has been late for the past two months. One more late month and I am evicted. Nevertheless, creativity fills me with hope of one day changing this poor life. Without any interruption I and bleed. The world does not exist for me for I am a separate being. My fingers move across the keyboard 70 words per minute. My thoughts flow like a river; too much fantasy causes us to

suffer from the horrors of life and too much reality damages our will to do things.

It is now four in the morning and I must be at work at eight. I write so much my will is to write more. Darkness covers my eyes as I shut them, northern lights that change into the rays of the sun. Lighting and the ends of space. The cosmos, the mind takes me to the origins of life. The mind is the ultimate reality for without it life does not exist. Will I ever reach that place? My head falls on top of my books.

Mario drops another stack of papers on my desk. I snap out of my sleep. The two ladies that work in payables across my desk stare at me with deception. I turn behind me and notice Jane and Charlotte mock me as they glance at me. Mario looks at with a disgusting grin on his face. He walks away with a boastful attitude. My head hurts from the lack of sleep.

I walk over to the kitchen to pour myself coffee with three expresso shots. Mario walks in and pretends to wait for the coffee machine. I ignore him. Suddenly, he moves towards me and tries to rub his hands on my testicles. With his other hand, he grabs me from the back of my head and forces a kiss. I freeze and resist, I grab him by his shirt and slam him on a nearby table. The food and drinks spill all over the floor. But I can't punch him! What have I done?! I injured the pretty butterfly! Gradually my hands detach from his chest, my rage dies. Everyone comes to stare at the aftermath of this violent scene. I catch my breath and walk over to balcony by my sister's old office. I look down, cars rush on the street and the wind pushes me to the edge. My body shivers, my stomach is nauseous. Throw myself! A little boy looks up towards me as he walks with his mother. I don't know if he is looking at me. Maybe. I would not want him to witness the reality of death at such an age.

"You are fired, Fatmagool!!!," yells Mario.

His words resonate in the walls and bounce in my ears.

The streets are wet and the ambiance humid, not one soul is present. I am alone in this world and only my stomach controls me now. I have not eaten in the past two days, most of my check goes into my high rent and my bills. My body is feeble and my loneliness binding to hunger. Any

food or alcohol is nothing but an escape from sadness. The sadness of having to lose my job to do what I love. My legs do not respond. I might collapse but my will is to reach that place. A shade covers my eyesight again; will I ever reach that place? What is happening to me? Why does the world seem darker and darker?

I walk by an old bookstore, it's the only light in this dark street. An old man sits at a table in front of the store. He has a modest tweed sweater with the most well-pressed slacks I have ever seen in an elder man. His neat white beard and his glasses intact and clean. I can't help but admire him. His eyes clash with mine.

"Are you really happy?" he asks.

I dissimulate.

"Do you like books?" he asks.

I look back at him with a confused expression.

"I do."

"There is a café on the corner of Welsh and 11th street, they have book readings."

"Who are you?"

"I work in the bookstore."

I am bewildered.

He stares at me with a serious expression, but I sense gentleness in his demeanor. He is immobile, like a striking painting he elicits a cascade of emotions that make me think if I am happy with my existence. I feel like I must touch his face and kiss him. My body feels as light as a feather. Is this how unbearable the lightness of existence is? It's beautiful.

"Be a candle, for by consuming yourself you light others," he says.

I open my eyes and thunder rolls. He smiles and goes back into the store. What did he mean? Where is this coffee shop? My answers could be there.

There is the coffee shop the old man mentioned. The strong smell of brewed coffee penetrates my nostrils. A cozy and bohemian room filled with college students. The barista asks me what I would like to drink.

“Do you read books here?”, I asked.

“Talk to Dale the owner.” He points to him.

Dale sits at a corner; he types with diligence without any desire to be disturbed. There is a desire to share something important within me. Perhaps my imagination shall solve the mystery my reality has struggled in vain. His eyes look up to me, but he does not stop typing.

“How can I help you?” he asks.

“I was told that you read books every night – is that true?”

“Yes, we support aspiring writers.”

“How can I read something for tomorrow night?”

“Just take the stage when it is available, and we shall listen.”

The crowd gathers around. People drink their coffee as they direct their attention towards me. I fix the microphone and look at my story. A hot flash runs through my body and sweat begins to drip from my head. I take a deep breath.

In a land now long forgotten and a long time ago there lived a king named Atef who lived with unimaginable riches. From the Iberian Peninsula to the Balkans, to the Sahara Desert, and to the orient king Atef would strike fear into the hearts of men. He had a beautiful daughter who was the apple of his eyes, Mahidebran. She was taught math, history, sculpture, hunting, and rhetoric. Although intelligent, Mahidebran was depressed. She would be knowing there was emptiness in her life. Atef

became very worried about her emotional state. He consulted his advisors, his prophets, and her educators. The prophets foresaw her death if she did not recover her happiness, but they could not foresee what would make her happy. Atef and his advisors consulted for three days. On the third day they discovered a young man who had been rumored to gather crowds of people just to listen to his lyrical rhymes. He was brought before Atef and questioned by his court. Who are you son? What is this thing that you speak of that makes people listen to you for hours? What demon have you invoked? The young man stated that he was a poet and that the people would gather to listen to something called poetry. The king and his court were very confused. They had never heard of poetry before. They asked him to demonstrate a piece of his delightful poetry. The young man sang of the Nile river, praised Minerva, honored Jupiter, exalted Atef, and he finalized with a lyrical ballad for Mahidebran. The king and his court were completely astonished. Atef requested that he teach Mahidebran to recite poetry. If poetry can bring happiness to his daughter, he would promise part of his kingdom to him. The young poet was honored, but he instead he asked the king for such a humble request; food for his family. The king agreed. That day, the young poet sang and sang to Mahidebran, and from the sound of his voice and his light skin in contrast with his dark hair and beard, she fell in love. The king was very pleased to see happiness return to his daughter, but her educators were not happy. Mahidebran no longer had an interest in math, astronomy, philosophy, history, and hunting. All she wanted to do is write poetry and recite it to the common people. Poetry made her happy. The educators and advisors suggested that the king hang the young poet for enchanting Mahidebran.

The king disagreed for he was delighted to see happiness in his daughter. The educators then planned to poison the young poet so that Mahidebran would forget about poetry. The king had arranged a large banquet with the court and other small kingdoms to celebrate her daughter's happiness. That night, the math educator served Atef a glass of wine and the philosophy educator poured a sleep potion into it. The food and wine were so abundant that everyone was guilty of gluttony; Atef was no exception for he fell asleep. The young poet drank the poison and waited outside the palace gates for a bit of food as promised. But the king was asleep, and his promise now broken, the young poet could no longer withstand the snow that gathered in his head. Tragically

he passed away. The next morning Atef woke and could not find his daughter. His advisors and assistants searched until they found her crying over the young poet's body. The king could not believe it. His daughter's happiness had now vanished and her only true love was no more. The educators claimed that if they instruct her, she will forget poetry. The king agreed thus Mahidebran returned to her studies in the other subjects. The king however realized that poetry could warm the heart. Inspired by his daughter's happiness he began to write poetry himself, but little did he know that his reign would come to an end because of the lack of poetry.

Everybody claps and cries. My story touches many hearts. I get off the stage and a group of people gather to shake my hand and congratulate me. The owner discretely approaches me and hands me a large cup.

"Please keep coming back with more of those," he says.

I take the cup and notice that there is no liquid inside. I pay for my coffee and head outside. The cup is filled with money, there are several fives and ones. Goodness this must have been the tips the writers get from the audience. It seems to be enough to make up the rest of my rent.

Suddenly I see this woman and her child in the alley behind the coffee shop. They are homeless. She tears my heart. Her face is languid, her skin wrinkled and chapped. Her clothes seem wet and her child is asleep next to her. The child is dirty and debilitated and their smell is abhorrent. Her child moves to hug her and his cry makes me cringe. The woman stares at me with her blue eyes and I am frozen in fear. If I walk away now I could never live with myself, knowing that I can help the poor woman. But how will I take care of me? No! Who cares about me?! My life is poetry! The woman smiles at me, the warmest smile I have ever seen, even more beautiful than my beloved Lydia. She hugs her child and falls asleep. My eyes become filled with tears.

I approach her and hand her all the money in the cup.

"For you mother, poets are god's gift to mankind," I say in a soft tone.

Her hand shivers as she takes the money. I take her hand and gently caress it; I close her fist with the money in it.

“Thank you so much. Who are you?” she says.

“I am the poor Fatmagool.”

The rain droplets tickle my face and moisten my eyes. The water refreshes my stiff skin and my muscles shiver. I walk away feeling happy with a certainty that I will never die. I close my eyes.

The Night I Slept with the Devil

Jean-Claudette Flores

I met the Devil. I danced with him. We slowly swayed in a harmonious waltz to a whimsical melody only we knew; hand in hand, chest to chest, lights dimmed low. Our gaze locked as he traced the sensitive lining of my back and I became breathless; drowning in the pool of his deep, onyx orbs and melting at the heat of his touch on my bare skin. As our song gently faded away into its final note, our heartbeats became the only sound in our bewitching, little world; beating in perfect unison to intensify the burning desire brought upon our togetherness as we masked divinely in each other's presence. He spun me again; this time with my back against his heart, his hungry mouth at the nape of my neck. I felt his breath; each one tantalizing my body with a delicious sensation lascivious enough to make even the holiest of saints blush. And I was no saint. He knew that all too well. I walked through the gates of Hell and he was the one who opened.

"Do you want me?" he breathed hoarsely onto my skin, holding me close.

I whispered yes without a chance to think; as if I could. I was long gone. My mind, and every sense of rationale it had, withered away into delighted oblivion the moment I felt his warmth when we slow danced to our heart's song. He placed a finger under my chin, and gently moved my face to meet his. His mouth was an inch shy of my slightly parted lips, teasing me. I tasted his breath on my tongue with each ravished pant, and I hastily grew an intense craving for something much more savory, much more...stimulating. He looked into my eyes and I became frozen under the severity of his covetous stares. Flames of intimate desire danced fervently in his eyes as he kept me spellbound with his touch. His lips rested upon mine at last, satisfying the craving I sought, and the endowment it had over me was stronger than his tight grip that locked me within his rapturous hold. And in that moment, I knew I was his.

But he was not mine.

I didn't touch him. I couldn't touch him. I couldn't move. I was in a complete trance of sensual euphoria, hopelessly mesmerized by the soothing feels of his delicate touch, the aromatic aura that fumed

deliriously over our heated bodies, and the sparkling arousal that rose from our kiss. Oh God, our kiss adorned me. His lips caressed mine passionately, spelling out a thousand words that have already been said, and leaving me disarmingly numb to the captivating impacts of our salacious deed. He bit my lip. My body was on fire. My skin blushed and abruptly, I was lost. A sudden ache pulled at my heart and I knew not what it mourned, but it did not compare to the twisted, hollow pain that drove me into this dark world in the first place. I dared not return. I carried on, a slave to his touch, paralyzed in his hold. He poured his lust like liquor onto my tongue, and I was drunk. Our faces grew redder. A million candles burned inside me. He then pulled away, eyes still sinking into my own as I gasped for air with no prevail of calming down. His presence alone kept me breathless, and his sly smirk that grew on his lips revealed that he knew well of his power. He was the Devil, after all. He embodied all of the deadly sins and wrapped them around me like a silk robe — lust was a given, but it was his greed that kept me warm. Possessive was what he was. I felt him biting into my skin to leave reminders that I was his and his only. He laid me down and that cursed ache pulled once again at my heart, as though to warn me of something malicious that lies ahead. But I thought to myself, “I’m already in Hell laying in bed with the Devil. How much more malicious can this get?”

He hovered over me and undressed me slowly; lingering longer at my ubiety and scoping every inch of my body with his feasting eyes. I laid naked beneath his seducing gaze and I felt his desire brood over me like a starving wolf over its prey. His rasping jaw and roaming lips drifted lazily toward my writhing hips. A stroking tongue soon followed, leaving behind a hot, teasing, wet trail of pure ecstasy that roused out my tortured breaths begging for more. I longed for him to take all of me, for I no longer wanted any of it. I cared not of my value. I was already an empty shell of a being when I entered this inferno. I had nothing left to lose, nor anymore to give. So I gave the Devil the little of what was left of my sanity and braced myself for the soul suppressing fate that awaited me.

As wicked as it was, it felt so damn good. Beguiled by the tenderness of his lips exploring my skin, I drew a blank. My mind comprehended nothing but the feeling of his hands and kisses over my body moving to a rhythm only he controlled. My legs opened as his whispers sunk deeper in my florescence. Lower and lower the trail of his kisses went,

and suddenly my body tensed to an intoxicating sensation that bloomed from the flower of my womanhood and had me shaking shamelessly into his mouth. He wrote poetry between my legs with his tongue and I am consumed by him. An euphoric rush traveled through my blood and I burst into sheer bliss as he savored my last drop. He crawled back with his hands holding himself up over me. He licked his lips. I looked into his eyes, and then I froze. It was different. The sweetness in his gaze was gone. I swore I glimpsed death; an eerie and hostile death that appeared mapped out in his vision like a careful plan. Shivers radiated through me, but this time, it was cold. Cold, odious shivers. My heart was now screaming in manic; raging over and over of what it tried to warn me of — and save me from — earlier. But before I could acknowledge the hypocrisy of my emotions, he covered my mouth with his and entered inside me slowly, distracting me from any thoughts that could defy him.

Not like I could, anyways.

I felt him surround me like waters of a lake; ebbing, flowing, and filling me up with his pleasures through every thrust, every wave. We were panting heavily against each other; lips refusing to break apart. My heated moans mingled with his husky dark grunts as we aligned. Our passions built from a feather touch to a firebrand fanning out the flames of our desperate beings. Our nakedness is exposed in the red shadows of our lust, and we melted together in a shuddering embrace. I tasted the burns of amber flesh as we panted and trembled in rhythmic thrusts and throbs, skin sliding against skin in the depths of our open bliss. We heaved with muffled breaths until a burst of lightning broke the madness, and we emerged in an orchid hazed enveloped by the night.

But just like a cloudy night, the overcast of darkness that had ached me returned to shadow over my heart and mind. I became numb again as he glided in and out of my sex, but the calming pleasure that once came with the appeasing numbness disappeared. I didn't understand what was happening. I closed my eyes, and I entered into a whole new world of conflicted intuitions. I wanted him. Fuck, I wanted him so badly to ease me from my troubled reality of lonesomeness and drunken dusks-to-dawns. But now he was in me, and I wanted nothing more but for him to get out. All of a sudden, I felt pain. Deep, deep pain and it was not from his loaded member that filled up the depths of my libidinous void, but instead from the obsessed look in his eyes that held me prisoner to

his nefarious ardor. I may have felt like a sorry, desolated excuse of a human life when I enter his fiery realm, but as I laid naked under his degrading stare, I found myself to be...nothing. I was not dead. I was never even alive. In that life and through his eyes, I did not exist. He didn't feel my warmth, my craving, my passion; nor was it his concern for as long as I satisfied his. I was just a commodity. And that was a misery that surpassed them all.

"You're mine," the Devil growled ravenously, pulling me back to face my regret.

"Yours," I still moaned into his mouth, neglecting the cold tears that ran down my face, "Yours, yours, yours."

He was a destruction of mass weaponry and he used his most fatal ones to destroy me. He left my walls and pulled me back onto my feet, only to push down to my knees and it was when he cupped my face roughly in his hands that I knew he was only seconds away of finishing me off. He put his gun to my lips and I tasted our sin. It was cold. Bitter. It reeked of filth. He released the trigger. I swallowed the poison of his bullet, but I did not bleed. How can I bleed if I am empty? After, we laid on salted sheets and barren minds in silence. I finally let go of the locks that held my fevered thoughts so tenderly and allowed back in the voices of reason that elaborated the harsh truths of the chaos I not only had just endured, but ignited myself. He kissed me one last time, and something stuck in between our tangled tongues; a combination of goodbye and an apology. An apologetic Devil? He had already walked away; left me shriveled up bare in the cold to repulse at my own company while soaked in our musky iniquity — who knew it was possible to shiver in Hell? So no, not him. I was the one apologizing. I apologized to myself for caving in to the deadly temptation of lust and greed to the extent of murdering the lively, hopeful girl I was once was. Suicide's a sin, too, and I've killed myself a million times before. Touching him should have made me feel whole. Loving him should have made me feel real. But our act of meaningless intimacy only made me feel the need to escape again and again, and what obviated me from truly gaining that sense of realness was the fact alone that I was not loving him, he was not loving me, and above all, I was not loving myself. I did not know how. Neither did he. Neither did they.

No one has loved me for more than just the night.

The Chance of Rain

Matthew Hernandez

Sunny and 74°. Just as it was yesterday. And the day before that, and for a million days before that, stretching all the way back to the dark times before the Age of Sufficiency. Back to when humanity had almost doomed itself burning fossil fuels, poisoning the ground and water.

Layton looked up from the control panel's touch screen on the Weather Creator and found that everything was in its place; blue skies, sunshine, and not a cloud in sight.

Essa walked back around the great machine to see Layton staring off again and felt a strange urge begin to rise up in her. It caught her so off guard that for a moment she was frozen, locked in place by the sheer peculiarity of it. Just as her mind began to return to the situation before her, a young voice called out to Layton. The monotone drone that she had heard every day of active duty since she received this assignment. Odd that it was always children who were assigned as overseers. She was told once during training that it was because they could still feel the trace of some ancient barbarity in the human psyche, some trace of pre-sustainable civilization.

"Layton-what-are-you-doing? Is-there-a-problem-with-the-WC?" the monotone pierced through the sameness of the world and Essa felt a different urge, but stronger this time. She saw a flash in her mind, too quick to make out. What was it? Were her hands balled up? Why?

"No, the world is adequate, same as always." Layton's response snapped Essa back to the present. She noticed that Layton had a strange accent when he spoke, why had she never heard that before? She'd been working this assignment with him for almost two cycles now.

"Good. Please-make-sure-the-necessary-reports-are-logged-and-archived." The boy's drone caused that event again in Essa's mind and she found that her left hand had bunched itself into a fist. She stared at her hand for a moment before Layton interrupted her. "C'mon Essa, work's done for the day." His voice seemed to cause an opposite reaction in her body. She felt her fingers relax and breathed more deeply. Packing

up her small tools to go, Essa turned back to see Layton staring out at the fields of wheat as the WC began to generate a soft breeze in order to scatter the seeds to the upturned plot to the north. "Layton, do you require assistance to the Hove?" She said softly, beginning to walk over to him. "No, thank you Essa. My boot just caught a rock is all." Essa knew that Layton was hiding another of his episodes. Lately he'd been having more and more of them, no doubt he'd soon receive his final assignment. Essa had another unsettling feeling, this time it made her eyes twitch and her throat went dry. She attributed it to the growing winds emanating from the WC and made her way up the path and back to the Hove.

When they reached the Hove, the living quarters for WC maintenance workers, Layton and Essa typed in their reports and uploaded them to the relevant archive files. There were two maintenance workers assigned to every machine across the globe, all uploading these same reports every day, and to each team and there was a child overseer, whose sole job was to report on the workers.

The Hove itself had everything a human needed for survival and was attached to the WC's central processor and power source so the team could always upload reports and remotely check each other's work from anywhere in the world.

Layton's episodes grew worse and worse as the weeks passed. He stared more and more into the sky every day they went to the WC. Until, one afternoon he abruptly stopped staring off and turned his gaze directly to Essa. Something about him was wrong, his eyes had a faraway quality. His forehead was sweating, and he was twitching slightly.

"Essa, did you know that once, long ago, huge amounts of water would fall out of the sky? Before the WC pumped water directly to the roots of the crops, even before the WC, the sky would darken, clouds would gather, and then it would open up and water would fall. They called it rain." He was rambling, speaking faster and faster until he lighted on the last word, "rain." He held that word apart from everything else and a seed of thought suddenly bloomed in Essa's mind: "Reverence," she thought. Layton feels reverence for rain.

“Layton-you-have-had-an-unacceptable-episode. You-will-be-taken-now-to-final-assignment.” Essa hadn’t even noticed the overseer, perched atop his floating chair, hovering just over their heads. Layton looked up as two men descended from the sky, small packs strapped to their shoulders, allowing them flight. Layton was seized by both arms and as his eyes met Essa’s, a new word blossomed in her mind: “Fear,” she mouthed.

Before they could ascend with him, Layton yelled out, “The WC can make it! The WC can make rain! Essa, it’s an archived program...” If he said anything else it was lost in the air as he rose up into the sky, up and away from her forever.

“Essa-you-have-heard-a-thing-that-is-forbidden. It-has-caused-you-to-recall-emotion. You-must-submit-to-a-cleanser-to-continue-in-your-current-assignment-at-the-WC.” Essa heard this through what felt like miles of thickening air. A small voice from some far distant place, only vaguely remembered. It wasn’t until she felt a small hand on her arm that she stopped staring into the sky after Layton and came back to herself.

She looked down, saw the overseer’s large clear eyes, saw the way the gentle breeze moved his straw-colored hair back and forth on his small head. She realized that her arms were locked to her sides, both her fists clenched so tightly her knuckles had gone white. “Anger, Rage, Hate, Sorrow” – all came to her at once and she mouthed their names rapidly. The full flood of emotion hit her like a blow to the head. Essa felt her stomach twist, felt all her muscles go taught at the same time. She lashed out at the overseer, swept him up easily in one arm and carried him over to the WC. Somewhere in the back of her mind she was aware of the overseer’s emotionless protests, but she couldn’t make them out. Even now, she thought, “He doesn’t know what it means to feel fear... or hope, or joy.” The words, and the emotions they were attached to, came faster and faster now, spiraling beyond her control.

She held the overseer with in one arm and walked to the WC’s control panel. She typed in her access code and pulled up the program archives. She searched for, and found, the folder marked [Rain], looked through the list of programs there. Essa’s finger lighted on the one titled

[Summer_Storm.exe]. She pushed it, pressed her index finger gently onto the screen, and then quickly pressed the [Execute] button.

“Essa-you-have-violated-too-many-commands-now-to-remain-at-your-post. You-will-be-taken-for-final-assignment-as-soon-as-the-retrieval-team-returns-from-depositing-Layton.” This time the overseer’s monotone didn’t bother her. She felt, grief for him. Essa just pulled him to her chest instead. Even now, he didn’t struggle – he couldn’t even conceive of fear. She held him tightly and waded through the wheat fields until she reached the patch of new growth at the north edge of the plot.

There she laid down and turned the overseer around, so his back rested on her chest, so they could both look up into the sky. Together, they felt the breeze become wind. They watched the world darken and cloud over. Felt the first, cold, wet drops alight on their skin.

When the first flash of lightning scorched across the sky Essa felt the overseer tense for the first time. The succeeding clap of thunder made them both jump. Then suddenly, the sky cleared – all the clouds retreating towards the WC.

Two men walked over to Essa. They removed the overseer from her grip and placed him gently back onto his feet behind them. Next, they lifted her from the ground. Essa didn’t struggle, had no thoughts other than how the water felt on her skin.

Giving herself up to the retrieval team she glanced back over her shoulder at the overseer and saw that his eyes were puffy and rimmed in red. He had been crying. She hadn’t even noticed with the rain falling on them and she wondered if she had cried too. She touched her cheek and her fingers came away wet. “Beautiful,” she thought. “The rain is beautiful.” She smiled back at him as the two men carried her into the now cloudless blue sky.

The overseer watched them go, something tugging at his small chest. His breath came ragged now as the thing worked its way up from his belly and into his throat.

All at once it erupted from him – from his eyes, and his lungs, and his mouth all at the same time. A single word flashed through his mind as it did: “Sad.” And he cried out with the voice of the small child he was – hoarse through his tears, just one word, long and loud and pleading.

“Essa!”

Ice Cream and Revolutions

Matthew Hernandez

When Connie and Rene left for their date Connie was still beside herself – shocked that Rene convinced her parents to let them go out without a chaperone. The thought was still rattling around her mind as they were walking toward El Capitolio. “May I get you anything?” Rene said interrupting her thoughts. “Are you hungry? We have some time before the movie. Anything you want.” “Um, yes please” She replied. “OK, well I know a place with the best fish in Havana, it’s on the way to the theater.” Connie barely noticed the neighborhood as they walked through it. Here was Rene, the Rene. The brother of revolutionaries, son of dissenters, from a family with influence. His European ancestry still shone through in his pale skin and pale green eyes. Cuban but only for the last three generations. Not like her family, Havana by way of Havana for God knows how long. She had seen the pictures, heard Rene’s stories of Fidel popping over for dinner, playing dominoes, sharing rum and cigars. Until then Connie was unaware that Fidel Castro had the ability to “pop” over anywhere. After his first failed attempt at overthrowing that bastard Batista no one thought he would ever come back. Now he is here and more and more people, like Rene’s family and her own were giving him their support.

“So, the guerrillas sent a message to my mother that Lou had been killed in a raid,” Rene spoke, continuing a story he had obviously started before suggesting the restaurant. Connie hadn’t heard the opening but could guess how it began. Rene was always honest with her about his family’s involvement with the revolution, after all, he trusted her; they had plans to marry one day, after the revolution was over and they had the freedom to start a family of their own. “My God, that’s terrible, I’m so sorry Rene.” His revelation was too casually given but Connie understood her role in his story telling. “Ha, you know my family, we never die.” He retorted with an arrogance fitting his attitude. “So, my mother looks right into this poor kid’s face and says ‘Mijo, did you bring his body?’ and he doesn’t even know what to say, he’s by himself, he obviously walked down from the hills to deliver this news on his own, of course he doesn’t have a body! So, he answers her ‘No Señora,’ and I’ll be damned if she didn’t slap him across the face right there on the door step. ‘Unless you bring me my son’s body then don’t you ever say to me that

he's dead! My sons don't die just because you think they do!" 'Si, Señora.' That's all this poor kid can say, 'Si, Señora.' So, my mother says 'Ok mijo ok. I'm sorry to get so angry with you, let's get you fed and then you and I will be on our way.' He has no idea what she's talking about, where are they going? 'Um, Señora?' 'What, do I need to hit you again to restart that brain of yours?' my mother snaps back at him, although you can tell her anger was waning at that point. 'You said Lou went missing after the last raid and that you only found about half his unit, right? Well that means my first-born son is hiding in the hills somewhere, probably hungry, and you lot don't know how to find him, so you're going to take me as close as you can and I'll find him, and when I do, he's going to get what you got but worse.'"

"So, your mother is wandering the hills?! Rene! That's terrible!" To which Rene smiled his most mischievous smile and gave her a little wink, both infuriating her and pulling her further in to his romance. "You bastard, just tell me that your mother's alright, she scares me but I don't want her dead." "She got back yesterday," he added pausing casually to order some food from the waiter. "Before you curse me again, she's fine. She went up into the hills for three days before she found the stragglers of Lou's unit. When she first got there a sergeant tried to show her a body and tell her it was Lou, she took one look and..." "And let me guess, she slapped him" interrupted Connie, still annoyed that Rene would dangle both his brother's and mother's deaths on a string for the sake of a story. "... Well yes, directly in front of the entire staff" Rene added launching back into his tale. "She said only one thing to them 'what direction did you find the rest of his unit?' The sergeant piped up and said 'They were in the hills just to the northeast.' To which she glared at him tensing her arm and readying another blow for the man's ear. 'Señora.' He added quickly. 'That's better, it's good to have respect for your elders mijo.' And she walked off, by herself, into the fighting.

"Well, after three days she found him and a few others and in another day she led them back to the main unit. The other soldiers said that Lou looked like a pomegranate he was so red from the beating. He said it was from the fight, but everyone knew that my mother was the only reason he looked that way. Then she came home, escorted by a few soldiers and with Fidel's compliments." "Your mother scares me," added Connie. "She scares me too," echoed Rene.

“What’s that you’ve been carrying?” asked Connie as she noticed for the first time that Rene had a small parcel under his arm. “Oh, nothing. Just something I need to drop off later. Let’s head to the movie, and after how about an ice cream?” “Oh, yes, that would be wonderful,” Connie answered.

In the decades to come Connie would never remember the movie but the ice cream would rattle back into her mind even 50 years later.

The vanilla ice cream Rene brought back to their table by the window was already starting to melt in the Havana summer sun. Its sweetness was decadent in the heat. Connie began to lose herself in it and in Rene’s soft stare. “I have to run around the corner real quick,” Rene suddenly interjected. “You enjoy the ice cream and I’ll be right back.” His smile made the interruption to their date seem fine. “Sure,” Connie answered.

As she sat in the window staring off, seeing the people pass by, not so much noticing anything except the sweet cold feeling in her mouth. She thought of what life might be like if she married Rene, where she would work – if she would work or stay home and raise a family. “After all, it’s 1958 I should have the choice to stay home or work, to have kids or not. Of course, I do want kids, at least a few.” Her mind must have wandered for quite some time, she didn’t realize it had been almost half an hour before Rene turned back up. “All finished up?” He asked as he reentered the ice cream shop. “Yes. You were gone awhile.” “Sorry about that, I’m back now. Let’s get you home.”

The walk home was lovely. The sun beginning to set. The Havana summer heat starting to abate. The conversation taking turns here and there and no place in particular. As they strode up the walk Rene kissed her goodnight and left her at the door turning to go. He glanced back at her as he walked away, strolling without a care in the world, and his look filled her with warmth.

The next morning when Connie awoke, still glowing from the night before, her father was sitting in the living room. “You’re not going to work today?” she inquired. “No Conchita, the city is shut down for the day. One of the buildings near El Capitolio was bombed last night.

Castro's guerrillas are growing bolder. I wonder if Bautista is getting worried."

Connie turned and walked back to her room, thinking about Rene's story, his brothers, the package he was carrying, and how close the ice cream parlor was to El Capitolio. The revolution had hit Havana.

A life time later when Connie would tell this story to their grandchildren, she wouldn't mention that Rene would grow to be the most calculated man she ever knew and that the life he led after that day would be far more nefarious than the one she dreamed of, sitting in that ice cream shop, staring absentmindedly out the window.