

the CYPRESS DOME

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the CYPRESS DOME

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The Cypress Dome is an annual undergraduate publication at the University of Central Florida. UCF students who are interested in learning more or wish to submit should see our guidelines at cypressdome.org.

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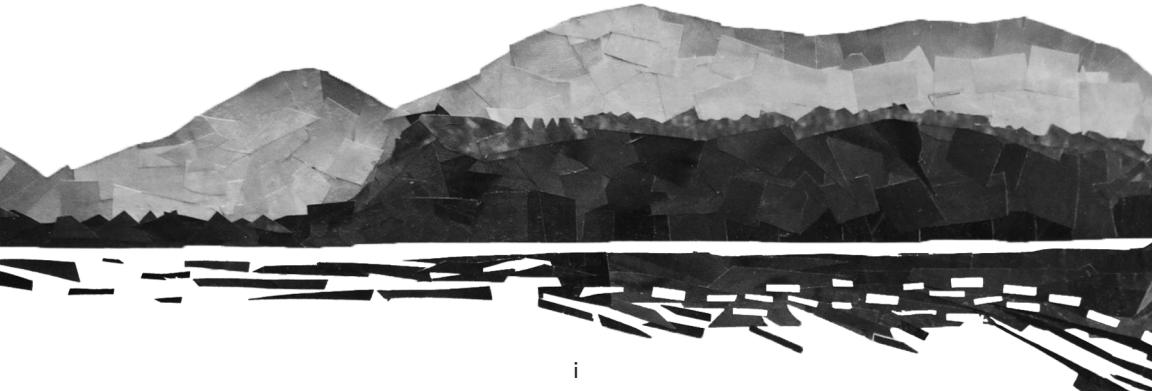
Cypress Dome Society

The Cypress Dome Society (CDS) boasts a wide range of eclectic artists at UCF, just as varied as the Florida weather we wake up to. A literary community on campus, CDS proudly publishes *The Cypress Dome* literary magazine every year, gathering and upholding the stories from our own community. From poetry and nonfiction to scripts and even visual art, CDS accepts a broad range of artistic expression. CDS proudly accepts works from students of all backgrounds, belief systems, and identities, and just as a cypress dome offers an enriching environment in the Floridian wilderness, CDS strives to create an environment that fosters the voices of all UCF students and give them a platform.

The Cypress Dome Society spreads its roots in the UCF community through activities that engage the student body. Our Open Mic Nights offer students the opportunity to voice their written works. CDS also accepts donated books from students and community alike as part of a book sale on campus. Occasionally, CDS even has the pleasure of collaborating with Writers in the Sun to invite authors to speak to our community. All of these events culminate in the CDS launch party at the end of the year where the brand-new issue of *The Cypress Dome* is presented.

The Cypress Dome Society invites all students interested in CDS events to partake! Follow us on our Twitter and Instagram (@cypressdome) for updates. Additionally, submissions for the latest issue open up in fall. For more information about submissions, merch, and CDS in general, feel free to visit our website at cypressdome.org.

— Gian Arellano,
Promotion & Circulation Director





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Letter From The Editor

These days, it seems there is always a fight going on. As individuals, we seem to fight ourselves, battling our minds for a sense of identity and peace. We fight each other, battling for power and freedom. We also fight the world for our right to be. Living in a time where we constantly fight, it's imperative to take the time to connect and start piecing together who we are, who we want to be, and how we want to live.

Close your eyes. Imagine your life like a collage. Every memory and every moment is a small piece to the grand picture of life. Sometimes, we feel out of place, like we're in the wrong puzzle. Like an ugly duckling. But with every added piece of our collage, we begin our transformation.

I now present to you the 33rd Edition of *The Cypress Dome* magazine. The contributors in this edition demonstrate a strong sense of self and growth. The characters of the pieces dare to become more. Despite living in an environment that demands conformity through cruelty, they encourage the reader to follow in their footsteps and embrace who they are. The harsh realities presented reflect our own, reminding us why we fight.

Eventually, there comes a moment when we glance down at the water and notice we've been swans this whole time; not everyone reaches that conclusion as quickly as we might like to. I sincerely hope these stories will help you recognize that.

I would like to say thank you to my editorial team. This edition would not be possible without their tireless efforts. I am so proud to be part of this team and I cannot imagine the magazine's success without all of us.

Now go, dive in. Reflect upon each story, poem, or piece of art. You'll find more than you expect.

Sincerely,
Jaclyn Diaz
The Cypress Dome Editor-in-Chief



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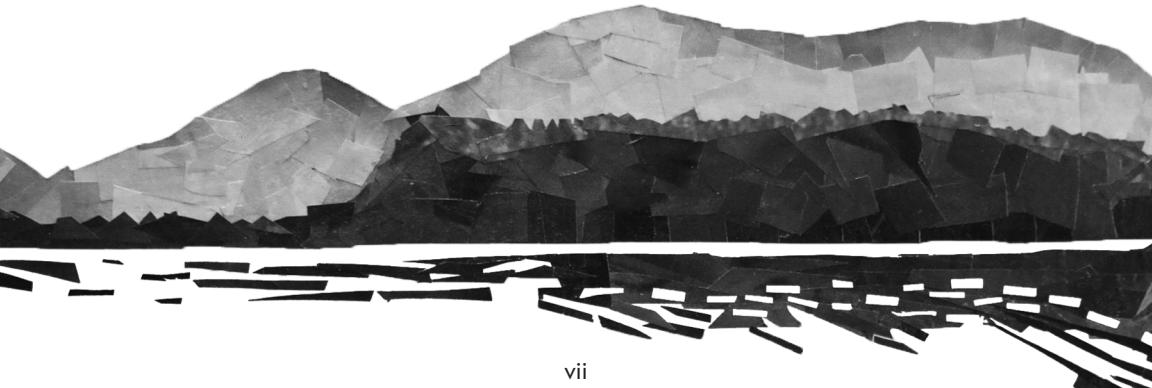
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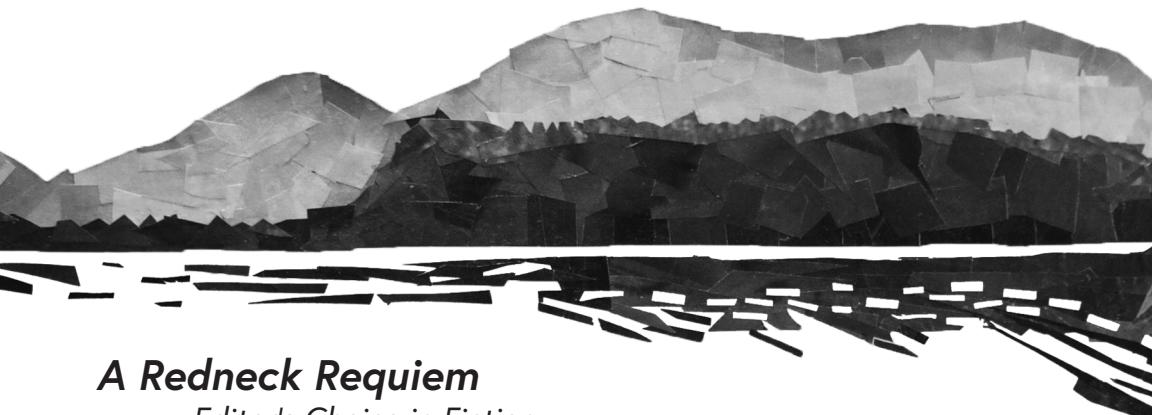
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Content Warnings

In the interest of the mental health and safety of our readers, *The Cypress Dome* staff have included a guide to warn readers of content that may elicit a potentially harmful emotional response. Please see the visual guide below for the indicators of intense topics that are discussed in some of our featured works.

- ❀ Gore
- ✿ Sexual Abuse
- ❀ Suicidal Ideation
- ✿ Transphobia
- ❀ Body Dysmorphia





A Redneck Requiem

Editor's Choice in Fiction

by T.L. Browning

Momma can't tell you when my birthday is. She doesn't remember that my first word was "mercy" because she used to say it when I frustrated her. And she doesn't remember I took my first steps during an episode of *Judge Judy*.

"Nadine, grab my cigarettes," she'd said.

Granny told me I stood right up and marched over to the coffee table, grabbed the pack with my hands, and took them to Momma with the biggest grin on my face. I never asked what Momma's response was—I knew the answer already.

When I left for college, Momma handed me the two surviving photos from my childhood. In the first, I'm sitting in her lap, Granny's taking the picture off to the side. My tiny hands are pressed against Momma's cheeks, her lips puffed out, eyes squinted. She's wearing a multicolored crewneck sweater and dark jeans, her bare feet flat against the shag carpet, her blonde hair teased two inches off her forehead. Her thin fingers are clasped behind my back; I'm wearing nothing but a diaper and a toothless grin.

In the second photo, I'm sitting on the third step of our double-wide's front porch. Dark curls frizzed like a static charge around my head, a sucker stick hanging from the corner of my mouth, and I'm squinting into the flash of the camera. I'm still wearing only a diaper, the bottoms of my feet blacker than the handrails next to me. Momma is behind me, framed by the open front door, snorting a line of cocaine off a torn-up Froot Loops box.

I think of these photos waiting at the four-way stop in Intercession City. A construction crew is turning the stop signs into a streetlight at 12:34 pm on a Tuesday. Traffic hasn't moved for an hour. There are two crowds of people on opposite sides of 17-92, screaming and bouncing homemade signs in the air around the crew working to balance the last pole. On one side, the signs support the transformation—

FINALLY the 21st Century makes it to Hackney. The crowd is full of people I shared bus rides and classes with. I never thought I'd see the people who bullied me for *wanting* to go to school and the people who punched them for bullying me working together—especially for something as insignificant as a stoplight.

On the opposite side of the street, there are familiar faces of authority from my youth. Old Man Picket, who walked up and down 17-92 collecting discarded aluminum cans for recycling, his trademarked toothpick wiggling from the left side of his mouth. Ms. Tuft, the school librarian who knew what I wanted to read before I did, her glasses almost as big as the sign she held over her head. Mr. and Mrs. Vickers, the owners of Hackney's Flower Emporium and my Granny's best friends since grade school, the edges of their signs stained with potting soil. Their signs argue the poles rob Intercession City of its character. The one up front reads *honk twice to send the idgits home.*

No one even lives off the intersection; Intercession City is just a nickname given by the locals since it's the only intersection leading folks out of Hackney. It's widely frequented because it's home to Dossier's Grocery, the fresh produce lot, the yard sale lot, and the only goldmine this microscopic town can claim—the Wawa. Most small towns get the generic Gas N' Sip, but six years ago, a businessman drove through and realized the revenue potential. Four months later, every family who drove through the intersection to get to work or school made daily pit stops.

I moved away four years ago. *Far away.* I didn't fit in here. Instead of sneaking into the back of Ms. Lowery's acreage with friends to go muddin' and drink bad beer, my free time was filled with sitting on the front steps of our double-wide reading novels set in cities this town couldn't fathom. Change isn't a word this town practiced, especially the people. People were fine growing up here, and they were fine watching their babies do the same. Granny always said Hackney sounded like a dinner bell after a long day in the nursery, only to find a fried bologna sandwich for the fourth night in a row. She never could make enough money running Hackney's Flower Emporium to move her and Momma to the next town, let alone an entirely different place.

Momma's back in the hospital; this time, it's meth. Seems the standard painkillers didn't hit the same way as those concocted by random people met deep in the holler of Hackney. Honestly, it took longer than I thought for her to graduate from the minor drugs. She never could stay down for long.

The hospital called me when no one else in her contacts picked up. People in Hackney knew I left with no intention of coming back, especially after losing Granny. Momma gave me those photos for a reason—she knew my road out of Hackney drove in one direction. I was shocked my number was even in her contacts.

"You wanna forget me," she said, handing the photos over, "so here's to forgetting you."

The nature of forgetfulness doesn't quite play by your rules though. What you need to remember exhales from your lungs like its purpose is to keep you alive, but what you want to forget shackles itself to your bones because it never learned to walk on its own.

A honk brings me back to the intersection and I see the crane parked in the yard sale lot; the traffic is swarming the intersection like bees to a hive. I roll straight through the light and honk twice. The crowds on both sides of the intersection throw their signs in the air. I smile at their silent screams and wave halfheartedly as I pick up speed.

As luck would have it, after spending seven hours on the road, two at the hospital with the doctors, and one watching rednecks get upset about modern technology, I get stuck behind someone's grandma as I drive the 20 miles into Hackney to Momma's house. When I finally pull into the driveway, I bottom out in a hole I didn't remember being there and stare at the trailer for what feels like hours before I get out of my car.

Momma named our double-wide Beaucephus; it means *beautiful*, not to confuse it with the popular boy's name. She was painting it, bright green paint trickling down the left side of the front door when she said, *Beauty is biased, Nadine*. I'd just told her Kaitlin Pryor, head cheerleader at my middle school, said our house didn't count as a home because it had wheels. I thought she was the most beautiful thing as I watched her paint. Nobody else on the street named their home, not even Kaitlin Pryor and her family's inherited farmhouse.

The name is chipped now but still bright.

I try the front door's handle before I reach for my key, and it gives with a soft click. The smell hits me harder than the sight of the living room. It's a mix of burnt bread, dirty clothes hampers, and ripe onions. There are moldy plates pushed halfway under the couch, clothing flattened to the curve of the couch cushions, and burns in the carpet resembling the remains of a druggie's version of tic-tac-toe. Other than randomly shaped holes, the walls are yellow from years of unfiltered smoke clouds.

There had once been a china cabinet against the wall that leads to the hallway, filled with Granny's china set her great grandma gave her after her first marriage. A record player used to live in the right corner, a rack of vinyl next to it. The TV that once sat on my old baby changing station was missing, the stacks of VHSs and DVDs gone too. There's only a couch, a love seat, and a lopsided coffee table.

A flick of a light switch tells me the electric company cut the lights at some point since Momma's been in the hospital—maybe even before. I'm confident the smell is coming mostly from the kitchen, so I avoid going in that direction. I head straight for Momma's room to look for some clean clothes.

Momma's bedroom door faces mine. I hated it; part of me still does. The door never seemed thick enough to keep me separated from the world I felt I didn't belong

in. Momma would either sit against my door crying or bang on it so loud I couldn't ignore her. It depended on what high she'd managed to get that night, but either way, I'd feel guilty and open the door. I spent more time saving her from herself than I care to remember.

My door is shut, and the handle is coated in a visible layer of dust. I could make it out even in the darkness of the hallway. I know I shouldn't care; no good memories lived in that room. I spent the better part of my consciousness fighting what Hackney turned my family into. Granny worked until she died at 87 in her sleep, and Momma found too much comfort in the part of town that trademarked leaving town *while* staying put. I used to lock myself in my room and hope the walls would keep me from catching the virus.

I'm standing in the threshold before I can think of another reason why I shouldn't be. Momma's clothes drop from my hands. It hasn't changed. My gray comforter on the twin bed, the two pillows with floral shams. My dresser mirror is covered in the stickers from random events like Hackney's Blueberry Festival and Polk County's Annual Hog Day Parade. The blackout curtains I hung when I was twelve to keep Momma's boyfriends from peeking in my window still ripple slightly in synchronicity with a breeze from outside—the window never set properly in its frame. All the books I couldn't carry to my dorm room are still stacked along every free edge of the room. Everything's coated in layers of dust, like it's some sort of glue keeping things from falling apart.

The only thing out of place is the scattered pile of papers on the floor: different sizes, textures, colors. Momma's handwriting is all over them; it's like she wrote them and then shoved them under the door and pretended they didn't exist. There are paragraphs written on the back of flyers and in the blank spaces of newspapers and magazine pages. Some are even scribbled on napkins with different restaurants' logos watermarking her words. It's a mess of language ranging from coherent conversation to clear deviation from every grammar suggestion imaginable. Every letter begins with *Dear Nadine* and ends with *Your Awful Momma*.

Some are filled with anger. At me moving out, at the world taking Granny, at the town taking the woman Momma thought she'd be. But most are drowning in guilt.

When you were six you crawled in bed with me and asked if Santa thought you were a bad girl. I was coming down from my high and you had alligator tears in those big brown eyes, and I nearly choked on my tongue. I told you Santa would visit you twice next year. But he didn't. Santa used your Christmas money on an eight ball and a pack of menthols.

I reach for another, a ripped piece of newspaper, Momma's handwriting outlining an advertisement for a mulch sale.

Have mercy, Dee, you used to sit on the third step of the front porch reading those damn books. I picked one up today—some poetry book by a guy whose name I can't pronounce. On one of the

pages, you circled something about home—how the word felt broken because you didn't recognize the taste in your mouth. When I found out I was pregnant I dreamed of giving you a world Momma never could afford for me. Funny how worlds work. You buy what breaks you.

I grab a folded Burger King bag.

That college in North Carolina gave you a full-ride eight months ago. I don't open your door anymore. It hurts too much to not find you inside. I never came looking for you at the right times when you were here. I hope you find someone who looks at you like you're a poem in a world full of sentences.

I want to turn back, never twist the doorknob, and run back to the hospital to sit next to Momma's bed and not know any of this.

I'm four days sober today. I did it for you, Dee. I saw that picture of you on Facebook. Smiling on the park bench at your new school. Kaitlin Pryor showed me after she left our dealer's trailer. She said she thought you looked more stuck up than when y'all were in school. I smacked her and walked back home.

The back of a Wawa receipt.

Relapse tastes like expired piecrust.

A napkin with a logo I don't recognize, brown stains sprinkled over the words.

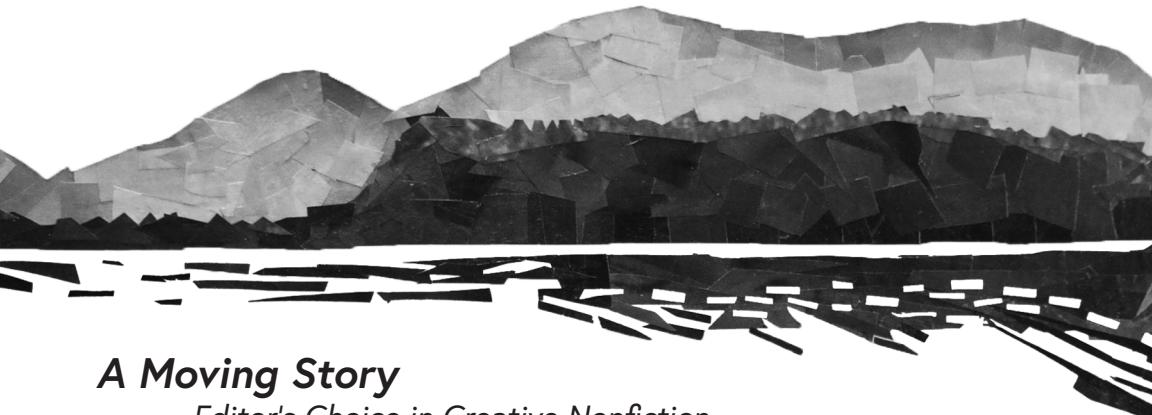
I can't stop. I've broken the one rule I made. NO METH. But have mercy! It feels like thunder in my veins, Dee. Sounds like birds when the sun wakes up. Tastes like that carrot cake Granny used to make from scratch. I broke the only promise I ever made. BOTH promises I ever made. I failed you first.

The letters go on. There's some blame in my direction; she even faults Granny randomly. But mostly, the letters admit her responsibility. They aren't apologies, rather truths she never could say aloud.

I never could get it right. Life, I mean. I'd wake up many mornings and drive to work and stare at that stop sign in Intercession City and wonder what would happen if I turned and headed for the interstate. Would I still be a maid out there too? A druggie? Sitting at another intersection waiting for an answer no one else could give me? It seems all my courage went to you in that delivery room, Dee. You're the only one I know brave enough to turn. Love, Your Anfjal Momma.

On the drive back to the hospital, I hear Momma's voice in my head, like a song on repeat, and no matter how many times you sing along, it just keeps starting over. I get stopped by the new traffic light in Intercession City. I fight the urge to turn into the Wawa and grab a coffee and Kit-Kat Bar. Momma is ten miles and a right turn straight ahead. I could turn left, and a few miles down the interstate could take me back to my life in North Carolina. I could turn right and see if anyone I knew was hanging out on Ms. Lowery's acreage. I could even make a U-turn and head back home—the endless possibilities that lie at the mercy of an intersection.

When the light turns, I keep the wheel straight.



A Moving Story

Editor's Choice in Creative Nonfiction

by Steven Kinzler

Nothing would give me greater pleasure than to tell you I'm the kind of guy who loves everyone he meets, but I'm not. This attitude robs any random slob you might meet of half their potential, and I simply won't have it. This doesn't mean I don't try to find something agreeable in everyone I meet—I do, but let's face it, I'm not Mary Poppins. Actually, that first sentence is a lie; I can think of a lot of things that give me greater pleasure than self-disclosure.

With that in mind, I can tell you it's a good idea to be confident in your relationship before meeting your boyfriend's family for the first time. You are going to be judged not only for yourself, which is fair, but against whatever ideal partner the parent envisioned, which isn't fair, but there you have it. Meeting the family is a fraught situation under the best circumstances and being gay rarely helps. Most parents don't dream of the day their baby brings home a same-sex partner.

Jeff and I waited a good six months before he brought me home to meet his family, and being the good Cub Scouts we both were, we had a final "Be Prepared" session sitting in the car outside Jeff's mother's pale green, low-roofed suburban home.

"It's going to be a full house in there," Jeff said. "My mom . . ."

"Dorothy," I said.

"Yes, and my sister Gayle and her new baby—"

"What's the baby's name?"

"Who cares—it's a baby. And my nephew Kevin. But my mom . . ."

"I know, you told me," I said. "She's a little different. It's going to be okay, I can handle weird." I leaned over from the passenger seat to give Jeff a peck on his cheek.

"You're not gonna do that in front of her," Jeff said, his eyes shifting from side to side.

"Of course not. That's why I'm doing it now. Quit, you're making me nervous."

We were greeted at the door by Jeff's nine-year-old nephew who made no attempt to hide his smirk or his curiosity. I took his hand and gave it a firm shake, "Kevin, good to meet you, sir," while looking straight into his eyes through his thick glasses—winning him over by greeting him like a man and not a little boy.

Kevin turned away. "Grandma! They're here!"

The blinds were pulled against the light and heat of the day, and it took a few seconds for my eyes to adjust. The interior of the house was a sad mix of brown, beige, and more brown. Most of the walls were bare except for a few framed photographs that were all hung too high. In one chair sat a young woman with an open, friendly face rocking a small child in her arms, while Jeff's mother sat next to her daughter in a mismatched chair with her arms folded across her chest. As I approached with my hand out, she gave me a close-mouthed smile and regarded me from top to bottom as I stood before her.

"Dorothy, a pleasure," I said, stepping forward and offering my hand. "Jeff has told me so much about you."

Dorothy stood and took my hand. There was a strange sense of gravitation about her, as if anything that strayed too close would never be seen again. She took my hand while stroking my forearm with her free hand.

"Oh my," Dorothy said in a murky tone somewhere to the left of cordiality. "Hello there." She gave me a wink and a mirthless smile.

Eww . . . I thought, not realizing that it would be a phrase I'd repeat to myself countless times over the next ten years.

* * *

After nearly a decade, you would think that I would have gotten used to Dorothy—and I did, after a fashion. Dorothy was a fact of life, like going to the doctor. You know it's a good thing even though at some point you know you're going to have to drop your pants and bend over. I had come to peace with her being a fixture in our lives, but I was always able to tell myself that she was 50 miles away and didn't drive. The universe was in balance. It's for this reason that the idea Dorothy could soon live less than ten minutes away was as appealing to me as phlegm, but I kept my mouth shut. I was sleeping with her son, and his mom was part of the package.

Dorothy thought she was making a statement when she quit her job a year ago. "They just want me to kiss their asses. Well, you better believe *I* told *them* where to get off! I knocked them right off their high horse, thank you very much! You watch, they'll beg me to come back." A year later, Dorothy's bosses never called. She'd been evicted from her low-roofed rented house and moved in with each of Jeff's sisters before setting new personal records for wearing out her welcome. The only option left, after ruling out matricide, was that it was Jeff's turn—correction, our turn—to take his mother in. Sometimes doing the right thing sucks, don't let anyone tell you

otherwise.

I let out a huge, but mostly silent, sigh of relief when Jeff said that our place would be too small to share with his mother. To be honest, our place could have been three times larger, and it still would have been a problem, but I'm not the type to let an old lady fend for herself, not even one who could suck the life out of the brightest morning, beat it to a pulp, and bury any lingering traces of joy before she even puts on her glasses. We needed to find Dorothy a place of her own, someplace outside the range of her formidable powers of gloom, yet at the same time not too far away in case she got herself into trouble.

* * *

The mustard-colored apartment building was one of hundreds that sprang up in the San Fernando Valley in the 50s and 60s. Two stories, maybe eight units tops, with resident parking in the back. The vacancy was an upstairs studio with a kitchenette that sounded ideal for Jeff's mom. Perfect or not, it was the last apartment we'd see this weekend and we were running out of time—Jeff's sister's "no kidding" deadline to get Dorothy out of her house was closing in fast.

The manager's unit's door stood open to invite in the cool November breeze. Jeff and I cupped our hands around our eyes as we peered through the security screen before ringing the doorbell.

"Looks like an old queen lives here," I said to Jeff from the side of my mouth.

"You'd know, huh?" Jeff side-mouthing back. "This is the last one on the list. Don't fuck it up, okay?"

The living room looked like a cross between a bordello, and well, another bordello. Gold faux-finish marble walls, burgundy velvet drapes, paintings and sculptures of plumed aristocracy, vases of peacock feathers, piles of books—without a doubt, this place had to be a bitch to dust. The archway separating the visible living room from the darker inner portions of the apartment was flanked by twin fluted Corinthian columns. Corinthian columns, in an *apartment*? Seriously? You could say the style was mid-century as long as you make it clear that the century you're referring to isn't this one.

"I can't wait to meet the madam of this cat house," I whispered to Jeff as I pressed the doorbell that rang somewhere deep within the apartment.

"Me too," Jeff whispered back. "I think we may have hit the jackpot."

As far as I was concerned, finding a place for Jeff's mother anywhere within 50 miles of us was as far from a "jackpot" as I could possibly imagine.

"Hello, coming!" The voice came from the back of the apartment, a Marlboro rasp with a whiskey chaser.

An older man came to the door wearing an embroidered half-kaftan that struggled valiantly against his generous belly and ended at mid-thigh, revealing pale, shiny legs.

He unlatched the security door and smiled as his eyes scanned us from face to foot with a quick pause at our crotches. We were being cruised by an expert.

“Richard Trent, pleased to meet you,” the man said, extending his hand. There was something about him that I liked immediately. “Come on in, can I offer you boys a drink?” I liked him even more.

“Hi, I’m Steven,” I said, grasping his hand.

“Steven. A good name. Strong. Based on the Greek, you know. It means *crown*, or more specifically, *one who wears the crown*. Four popes were named Stephen, you know, with the *ph*.” He gave my hand a final squeeze before releasing it.

“Yeah, well, this one’s no saint,” Jeff said, all business.

“Neither were most of the popes.” Richard continued to cruise me before turning his attention to Jeff.

“Jeff. Good to meet you. We were hoping to see the apartment you have for rent. Is it still available? It’s for my mom.”

“Jeff, it’s a pleasure,” Richard said. “You know, your proper name, Jeffrey, has a long history too. It means *divine peace, or peaceful gift*.”

So much for truth in advertising, I thought.

“You know your history,” Jeff said. He didn’t give a rat’s ass for history, but I gave him points for tact.

“Honey, when you’ve been around as long as I have, history’s about all you got.” Richard gave me a sly wink before turning back to Jeff. “So, you’re looking for a place for your mother? Good for you! I’ve always said that a gay son is the best friend a mother can have. How long have you two been together?” We hadn’t even crossed his threshold and Richard had already clocked us. “The studio’s upstairs. Let’s take a look, then we can come back down and get to know each other better.”

The studio unit was small but well-lit and airy thanks to French doors that opened onto a tiny Juliet balcony—doors that Dorothy, fearful of being chased around the room by cancerous sunlight—would never open. The appliances looked new, but Dorothy’s voice was already in my head: *Who the hell likes to cook? I sure don’t, thank you very much.* It wasn’t hard to see why Jeff’s sister was ready to leave her mother hogtied on her front porch for pickup.

Back in his apartment, Richard refreshed our cocktails. The unit was ours if we wanted it, no application, no credit check. Richard said he had a good feeling about us. I breathed a sigh of relief.

“So,” Richard said as he sank back into a plum velvet club chair, “tell me about you two. How long have you been together?”

“Almost ten years,” Jeff said with a quick glance in my direction.

“Oh, that’s wonderful,” Richard said. “That’s about 110 in gay-years. And how did you boys meet?”

“At a bar. Oil Can Harry’s,” Jeff said.

“Oh, my lord, Oil Can’s still around? I haven’t been there in years.” Richard said. “I thought by now they would have torn that den of iniquity down, sown the ground with salt, and had the whole site blessed by a priest.”

“Yep, that’s the place,” I said. “Jeff made the first move. I saw him and thought he was cute, but he was with someone.”

“Just a friend,” Jeff cut in. “The bars in Orange County are tired, so we drove up to L.A., but didn’t want to pay a cover in West Hollywood.”

“That’s news,” I said. “You mean we owe our relationship to you not wanting to pony up ten bucks to get into Rage?”

“Pretty much.”

“An Orange County boy through and through,” Richard laughed.

“Yeah,” I said, “fortunately for him I didn’t hold that against him.”

“I can only imagine what you held against him,” Richard replied. “So, love at first sight?”

“I don’t know about that,” Jeff said, meeting my raised eyebrows with a quick smirk before taking my hand. “Let’s say it was like at first sight.”

“Or at least lust,” I said.

“That too, I guess,” Jeff said.

“I swore off dating younger guys before Jeff came along.”

“But I dazzled you with my maturity.” Jeff leaned over and kissed my cheek.

“And you consummated your affections that night?” Richard asked.

“No,” Jeff said. For some reason, neither of us found Richard’s questions intrusive. “I was my friend’s ride, and I was still living with my mom then, so we exchanged numbers and the next day I drove back up from Buena Park for our first date. We’ve been together ever since.”

“He was worth the wait,” I said directly to Jeff.

“God, you’re so full of shit,” Jeff said with a smile as Richard chuckled. The three of us were already old friends.

Packing Dorothy’s things took almost no time at all. Jeff’s sister had everything packed and waiting for pick up. The drive from La Mirada to North Hollywood should have taken about an hour, but the traffic gods were not smiling as Dorothy sat on the passenger side of a borrowed van with Jeff in the middle between us.

“Can’t we open a window?” Dorothy asked again as she fiddled with the window control.

“Mom,” Jeff said with an edge, “it’s hot out, we’re barely moving, and the AC’s on.”

“Air conditioning dries my throat out.”

"Maybe if your mouth was closed your throat wouldn't get so dry," I suggested as Jeff dug a knuckle into my side. The remainder of the trip took place largely in silence as Dorothy and I exchanged glances at each other in the rear-view mirror. She was smiling at me.

* * *

Dorothy got along with Richard exactly as anticipated. She despised him. She drew first blood when Richard invited her downstairs for a cocktail, an invitation she rebuffed with a tight and smug, "I don't drink, thank you very much." This was a significant faux pas in Richard's world. He licked his wounds for a few days before bringing Dorothy a plate of food as a peace offering, an infraction Dorothy made sure would not go unpunished. "I told that old pervert I don't *like* pork chops!" she told Jeff over the phone. "If he's going to try and kiss my ass, he can at least make something I like! And don't think I don't know what he's doing, acting like he's something special, like I need his lousy food. Just wait, one day I'm going to tell him off but good." In Dorothy's ideal world, everyone would line up around the block to wait for their opportunity to kiss her ass and be told off. The fact that such a line didn't exist only pissed her off more.

On Saturdays, Jeff and I had a standing date to visit with his mom before we hightailed it downstairs to apartment 101 for a late dinner straight from Julia Child circa 1965: clove-studded baked ham, peas poached in crème de menthe, Caesar salad from scratch, potatoes whipped with butter and cream cheese, and lots of cocktails served by candlelight. The subject of Dorothy would usually come up sometime around the third drink, with Jeff making an apology for her latest behavior.

"Jeffrey, there's no reason to apologize. Your mother is who she is," Richard said after we'd retired back to the living room. "I've been all over this country and a good piece of this world. I've met movie stars—Roddy McDowall, now *he* could throw a party—I made good money selling textbooks after I left the service, and whatever else I could sell after they shit-canned me, I had cancer—beat it, two husbands—not at the same time, had my heart broken, and broke a few myself for good measure. I saved enough money to buy this apartment building. I had big dreams, achieved some of them, and toast to the ones I didn't with a vodka on the rocks and a slice of lemon. It takes a lot more than your mom to rattle me."

Richard continued to focus on Jeff. "Now here's the thing about your mother: she was a wild one when she was younger. I know her type, that one has some stories to tell."

"*My* mom? I don't think so," Jeff scoffed.

"Don't interrupt an old queen with his vodka," Richard said, reaching over to pat Jeff's arm. "Do you think your mother sprung out of the womb like she is now with her snatch so tight she could zip it? *Hell no!* She was young once, and pretty, based

on the photo she keeps by her bed—you got your looks from somewhere, blondie. I know her type. She attracted a lot of attention once, but then she got married, had kids, husband up and left her, raised the kids by herself, and now that the kids are on their own, she feels life's passed her by. That woman can't stand not being the center of attention anymore and takes it out on everyone around her. I know because my mother was the same damn way. She's pissed off but doesn't know who to be mad at, so she's mad at everyone." Richard took a long breath and a sip from his glass. "Hell, I can tell you as well as anyone that getting older's no picnic, but there's not a god-damned thing you can do about it but cover the mirrors and get on with living. Only, some people can't, not easily. But she's your mother, so what are you going to do?"

"Love her?" Jeff said.

"What else is there? We have an image of our parents as perfect people, but they're not perfect, they never were, and having kids didn't turn them into overnight saints. You want to know the truth? None of us truly grow up until we're able to forgive our parents for their flaws. Forgiveness is a powerful thing, but you need to manage your expectations. The only person you can change is you, and even that ain't easy. Not everyone's able to do it, but I always say, when all else fails, be kind."

"She doesn't make it easy sometimes," Jeff said.

Richard raised his glass. "I'll drink to that."

* * *

I could tell from Jeff's tone that he wasn't calling to see how my day was going.

"What's wrong?" I asked as apprehension sent tendrils up my spine.

"My mom. She slipped at the hairdresser's. Her hip's broken."

"Oh Jesus." I sighed into the phone and sank back into my office chair. "Where are you now?"

"At the hospital. They just took her in for surgery."

"OK, how are *you* doing?"

"Fine," Jeff said too quickly.

"I'm on my—"

"You don't have to. I'm fine. Just sitting here in the waiting room."

"Great. We can be fine sitting in the waiting room together. Where are you? Kaiser?"

"Yes, thanks." Jeff's voice broke. "Come quick?"

"On my way."

* * *

Dorothy sat upright as the physical therapist tidied the area around her bed before drawing back the curtain and nodding approval for me to enter. I greeted Dorothy with a peck on the cheek and looked around her half of the semi-private room for something to hold the flowers I brought.

"You're looking great," I said. "How are you feeling?"

"Oh, don't hand me that shit, I look like hell," Dorothy shot back.

"Hell it is, then. What's wrong?"

"Everything. That woman," Dorothy said, pointing with her chin in the therapist's direction. "She's a monster. I tell her I don't want to get up, it hurts too much, I don't feel like it, but she makes me do it anyway. And then—and *then*—when I think it can't get any worse, a man," Dorothy's voice dropped to a low whisper, "a *black* man gave me a sponge bath this morning. The idea."

I couldn't help smiling. "Did he offer you a cocktail first?"

"This isn't funny, Steven. You know I don't drink."

"So, I've heard," I said with a mental eye roll. "Look, everyone's job here is to help you get better. You want to get out of here, don't you?"

Dorothy collapsed inward, her back slumping, shoulders rising to her ears. "Sometimes I think I'm never going to get out of here," she said, her small voice holding back big tears.

I've always been a sucker for tears, so I sat next to Dorothy on the edge of the bed. "Listen, don't cry. You have every right to feel this way. Three weeks in the hospital is enough to make anyone stir crazy. You're going to get better, but you need to cooperate with the people who are here to help you. They can't do it alone. You have a role to play in this too, a big one."

"I hate this, and I hate them, all of them."

"No doubt," I said; then I had an idea. "Listen, how about I talk to the staff and make sure they know exactly who they're dealing with?"

I had her full attention. "You'd do that?" Dorothy asked in a conspirator's hushed tone.

"Why wouldn't I?" I said. "Stay here."

"Very funny," Dorothy said, her tears forgotten now that someone was about to get in trouble.

I helped Dorothy scoot herself back in bed before walking out of her room toward the nursing desk. I introduced myself to the physical therapist, a serious but sincere-looking young woman, and asked for an update on Dorothy's progress. The therapist told me what a woman of Dorothy's age and condition should be able to do, compared to the fraction of things she actually did.

"At this point, the patient's attitude is critical for their recovery," the therapist said, carefully choosing her words, "But..."

"Yeah, I know," I said. "She can be a real piece of work." I looked over the therapist's shoulder to see Dorothy intently watching our conversation. "Listen, this is going to sound nuts, but I'm going to point my finger at you a couple of times because she's watching." The therapist gave me a look that told me she understood.

"I really want to thank you for everything you're doing to help her," I said while aggressively thrusting my finger at the therapist, then at Dorothy in her room, then back. "All of you are doing such a good job, we really appreciate it. Thank you so much, and please, don't let her get you down."

"Well?" Dorothy asked as I returned to her room. "What happened? What did you say?" she giggled.

"I told her that we appreciate what she's trying to do, but she better start treating you nicely or she's going to answer to me," I lowered my voice, "and I told her if she didn't like it..."

"Yes?" Dorothy acted like she was being told a bedtime story.

"...she could kiss my ass, thank you very much," I said as Dorothy beamed.

* * *

Richard promised to hold Dorothy's apartment rent-free until she got back on her feet, but after two months in rehab with no end in sight it became clear that no matter what happened, an upstairs apartment was no longer an option.

Jeff's sisters came to help clean out the apartment. No one knew for sure where Dorothy would go once she left rehab, but we all agreed that it wasn't right to continue imposing on Richard's generosity. We worked quietly and efficiently, keeping busy to avoid thinking too far beyond the present moment. Several minutes passed before I realized that Jeff was missing. I found him outside sitting in his car holding the framed photo of his mother from her nightstand.

I opened the door on the passenger side. "Hey."

"I can't do this," Jeff said as a wave of emotion broke across his face.

"Hey, hey, it's okay, it's okay. You don't have to," I said. "There are plenty of hands upstairs. Take all the time you need."

"She's not going to get better, is she?"

"I wish I had a better answer for you, sweetheart, but I don't know."

"What if... what if she... dies? What'll I do?"

I wrapped my arms around Jeff as his body shook with a lost child's sobs. We sat together in his parked car, watching the traffic pass in silence as I held his hand.

"She threw me out when I first told her I was gay," Jeff said as his thumb traced the edge of the framed photo. "I slept at friends' houses—or in my car—for weeks before she let me back in."

"I know." I'd heard this story many times.

"I mean, my sister can get herself knocked up and my mom rolls out the red carpet—c'mon back!—but when I tell her I'm gay, she kicks me out," Jeff said as he shook his head. "She was always doing crazy shit, you know? Getting involved with the Jehovah's Witnesses, keeping us all at home when the church said the world was ending. She'd say if we're all going to die, she wanted us to meet Jehovah together.

Other times we had nothing to eat for days but Kraft mac-and-cheese, but she always made sure we ate.”

Jeff pulled a small plastic bag out of his pocket. “I found this in her kitchen. You know what this is?”

“No. Looks like dirt.”

“It is dirt. My mom eats it.” This was new.

Jeff continued, “She had—still has, I guess—some eating weirdness. When I was a kid, I’d sometimes catch her wetting her finger and sticking it in a baggie of dirt she kept up on the kitchen shelf and putting it in her mouth. I thought it was gross—still do—but she’d wink at me like it was our secret. Maybe she’s got an iron deficiency, who knows?” Jeff let out a weak laugh, a grace note amid his tears. “She’d never tell a doctor; she’d be too embarrassed.”

“That sounds about right,” I said.

“And just now, I’m up in her kitchen putting her stuff in boxes and I find a little bag of dirt that is just so...”

“Her.”

Jeff nodded as fresh tears streaked his face. “Her.”

* * *

Visiting hours were long over, but the hospital didn’t ask Jeff and me to leave.

Dorothy lay open-eyed and unseeing on the hospital bed, her breathing rapid and shallow, skin yellow and damp. Three months earlier she had broken a hip, but that wasn’t what was killing her. She was dying of cirrhosis, the result of an undetected low-grade case of hepatitis that could have been easily diagnosed and treated, but Dorothy didn’t trust doctors and the Jehovah’s Witnesses are hinky about things that have to do with blood. The anesthesia and meds given to her because of the fractured hip overwhelmed what was left of her liver. The diagnosis (*Everyone’s going to think I’m an alcoholic!*) mortified her.

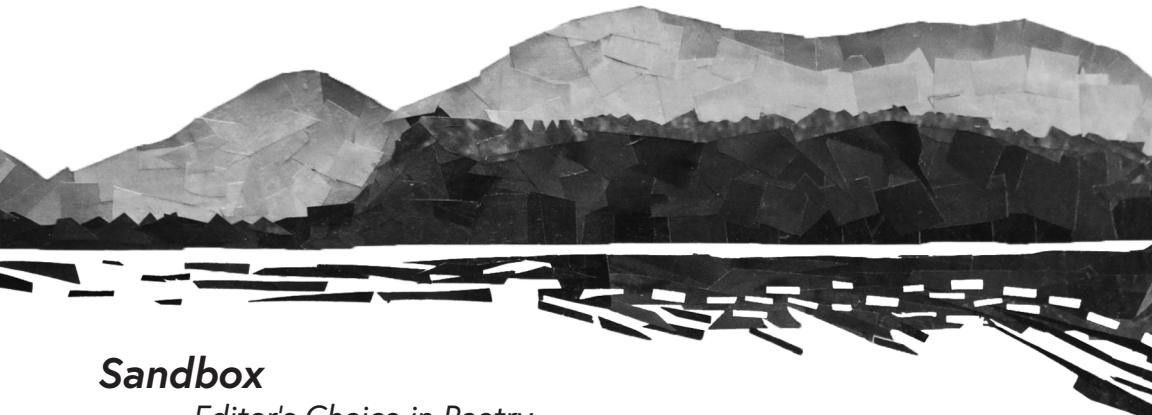
At 4:00 a.m., Jeff snored lightly on the turquoise faux leather waiting room sofa while I took over his station on a hard-plastic chair beside Dorothy in her room at the end of the hall. I didn’t know what to say to her—business as usual for us—but I wanted her to know I was there so she wouldn’t feel abandoned teetering at the edge of the abyss. It took years, but I finally realized that fear drove Dorothy’s resentment toward her adult children. Her fear of being left behind was a chasm that no amount of Mother’s Day cards and Saturday night dinners would ever fill, and the resentment that came with her fear alienated the people she most wanted to hold close.

I took her hand. “Dorothy, I’m sorry this is happening to you, and I’m sorry we didn’t always get along. I hope you can forgive me. We’re both pretty hard-headed, huh? I want to thank you for Jeff. He’s hurting bad, but he’s going to be okay, I’ll make sure of it. He’s resting now, but he’s been here by you all night. You did good with

him, with all your kids. You should be proud.”

My voice grew thick. “It’s got to be so hard to let go. I can’t imagine, Dorothy. I don’t know how any of this works, or even if there’s anything at all after this, but just in case, if you see a guy who asks you to come with him, don’t be afraid. That’ll be my dad. I just had a dream about him before Jeff woke me up to come be with you. He seemed to be looking for something, for someone, and I think he might be looking for you. He’s an okay guy when he isn’t drinking, and knowing you, you’ll probably think he’s cute, but it’s okay if you want to keep that our secret. Take your time, and when you feel you’re ready, just go with him, okay? He already knows the way. He’ll keep you safe, and if he doesn’t, you tell him for me that he can kiss your ass. I love you, Dorothy.”

I sat for a while longer holding Dorothy’s hand, listening to her shallow, rattling breath. I didn’t realize that Jeff came in until I felt his hand on my shoulder. I covered his hand with my own and rested my head against his forearm as we waited for dawn to break.



Sandbox

Editor's Choice in Poetry

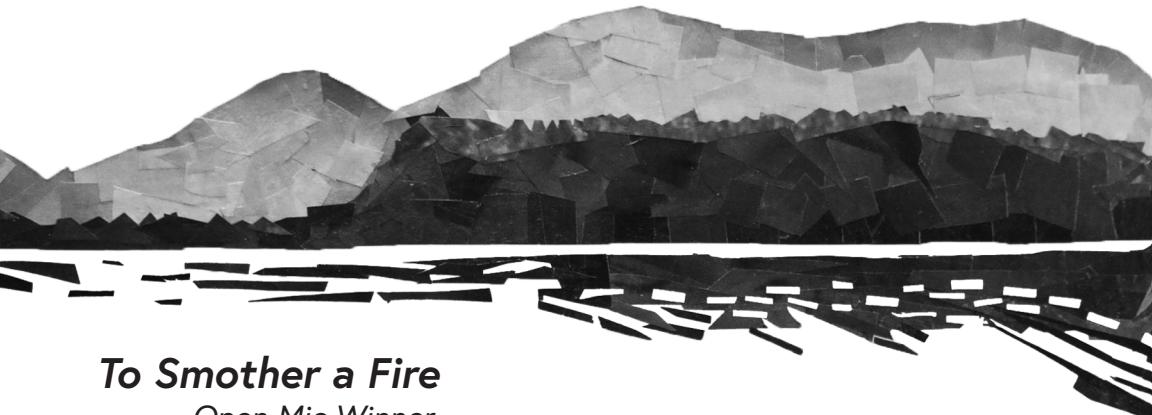
by Addison Blumstein

The sun pricks at my skin
through the leaves of an oak.
I hear squirrels wrestle up above,
showering me in debris and pollen.
I heave my hands beneath the sand,
scratch the tip of my nose,
licking salty grains off the bed of my lips,
and crunch between my molars.

Kids with dirty knees rush by my teachers,
ignoring their howls as recess ends.
My yellow shoes hold dirt for me
as I carry worms between my fingers,
and lay them in my sparkly purple bucket.
They squirm in the cold plastic
desperate to dig themselves deeper.

I bring them to concrete as their new home
glimmer in daylight and they dance
until their bodies run dry in heat.
I nudge each one, but they stay asleep.
I nourish them with juice.
They drift in a sweet pool,
until I tuck them into a bed of soil.

I hope they will wake up soon.



To Smother a Fire

Open Mic Winner

by Delilah Morales

Have you ever loved anything so much, you wanted to cry?

The small child asked with the tattered paper airplane in his hand.

I've never given much thought to the things I loved. They always fled too quickly—slipped between my fingers like smoke escaping between the valleys of outreached fingers.

A soon-to-be-gone rendition of what I could not have.
What I could not keep. What was never truly mine.

In truth, there is cruelty to this fate. To love so dearly, so desperately in fear.
Fear of loss, fear of consumption.

Love was the “never to be” impossibility. The promise that hung loose in the air,
like how a paper airplane taking flight might catch wind
and never make its descent.

Stifling and full of pride. Unable to bend or kneel. And though, I've seen it destroy
lovely things. I could not help but marvel at the finite nature of it. Love.
It was only bewitching so long as it ceased.

Is that why you stopped? Loving, I mean.
And it was curiosity that plagued his face this time.

I suppose so. It is easier to kill a flightless bird before it truly soars. A beast before
it is fully grown. Rather than nurture and raise this spiteful creature—I killed it,

at any chance I could. I smothered the fire before it could burn me, held it
beneath the crash of the waves, and drowned it in my own loneliness.
My own self-loathing.

He giggled. *You're mean.*

True, an arrogant and selfish mistress I might have been, but I preserved what little hope I could.
I lived despite the beckoning call of love's malice. I went on, I lived.

You survived.

His eyes thinned, he was thinking, mulling over my words in his own inexperience.
I survived! I did!

And now?

Now. Now there is this...silence. Yes, this silence.
The clamor and roaring drove me to the edge of an exceptionally dark abyss.

But now, it is gone. Love has lost.

No, love has not lost. It is not gone. It is my constant companion.
The devil that sits patiently on my shoulder. A wicked smile—as if to taunt my very soul.
My spirit remains uneasy beneath the weight of its fallacy.

Fallacy?

The creation of love's design. Shaped to remind me of what I've lost.
What might have been mine had I chosen love.
Had I chosen a settled love.

But I know love is war, and I am damn tired of sacrificing my sanity
for the sake of a little less loneliness in this universe!

Listen, kid, I am caught between a rushing tidal and a tempest set ablaze.
I must suffocate these raging flames. Strip them of air and breath. I must resume my practice.
I must remember how to smother a fire.

The boy watched me carefully. And with his broken innocence and pity for my spirit...
he cried with the torn paper airplane in his hand.



Begging For Change

Sculpture (PLA plastic, resin, pulverized beer bottles,
spray paint, spackle, hot glue)

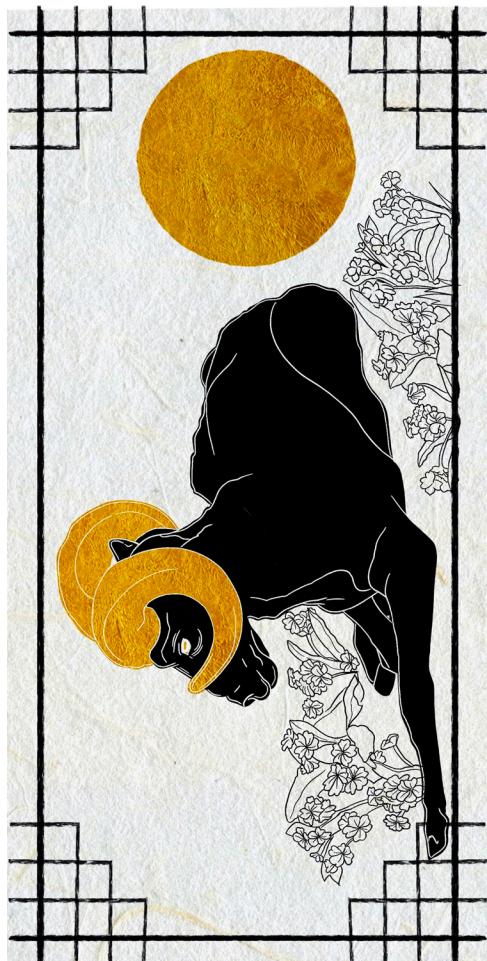
Jim Wysolmierski



Dragon & Tiger

Digital

Madison Banish



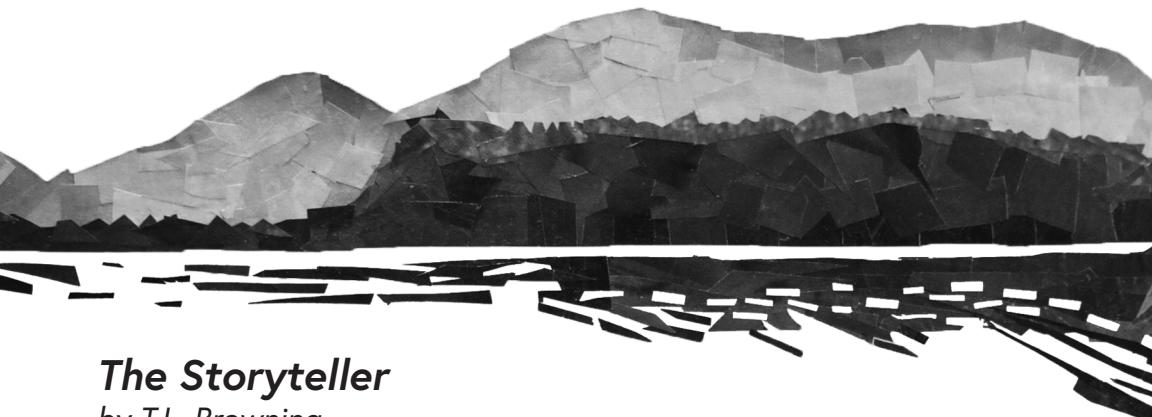
Rabbit & Ram
Digital
Madison Banish



Guitar

Charcoal

Zofia Martin



The Storyteller

by T.L. Browning

We've been living in our car for a little over two weeks. Pepaw in the driver's seat, Memaw in the passengers, and me outlined by our duffel bags in the back hatch of our Chevy Blazer. We're homeless, but not poor; we just can't afford rising rent costs in a city that's warped into the tourist trap capital of the state. What used to be one amusement park turned into two. When two competing forces of overpriced entertainment didn't fail to exist within a ten-mile radius of one another, five smaller versions popped up on Main Street. Sprinkled in between are themed mini-golf joints, chain restaurants, and those colorful gift shops that look like a bubblegum machine threw up. If I didn't live here, the strip would look like a place where time is interminable, and responsibilities don't exist.

The summer I turned 16, I put in applications at every building along the strip. I've lived with Memaw and Pepaw on and off my entire life. Before Momma took off with a biker guy from South Florida when I was 11, she'd disappear for weeks, sometimes months, after dropping me at their house for a weekend while she *went out to find adventure*. The signs were usually obvious since she didn't interact with Memaw and Pepaw much, aside from using them as free babysitters. She'd drop me off at the curb with an old grocery bag filled with clothes and tell them, "*I'll be back when I'm back.*" The last time, after she met the biker guy, she sent a postcard three months later explaining she *had* to go where the blacktop took her, and a few other cliché reasons that meant she wasn't coming back for me.

During these visits, Pepaw told me stories of how I wasn't really Momma's daughter. Without my telling him, he knew I felt responsible for her leaving. I always felt like shackles missing the master key, keeping Momma chained to a life she never wanted.

"Now, Gracie, I know you think you're human," he said once, "but did I ever tell

you about the day the mothership dropped you off by the farm's gate?"

Pepaw's stories became my emergency parachute. I've buried myself in books for as long as I can remember; the more out-of-this-world, the better. Whether the story had a happy ending or not, there was sense to the pages. I lived vicariously among them—subconsciously at first, and gradually on purpose. Shutting a book felt like jumping out of a plane but never reaching the ground. I just kept falling and falling until another caught me. That was when Pepaw came in with one of his wild stories, waiting for the moment I got that look on my face, like I finally had solid ground under my feet.

"See," he continued, "it was a bit shady, these green-eyed tentacle creatures dropping off a curly-headed human. You didn't look a *thing* like them, so, I'll admit, I was thankful for it."

He'd wait for me to laugh here, and I always did.

"I think I would've learned to love ya, but I don't know what boy I'd pawn you off on eventually who could overlook tentacles."

Sometimes I was an alien, and sometimes I crawled from the woods in the back corner of the farm. One time, I'd just appeared in the living room when Pepaw said he wanted a helper at his mechanics shop who didn't talk his ear off. I knew it was all fiction, stories to make me feel less lonely. Still, I liked the concept of being a multitude of different things—different origins, different ideas—because it was better than being abandoned.

Less than a year after Momma left, Pepaw was in the hospital post-triple bypass after having a heart attack driving me to school one morning. He recovered, but lost his shop and, eventually, the farm he inherited in his mother's will. Even his health insurance couldn't stop the bills from coming. After a month in the hospital—with complications following the surgery—and being forced to rely on one employee at the shop, it just made sense to sell it and try to make ends meet with the profit and Memaw's cleaning business.

I learned early nothing hits harder than bad timing.

I graduated two years ahead of my class through the state's virtual home school program. I'd convinced Memaw and Pepaw to let me transfer out of public school because I couldn't stand kids my age. Really, I wanted to because I blamed myself for Pepaw's heart attack since he'd been driving me to school when it happened.

Now, Pepaw's driving me to my interview at Phantom's Spectacular Standstill Carnival, and I celebrate getting my diploma in the mail with an apple fritter and a watered-down iced coffee from 7/11. The little joys in life really are sugarcoated.

I chew on the inside of my cheek as we get closer to Phantom's.

"Did I ever tell you about the time your uncle Ricky stole a clown's costume from

a circus we took him to back in the ‘80s?”

He had, but I know better than to say otherwise. This is his attempt to calm my nerves.

Story goes, Uncle Ricky had *begged* to go to the circus after getting an A on his math test. He’d been struggling with long division all year long, and Ms. Hartsfield, his third-grade teacher—from hell, he’d argue—told him if he failed, he’d have to go to summer school. Well, Uncle Ricky didn’t *do* summer school, so he divided every number thrown at him until his test, and he thought he deserved a reward.

“What kid hears *reward* and thinks *clowns*?” Pepaw says now. “It’s the only time I questioned the paternity.”

I roll my eyes at the same line I used to laugh at when I was younger.

Anways, Uncle Ricky had *begged* to go to the circus to see the Funky Clown Assembly. After the first act, when the acrobatics show had taken center stage, he ran to the bathroom.

“He passed a math test, Gracie, not a reading test,” Pepaw says, merging into the turn lane.

Uncle Ricky wound up in the performers’ bathroom instead of the guests’ bathroom, directly behind the big top. He went about his business, and when he walked out of the stall, he saw one of the Funky Clown’s suits on the sink.

“He said it was fate for him to become a clown.”

So, instead of washing his hands, Uncle Ricky stole the suit. He stuffed it under his Power Rangers shirt and bolted for the parking lot. My grandparents found him there, frantically scanning the lot for the security officer he just *knew* had followed him.

We’re pulling into Phantom’s when I think of something I’d never asked the other times I’d heard the story.

“What did he do with the suit?”

Pepaw laughs. “He kept that thing for years. He’d put it on when he got bored and stand in the kitchen window while your grandma was doing dishes or at the edge of the barn when your Momma was feeding the chickens.”

I laugh. “And you questioned him being your son?”

Pepaw smirks as he parks.

Instead of letting the Blazer idle, Pepaw cuts the ignition and gets out with me.

“You gonna walk around while I’m in there?”

He shakes his head. “I have an interview at 11.”

I’m trying to keep stride with him and find the right words at the same time. The whole point of me getting a job was so he didn’t have to, so I try to find the best way to tell him that without making him feel useless.

“Now,” he says, tucking in his shirt and flattening his collar, “don’t go embarrassing me in there. I know you haven’t quite gotten bona fide yet—you just got all that fancy

book learning, so you don't know what it's like in the working world. But you can't go in there with them big ol' words and think you're gonna outshine this seasoned vet."

He winks his blind green eye, still fidgeting with his shirt. He's nervous. He's been retired since his heart attack, and I can see the anxiousness thrumming off him like he's creating a new wavelength.

"I didn't tell you," he explains without me asking, "because I didn't want you to stress it. *You're* working to save for college. *I'm* working to get us back on our feet."

He frowns when I don't say anything, and I think of how he opened his mechanics shop a few blocks from the farm to have something he built himself to be proud of. He loved walking in and out of that shop, and it showed in how he took care of the people who trusted him with their cars. His shop was the place to go because he didn't sell you something you didn't need. He knew how everything worked and how to get it to work *again*. I can't imagine what he felt signing the papers over to the buyers, but I'm sure it didn't feel as bad as walking into a minimum wage job and trying to compete with teenagers for a chance to operate a water race game.

My interview is at 11:15, so I wait outside the hiring trailer as Pepaw walks in for his. I sit on a bench and take in the carnival from the back of the park. The striped red and white big top tent stands in the middle, the rides, game booths, and food stands spread from there like a glittering spiderweb ready to trap anyone willing to pay six dollars for a corn dog and five dollars to pop balloons to win a stuffed animal. It's a compact circle full of sugar, grease, and warm lights—the perfect setting to lure tourists in and keep them spending money on different platforms because their egos get hurt losing potentially rigged games. Phantom's tactic: what better way to coat your wounds than with an Italian sausage and a funnel cake? The consequences looked different under warm lighting and drowned out by the collective screams from the rides scattered about the park.

Even mid-afternoon on a Wednesday, the park is shoulder to shoulder with people. The sidewalks in front of me look like any cliché carnival setting. You have fathers walking around with arms full of colorful stuffed animals, mothers chasing toddlers with wet napkins, and teenagers wearing weird hats they won from the games. It smells like confectionary sugar and motor oil—which I'm assuming came from the rides closest to me titled *Phantom's Ghostly Swing* and *Phantom's Spectacular Cliff Hanger*.

Time seemed to move slower under the Big Top, like carnival time trumped reality. I've always been the observer, but I wonder what it'd be like to run in a flock of people my age and pretend the only thing that mattered was whether I beat everyone at ring toss.

Pepaw walks out of the hiring trailer, lips in a thin line, his blind eye wide open as his one good eye squints into the sun. When he sees me, his face scrunches into the broadest, most childish—and toothless—smile I've ever seen. When he meets me at

the end of the ramp, I see a bag of clothes dangling from his left hand. He brushes invisible dust off his shoulder as I walk toward him.

“How many times do I have to tell you that isn’t cool anymore?”

He ignores me and says, “You’re looking at the new Game Master. I’m the Master of Games, Gracie. The *Master*.” He sweeps his free hand in the air in front of him, bowing dramatically.

I laugh as I swallow my disappointment. I’d hoped they wouldn’t hire him. Not because he *couldn’t* work, but it’s my turn to save him since he’s been saving me my entire life. I want to tell him to walk back in there and tell the manager he’s made a mistake.

“That’s probably where they start everyone,” I say instead.

“Did I ever tell you about the time you couldn’t take being defeated by your senile grandpa?”

“Ha, ha.”

I hear my name called behind him, and I pat him on the back as I ascend the ramp. I walk toward the same guy who had called Pepaw in the trailer earlier. The closer I get, the shorter he appears. He’s wearing a midnight blue Phantom’s polo, black shorts, and has a radio clipped to his belt. When he smiles, I look down at his tattooed arms to avoid looking at his chipped front tooth.

“You got this,” Pepaw calls after me.

I smile without looking back.

Two minutes after walking into the hiring trailer, I walk out the new operator of the Cotton Candy stand. Apparently, “*pretty girls*” help sales in candy stands.

“You’ll be the talk of the carnies,” Chris, the hiring manager, says.

If I wasn’t desperate for the job, I would’ve called him a creep and left.

He hands me the hiring packet and a bag of uniforms. We’re walking down the trailer’s ramp when he nods towards Pepaw. He’s in front of the ice cream stand a few hundred yards from us, licking a vanilla ice cream cone.

“That’s your gramps, right?”

I smile. He looks so youthful, even with cracked skin and a slight slouch to his spine. He walks like he’s 15 and ready to bolt a marathon at a moment’s notice. When he sees me, his gummy smile returns, and some ice cream drips down his chin.

“Yeah,” I answer Chris.

“He’s a prime elder.” He must have seen my forehead wrinkle in confusion because he quickly continues with, “People don’t argue with old folks at the game trailers. Gramps looks like he’s seen a spin or two around the world, so we’re confident the kids will be comfortable with him, and the parents won’t complain much about the games being rigged.”

“Are they?”

His smirk tells me all I need to know.

“If it’s possible,” I say, stopping at the end of the ramp so Pepaw can’t hear me, “can we work the same shifts? We only have one vehicle right now, and my grandma needs it for her cleaning business.”

Chris nods, pulls a pen from his polo pocket, and writes the request on his forearm, above a tattoo of a woman in a tight sailor’s outfit.

“See ya Friday, then.”

I’m walking away before he can change the subject, and even as creepy as he’s been the entire interview, he knows following me to where Pepaw is waiting isn’t an option.

Back at the Blazer, I pop the latch to the back window. I reach into my duffel bag and pull out the jeans and t-shirt I left on top for easy grabbing.

“I’m gonna change before we pick up Memaw,” I say, heading back into the carnival as he cranks the engine. “I’ll be quick,” I say.

I’m back in under ten minutes, and I find him sitting in the Blazer, bobbing his head to a Johnny Horton song on his favorite oldies station. He looks relieved, like getting this entry-level job solved every problem since his heart attack. I wish I could smile, but I feel a twist in my chest, like someone took an ice chipper and plunged it into my heart and decided they wanted to wiggle it around for good measure.

I want to fix what I broke, but I know he’d work five jobs before he let me believe any of this is my responsibility.

“Did I ever tell you about the time your Momma told me she saw a snake in my spittoon?”

I smile, slamming my door shut. He has, but I let him tell me again.

At the end of my shift on Friday, I’m cleaning up piles of sugar around the cotton candy spinners and trying to breathe after ten hours of being asked the same questions over and over.

“Would you like a bantam or spectacular size bag of cotton candy?”

I had to explain more times than not what *bantam* meant.

“What phantom flavor for your sno-cone?”

The flavors are considered *phantom* because they don’t have food coloring.

“Caramel apple with or without a skeleton?”

This meant with or without nuts.

Everything at Phantom’s is *spectacular* because that’s the marketing tactic. And even though I had to explain everything a million times, people *did* buy. Annoying, but genius.

“Your gramps made a killing in the *Shoot Out the Star* stand tonight,” Chris says, coming in the stand’s back door. He’s holding a clipboard of papers and heads straight for the register to count the cash.

I smile but keep working.

“He kept telling this story about how he got shot in the eye with a BB gun when he was a kid.”

This time I laugh. “He loves that story.”

How fitting they place him in a game where he gets paid for one thing and gets to do what he loves the most, simultaneously.

“It’s true?”

Chris seems more shocked than I expected, especially since it’s difficult to miss Pepaw’s blind eye. The iris is still green, slightly lighter than his good eye, but the entire thing looks like it’s coated in a sort of impenetrable fog. He used to tell me that’s what happened when I didn’t eat my broccoli. I remember saying I’d rather have a foggy eye than eat baby trees.

“Pepaw doesn’t lie about his stories,” I say.

It’s true, but I forget others don’t know him like I do. They didn’t grow up listening to him talk, so they think of him as a lonely old man spilling stories like a fountain because he has no one else to talk to. But it doesn’t matter what happens; he has a story for everything. Short stories, long stories, even epics sometimes. He loves sprinkling in the few stories he has about meeting people like Burt Reynolds on a road trip with his brother out west, and Clint Eastwood when he was gassing up on the interstate before heading to the shop a decade or so ago. He has stories from his childhood where he lived in a three-bedroom house with 12 brothers and sisters and how he dodged the draft because he has seven older brothers, and he’s the only one who made it past seventh grade.

I’m the only person he makes stories up for, and that’s because he knows fiction makes more sense to me.

“His brother Raymond got a BB gun for his thirteenth birthday,” I tell Chris now, “and Pepaw didn’t know the gun was loaded when he jumped from behind a tree in their front yard. He only wanted to scare him, but he also didn’t think Raymond would have such good aim.”

Chris’ mouth hangs open, a stack of bills from the register frozen mid-count in his hand.

“He bled for hours in the emergency room, and by the time the doctor got to him, the wound had already clotted. His parents couldn’t afford surgery—let alone a glass eye. So, he wore a patch for a few months before—and this is a direct quote—he got ‘sick of being a pirate.’” I shrug. “Wanna hear something gross?”

He nods eagerly, still holding the bills from the register. His chipped tooth is visible from the gap in his lips—he stares unblinkingly at me until I continue.

“Sometimes,” I say, each syllable rounded out for dramatic effect, “you can see the BB roll into the green of his iris. Doctor says it’s impossible, but I’ve seen it myself.”

Of course, I haven't because it *is* impossible, but the look on Chris' face would have made Pepaw proud. Any storyteller worth their words knows the details—particularly the exaggerated ones—must be meticulous in guiding the story. Pepaw likes to tell the truth because it's comfortable for him. I use the truth like a trampoline because that's how I've survived an ordinary life.

"They never extracted the BB?" Chris asks.

I shake my head.

"Amazing."

"He really is," I say before heading out the back door to take the trash out.

I see Pepaw and the other game operators at the ring toss game on the way to the dumpster. They're working to cover the pool of floating pins with a tarp as Pepaw's telling them about the time he saved Uncle Ricky from my great-grandma's crazy duck.

"Don't get me wrong," he says, "Ricky instigated it, but the duck always finished it."

The guys laugh.

"Ducks typically aren't hostile creatures, but most people don't know they have teeth lining their upper beak and the sides of their tongue."

Story goes, Uncle Ricky—having grown up in a time without Google—wanted to check the theory one day. Before, he'd settle with scaring the duck when he saw him on the farm and chased him back to the retention pond in the back corner of the land, all the while laughing an evil laugh that rang across the farm's acreage like a sharp dinner bell you couldn't turn off.

"His grandma," Pepaw continues, "warned him not to taunt the damn thing. But telling a boy not to do something practically guarantees he does."

The guys laugh again, clearly from experience.

"So, he grabs this duck while it's sleeping one day."

And when Uncle Ricky had its beak half-pried, the duck snapped into panic mode. The duck flailed his wings to break Uncle Ricky's hold on him and started hopping up and down on his feet, grabbing whatever limb or part of clothing he could catch in his beak.

Pepaw's old man laugh echoes under the ring toss tent. "Ricky comes running from the pond, legs moving so fast he looks like Roadrunner fleeing from Wile E. Coyote."

And instead of running toward Uncle Ricky, Pepaw waited on the porch for him to get there, laughing so hard he thought he broke his lungs. When Uncle Ricky made it to the porch, Pepaw scared the duck off with my great-grandma's straw broom. Apparently, the duck's biggest fear was a bundle of dead grass.

"The duck never forgot," Pepaw says now. "And even after we moved into the

farm a year later, it took *years* for the thing to die.”

Uncle Ricky used to say it lived to haunt him, and even after it died, he swore he saw its ghost near the pond’s edge, ready to attack if he got too close.

“Hey, Pepaw,” I say, passing the tent as they cut the twinkle lights hanging from the edges.

“Guys, this is my granddaughter, Gracie.”

We exchange names, and I forget them by the time I reach the dumpster. All I can think is how bright Pepaw looked, telling his stories to strangers who don’t know they’ve been told so often their invisible spines are as wrinkled as his face.

I’m on break after an unnecessarily long night spinning red, white, and blue cotton candy for Phantom’s Fourth of July celebration. Pepaw and I were scheduled doubles today since we’re the only two who won’t complain about extra work.

It’s so hot outside, even the stick I spin the cotton candy on starts to wilt as soon as it passes through the stand’s window. After finding the window AC unit in the break room broken, I hang my polo in my locker—so I don’t get flagged down by a customer—and take my pineapple slushie on a walk around the park.

After a few months of working here, I can spot the difference between a local and a tourist in less than a second. To a typical bystander they look nearly the same, because if the locals come here, they’re pretending they’re tourists—this is a blending tactic, so they feel less guilty for falling for the gimmicks spun by carnies. They’re the easiest to spot near the games. While the tourists shoot their shot—be it the water race, darts, or ring toss—the locals hover like cunning shadows on the sidelines. They believe they’re building a strategy when, really, the games come down to chance. You either get the water gun without the crooked pressure point or the one partially sharp dart, or you don’t.

Pepaw’s at the *Phantom’s Doomed Waterfall* game tonight, and I can hear his voice trailing up the sidewalk three hundred yards away.

“Timmy the Tank on 13 is gonna smoke y’all!”

The tacky music is loud and invasive as I approach the stand. I see the shift manager, Scott, sitting on the picnic table on the other side of the sidewalk, watching Pepaw’s game.

“Break?” Scott asks as I climb up next to him.

I nod and sip my slushie.

Pepaw’s leaning so far over his station ledge to hand Timmy the Tank his prize he nearly falls in the water pit below. And he pretends to, after Timmy the Tank snatches his neon green T-rex. He gains a crowd-size laugh at the performance.

“He’s so natural it should be illegal,” Scott says.

“No truer words have ever been spoken.”

Scott took over Chris' position a month ago when Chris was promoted to General Manager. After weeks of being covertly—and not so covertly—hit on by Chris, I welcomed the change. Scott's quiet, and he does his job, but he also doesn't force me to talk when we're around each other. When I'm cleaning the Cotton Candy stand and he's counting the register, it's up to me to guide a conversation, just like now.

"Pepaw told me you asked about the BB," I say now, giggling under my breath.

A few weeks ago, he'd overheard Pepaw telling a customer at the *Shoot Out the Star* game about his BB gun story. It's the only time Scott started the conversation in my stand at the end of the night.

He rolls his eyes. "I felt like a freaking idiot when I asked him to shake his head a bit so I could see the BB."

This time I laugh so loud I nearly choke on my slushie.

I'd convinced him Pepaw's blind eye was like a Magic 8 Ball, and if Pepaw shook his head enough, the BB would roll from one side to the other.

"He asked me if I was dumber than a box of rocks at a cloud convention, Gracie. What does that even mean?"

I laugh so loud now it's disturbing. I get strange looks from passing customers.

"You certainly inherited his storytelling gene."

I shrug, unable to deny it.

Pepaw spots us from his stand and waves as he tries to draw in another crowd to fill the guns, but the passing people aren't biting.

"You know," he says now, "if I was a half-plucked chicken, y'all wouldn't be able to ignore me."

The smile on my face is involuntary.

"Storytime," Scott murmurs, leaning back into his palms. It's almost like he's been sitting here waiting for this moment.

"That's how I met my wife," Pepaw continues, the microphone threading his voice through the crowd.

An older couple, holding the hands of their two grandchildren, stop to listen.

"See, it was my wife's fault the chicken got out of the coop. We all had our jobs at the chicken farm. I was the Plucker, and my wife—as I've come to learn is a fitting title—was the Butcher."

This story is my favorite because if Memaw hadn't let that one chicken slip through the gate, she never would have chased it into the field where Pepaw plucked the dead chickens.

"The chicken ran so fast," Pepaw says, cackling the words, "its feathers flew behind it like New Year's confetti in Times Square."

Both Memaw and Pepaw hated their jobs because, back then, poultry farms had far fewer regulations than they do now. They both came from lower-income families,

though, so they couldn't afford to be picky.

"It was the sign we both needed to quit," Pepaw finishes now. "And if she hadn't given me a concussion when we both dove for the bird at the same time, I might still be working there. But I'm not! Instead, I'm luring you in with my weird love story, and now you guys owe me a game."

He points at the first older couple to stop, convincing them to let the kids play a round, and then he easily fills the other seats with similar sly tactics. A minute after the story's close, every seat at the race game is full.

Scott slides from the picnic table as he tells me he has to get back to his rounds. I still have fifteen minutes left on my break, and I sit and wait as Pepaw baits another crowd with a story about Uncle Ricky and his failed attempt to get into clown college.

It's astonishing how he can captivate a group for a game that has nothing in common with the story he tells. When he tells his BB story at the *Shoot Out the Star* game, it fits the theme, but what does a half-plucked chicken have to do with a target game? Nothing. Absolutely nothing. And that's why the *story* is what matters, not where it's told.

* * *

At the end of summer, we're both given large enough bonuses to help pay for a small house on the west side of town, away from the tourist rentals. It's the only time I've been able to convince Pepaw to let me help him financially. Between Memaw's cleaning business and Pepaw regularly putting in overtime at Phantom's, the question of where we'd end up transforms from theory to fact.

A bigger question haunts me when Pepaw dies in his sleep a few months after we move in. There's no preface, no foreshadowing, nothing. He just goes to sleep and doesn't wake up. As the paramedics gently carry him down the front porch steps, I wonder where all his untold stories go. Will they turn to ashes with him, or will they sit in a space waiting to be told by someone else?

Everyone at Phantom's comes to the funeral. Not only do they close the park for the service, but some of the younger guys who followed Pepaw around, like less wrinkled shadows, act as pallbearers. Uncle Ricky never returned Memaw's calls, and we didn't know where to *start* looking for Momma.

At the wake, Scott comes up to me and asks if there's anything we need him to do. I tell him everything's been covered by the insurance policies Pepaw had been offered by Phantom's when he went full-time a month after being hired. It's the first time since I've lived with them that the bills didn't bury us.

Memaw walks up then. "Thank you for being a pallbearer. I know it's what James would have wanted." When I hear Pepaw's legal name, it feels odd in my ears.

He nods, fidgets with the buttons of his suit jacket, and blinks away a tear. "We have something for you both," he says.

Scott walks to the refreshment table against the wall and pulls something from behind the tablecloth. He motions for the group to gather closer and puts a frame in my hands.

Under the gloss of the glass and enveloped inside a red and white striped border there's a picture of Pepaw in his blue Phantom's polo. He's smiling a toothless grin so wide his squinted eyes look like another set of wrinkles on his aged face. In gold print under the picture reads *Phantom's Unparalleled Storyteller*.

"Gramps meant more to us than we can say," Scott says now.

"We'd hired him intending to let him go after summer," Chris adds, "but he refused to be minimized to part-time help."

Everyone laughs, even Memaw.

"We can't bring him back, but we can preserve what he gave us."

Scott's voice cracks a bit near the end of his sentence. I bite the inside of my cheek to fight my tears. Like a gallery of grief, everyone in the room shares something that makes us more than people whose paths crossed because we took a job at an amusement park. We're caught in a story far more profound than any book spine I've cracked open.

"We were building a tent for him," Scott continues. "We were going to surprise him with it at the beginning of October, for his birthday."

I smile. "You guys were gonna give him his own game?"

"No," Chris says.

I look up, clearly confused.

"The tent is for his stories," Scott finishes. "We were arranging nightly showtimes, themed as he saw fit."

I stare at the frame in my hand. A tent for unparalleled storytelling.

"He would have loved it," I say, and I don't even exaggerate.

"Now, we want to offer you the job."

My head snaps up as I go to decline. I wasn't a born storyteller; I just kept stories told to me hidden in my bones to make life less solitary. Pepaw was a natural storyteller because the way he told his stories always made their reality better.

Scott doesn't let me speak and says, "This is how we keep him alive."

Memaw wraps an arm around my waist and whispers in my ear the truest thing I've ever heard. "You know the stories better than anyone."

I did, and Pepaw would want them told.

I've been telling Phantom's stories for seven years now. I have a tent with LED lights I can change the brightness on a whim. There are fans to make the tent walls ripple, and soundbars nailed to the bottom of the wooden pews where the guests sit for surround sound. My stage is everywhere the guests don't sit; sometimes, I even

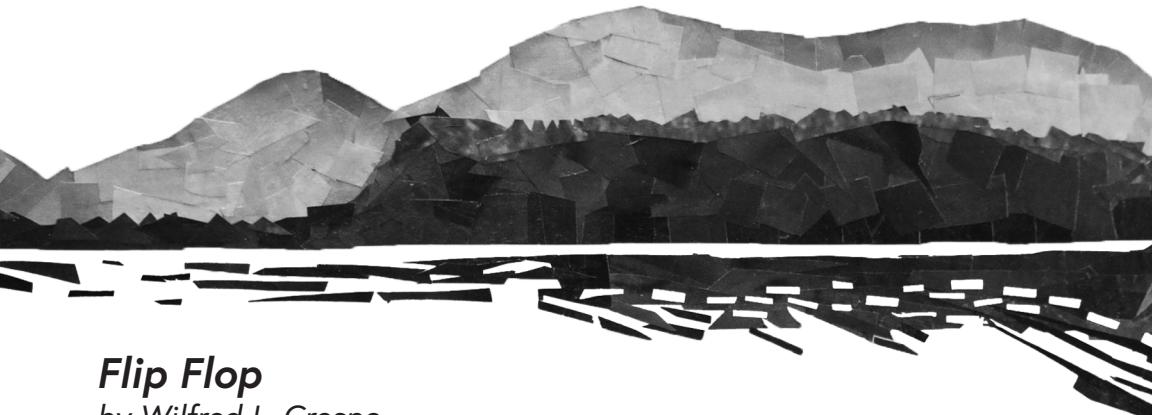
swing above them from the steel beam holding the tent up. It's a storyteller's paradise.

I started with Pepaw's stories. The ones about Uncle Ricky and his duck archnemesis. The ones about Momma's sheer lack of enthusiasm as Pepaw made a scene when she had to be picked up from the principal's office a couple of times a year. And even the ones about a strange, reclusive granddaughter who showed up on a mothership the same afternoon Pepaw begged for a worker who didn't sass him.

As the years passed, and I grew more confident through my college courses, the stories evolved from narrative retellings to unparalleled performances. The stage transformed from a paycheck to the reason I got dressed in the morning. They say grief has seven stages, and every year without Pepaw has built on the last, like some lopsided, rigged Jenga game I'm meant to keep standing despite my lack of balance. I think grief is different for everyone, though, and I only needed two stages—telling and making.

Pepaw knew it before I did—before everyone, really. He told stories of my birth because he knew I could believe aliens before I believed the woman who *grew* me left me to grow up on my own. And as the stories webbed from there, some fiction mixing with reality, I found a place I could balance.

When I tell the crowd about Pepaw, his character always transcends the space in the tent. Sometimes I can hear his voice thread through mine, like an echo given endless smooth surfaces to bounce upon. Even in—partial—fiction, he's the showrunner.



Flip Flop

by Wilfred L. Crespo

At home,
we spoke the tongue of the motherland,
so, I was tongue-tied, verbally a hostage,
because I am culturally adopted,
fostered, unwelcome in
the tide pool of my own genes,
as they wash and ebb, to and fro.

Flip flop.

Flip
flop. In my hand, it is a
flip flop.

In my mother's, it is: "la chancla."

She throws "la chancla,"

I dodge a flip flop.

I am made to fetch it,
so, it can be reloaded.

In my hand, I turn it over and wonder:

which side is which?

Which is my flip flop, and which is
"la chancla," her instrument of
"castigo!" Just punishment.

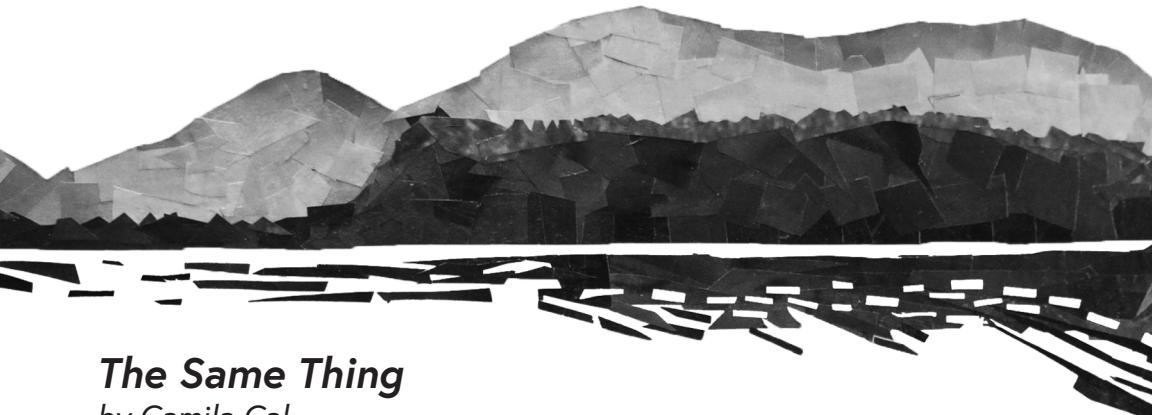
For what?

I never learned because I ran,
“El fugitivo!” *No translation needed*
They chase with a mouthful
of jumbled letters that are meant
to mean something,
but just drop
and tumble, each syllable a
scattered caltrop, a trap for catching,
for maiming.

I am: “nene” the boy,
free, in a word,
to be as I wish to be,
do as I see fit,
because no one has hopes
for stepchildren: “hijastros.”
I’m sorry if this is news
and any progress is a welcome surprise.

“Nene” the boy,
but not *their* boy,
not the boy of the island
that knows beaches or shells,
or is on a first name basis with
sun-kissed sands and rivers
that whisper: “hogar.”

My grandfather once muttered:
“Extraño no deseado.”
I’ve never had the courage to look it up.



The Same Thing

by Camila Cal

My father wrings his hands together
at the McDonald's counter.

Construction blisters rough against his fingertips,
stomach grumbling a pronouncement:

It's dinner time,
and everyone knows exactly what they want.

The cadence of their voices dance into the fryers,
land right on the greasy griddles.

The menu shines bright above him.
A jigsaw with no matches.
An open sea with no compass.

He turns, watches the person
that ordered before him.

A teenage boy. Black hair.
T-shirt, jeans. Normal.
Unremarkable, really.

But those lips,
that tongue.

He could reach the whole world with those.

“The same thing.”

Those were my father’s first words, here.
In America.

The easiest way his struggling tongue
could stretch to the unattainable,
could slither past the snide stares.

“What do you want?”
the cashier asks him.

But his tongue can’t do what the boy’s can.

It gets caught in the English trap,
wriggles, writhes, wants to spit out

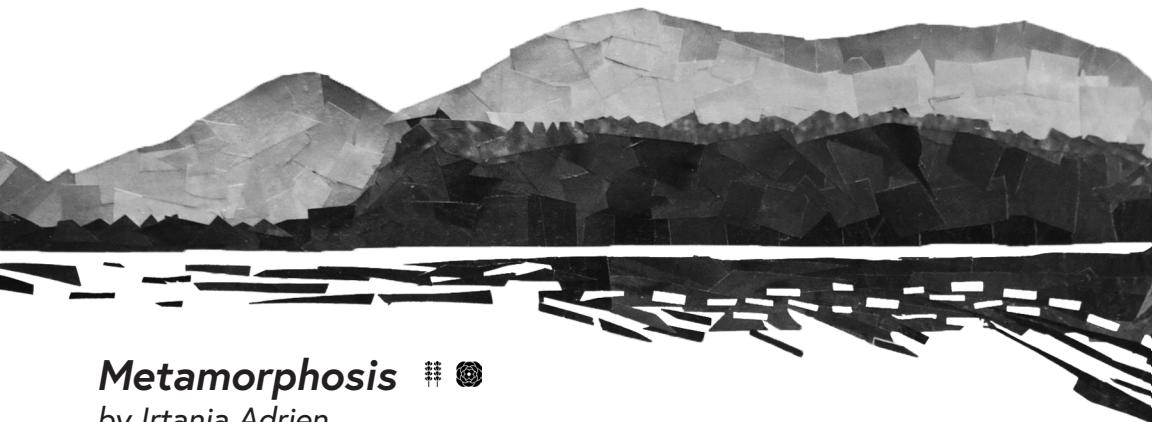
All he knows in Español.
to prove them all wrong,
to feel at home again.

But for now, he is starving,
ravenous.

“The same thing,” he says.

He never knows what to expect,
when he uses his first words.

Today: Cheeseburger. Fries. Chocolate shake.



Metamorphosis ■ ◉

by Irtania Adrien

You said, "If anything, I did my best," but why did you lie?

You sat on the stand and delivered your plea almost naturally, which makes me wonder—how long have you been preparing for today's performance?

You saw me. You looked in my eyes with a toxic mixture of fear, amazement, and even love. You didn't do anything. You saw my hand and studied my steel grip on the hilt of the silver blade as my wrist trembled. You looked at my smile, and you were so enchanted that the corners of your lips quirked upwards, as though my lips had pulled the puppet string of your facial nerves.

You were still and cold. So cold, even your breath shivered and reflected on my spine like a sub-zero snake. You saw me run across the room, and aside from your body swaying at the shadow of my momentum, you just stood there. I didn't ask you for this. I didn't need your pity. Your sympathy disgusts me. You saw the knife invade his body, breaking the measly peachlike flesh of his sweaty neck. You saw his body fall, and I could almost see the laughter bubbling in your throat.

You didn't stop me.

You didn't run to save me then, so why do you want to save me now?

You didn't even think to stop me from making the second stab, or the third, or the tenth. Your moist, shiny grey eyes followed my stabbing wrist with great accuracy. I bet you could even feel his thick, dark blood itch against the skin of my heated face and hand.

You didn't make a sound. I grunted. I growled like a dog tearing at flesh. I became a beast. Yet, you just stood there and stared on, entranced, as though you were watching an angel taking flight.

You saw me stand with panting breaths. He let out a painful cough. The blood which filled his mouth spurted out like a volcano, and the remainder of his life dripped

down the corner of his lips. His eyes glossed over in my direction. The last thing he saw was my smile. I think a sigh of remorse was the last effort he made with his life. It was faint and ghostlike, but there was fear there on the tail, which makes me think that he had gotten his first glimpse at the gates of Hell. But you didn't see that. You didn't even hear him die. You were so focused on making sure that I saw my reflection in your eyes, I almost missed it.

The ecstasy behind your pupils.

But you had no right. You had no right to admire me. You had no right to look at me with an adoring brow. I am not your hero. You were supposed to be my hero. It was never my duty to save you. And yet you still made it so. I didn't do this for you, so why did you lie?

You knew that I did it for me. You had your chance to be saved, and you let it go. You had the chance to save me too. In fact, you had many chances. Like that day when the principal asked about the bruises on my skin, or when I had constant trips to the ER for UTIs. But you were a coward. I saw my chance; I took it. And now I realize that all the crap you fed me about being brave and standing up for myself was just a sham to hide the cowardly hypocrite that you are. You chose when you wanted to be deaf and blind, and you chose when to look at me, and when not to.

How dare you? How dare you make *my* moment, *my* freedom, about *you*? I saved myself, and yet, with just the perfect tone and a trail of tears, you took that away from me. I wanted this. I wanted to own up to the fact that yes, I killed him—but you took that away.

I had the perfect speech prepared too.

The first stab was just enough to knock him down. I wanted him to be surprised that I had finally overpowered him. It was my turn to be on top. My turn to run the show and molest his body in any way that I wished.

During the second stab, I stared into his eyes. I needed him to see that it was me, and not you.

No, it wasn't you.

The third was for what he did on my seventh birthday, but you wouldn't remember that. You were so preoccupied with his laundry and eventually my stained bedsheet; you dumbly asked if I had taken a red popsicle to bed. But to this day, the stain is there. And yet, you still pretend that it's a stubborn blotch of colored corn syrup.

The fourth was for the doctor's visit five days after my eighth birthday, when I couldn't stop bleeding. But that time, you were too busy with preparing his lunch. At least that's what you said. But I know the truth. You didn't want to be there to give me a voice. The doctor couldn't speak to me alone because I was still a minor. You were supposed to be my voice. Instead, you chose to prepare his lunch.

Did you know that he made a pit stop with me on the way home after that visit?

No, of course not.

The fifth was for the news I received on my thirteenth birthday, that I'd never be able to have a child of my own. At thirteen, I wasn't thinking about children, but knowing that I had no choice in the matter took away my ability to choose my future. So, the stab was for my unborn children.

The sixth was for all the times he told me to be quiet, so I wouldn't wake you from your beauty rest. We both know that you were never truly asleep when he came back from my room.

The seventh, I did it because I wanted to. The eighth, I did it because I could. The last two were just for good measure. Some might call it overkill, but I call it venting.

You didn't even wince. I didn't wince. I wonder if I inherited that from you.

Doesn't matter now. The significance of my actions doesn't matter now. You've once again found a way to stifle my voice.

You're a monster.

You saw me lick the blade, and in that moment your throat lusted for the metallic taste which I should've enjoyed. But his blood was as bitter as his heart. It was like a toxic venom that burnt my tongue. But I know you imagined it to be sweeter than a ripe tomato.

So now I wonder, who enjoyed my freedom more? Who enjoyed my moment more?

You or me?

Don't lie this time.

While the adrenaline was running through my veins, your heart was pumping with a vivacity only matched by that of two lovers reaching the peak of their naughty carnal desires.

You had goosebumps all over.

When I crossed his body, you blinked like a curious child. I picked up the white phone and instantly tainted it with my red fingerprints. I dialed 911 and you still looked at me as if you were seeing me in a new light.

Just how sick can you be?

But then again, I was your Frankenstein. Yes. That's what it was.

I *am* your sinister creation.

You heard all those nights when I cried. But you gave me deaf ears. You heard my pleas and saw evidence of my trauma on my body, but you turned a blind eye. It was all an experiment, and finally, your monster was born.

I now see.

So that's why you saved me. It wasn't because you loved me, but because you loved what I had become.

That's why you lied.

You stared me down from the stand and you still said I was innocent. You said you did your best, if anything, but in truth *I* was your best. It wasn't about my freedom or finally standing up for myself.

It was the thrill.

Because why else would you call me innocent? Especially when you saw my stained hands. You heard me confess to the officers that I killed him because I wanted to. You saw them cuff me, and yet you remained mute like a sinner during communion. My bloody hands even corrupted the silver handcuffs as they took me out of our tiny apartment. The evidence of my foul nature was my blood-stained hands. So why did you call me innocent when the evidence was as thick as blood?

Ah, but that's just it.

My hands were stained red with my sin and yours. Your hands remained as white as snow, like that of Tristan's Isolde.

I was the condemned and you were going to sweep in like a redeemer to save me.

You called it self-defense on my part, but it was all your doing.

I was beyond the point of defending myself. I craved his death. You made sure I did.

Smart.

You're not a coward. You're not a monster.

You're a fool.

You put on quite a show, like an Oscar-winning actress at the curtain call. You cried when you were supposed to cry, you wept and folded into yourself like a weaker version of Ophelia. And the jury bought your innocence and obliviousness as if you were Queen Gertrude herself. You knew when to make eye contact, and you knew when to appear faint.

You had the whole room fooled.

But I saw it.

You painted the picture you wanted everyone to see, and your lips, which spurred lie after lie, were shaded red with his blood. You wanted him gone all along. But you also wanted to remain good. To have no faults—to live guilt-free.

Now I'm amazed.

You counted on me becoming a beast. You knew I'd have a breaking point. And you bid your time well.

Did it feel good? Did you wince when you heard me cry? Or did you harden your heart until you no longer cared? Did my pain make you shiver, like it did him? Did your heart thrum in your chest when I was begging him to stop? Did your throat run dry when I told him, "Not today"? Did you ever feel like telling me to suck it up? Did you ever feel the urge to watch and make sure that I let him use me as he saw fit? Did the picture of your boyfriend on top of me send a heat of arousal radiating from your

chest? Did you sweat or squirm at the thought of his sweat mixing with my tears? Did the sight of the bruises from his fat fingers choking my neck make you feel more like a woman? Did the welts on my skin from his yellow and sharp teeth make your thighs tremble?

Don't answer that. Think about it.

You put on quite a show, even the judge was silent for a minute or two.

That moment of silence, I ironically felt like it was for me. For the day I died by taking another life. For the day I lost myself and became something entirely different. For the day of my metamorphosis.

But you would go to prove me wrong again.

The judge decided to have me admitted to a hospital for counseling, and, six months later, I'm free like any other monster who roams the street of our nation.

You seemed relieved to hear that I wasn't going to be punished for being a killer. Even when I admitted that I wanted to kill him.

You had everyone believe that I was nothing more than a child who went through extreme trauma. A hurt child. A broken child.

You and I both know that I am an evil child because I was selfish enough to save myself at the expense of someone else's life.

I'd ask why you did it, but I already know the answer to that.

I said your tactic was smart, but you are a fool.

Why? You might wonder.

It's simple.

I'm your creation. The real-life version of your twisted fantasy.

You love me. And this is where you're making a mistake.

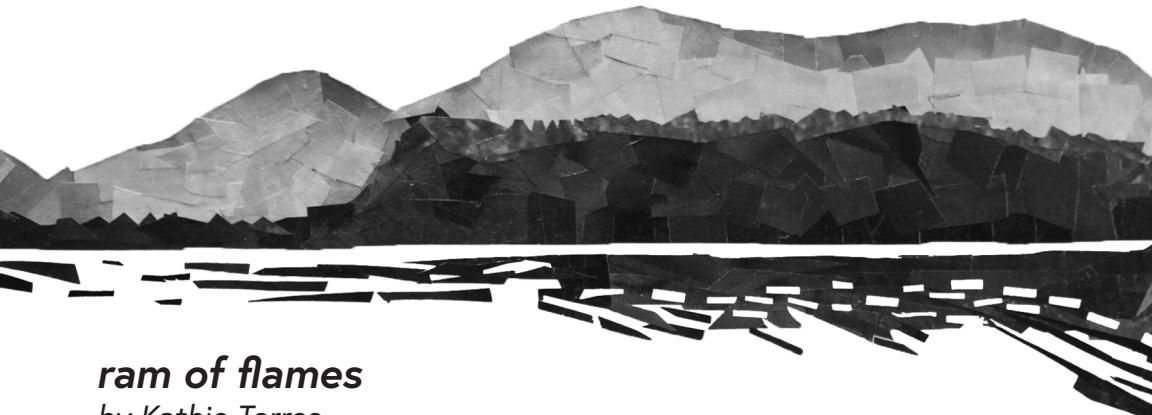
You love me, but you should fear me. You believe that you did everything to save me. Instead, you damned my soul, because I am now cursed to carry out my last and final desire.

You may be deluded. But you're also a mother.

I could feel remorse for this. But I won't because you wouldn't want me to.

You will be hunted down, and you know this. You love it. You love the thrill. You love the uncertainty of when.

You let me walk, you made them have pity on me, and now you'll sleep with one eye open.



ram of flames

by Kathie Torres

silky sweet child
painted in my blood
[will i understand you]
permanent by the sun

zero 13-hundred, a promise
the world for us to seek,
product of pain, my hands
your chrysalis of meat.

walk to run to crawl to
the safety of my arms,
[savoring your lost wings]
till it pulls us apart.

I yell

iyell iyell

in a distant home
[i lost the rose of my heart]

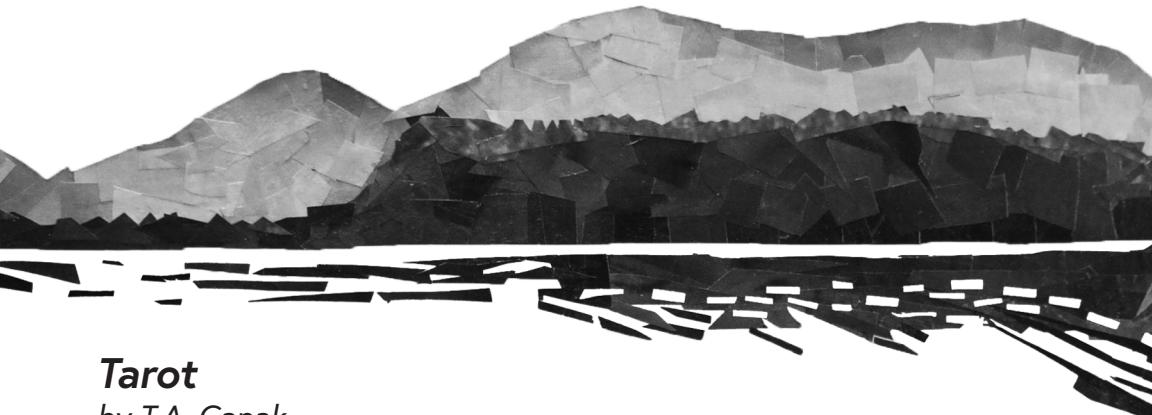
leaping on serenity,
you cease,
we sleep

awake.

rugged angry soul
ivory bones untorn apart
smothered in your salt
[are you safe in my arms]

running from my fingertips
squeezing aches of inner meat
[faded voice de mi ardor]
an escape is what you seek.

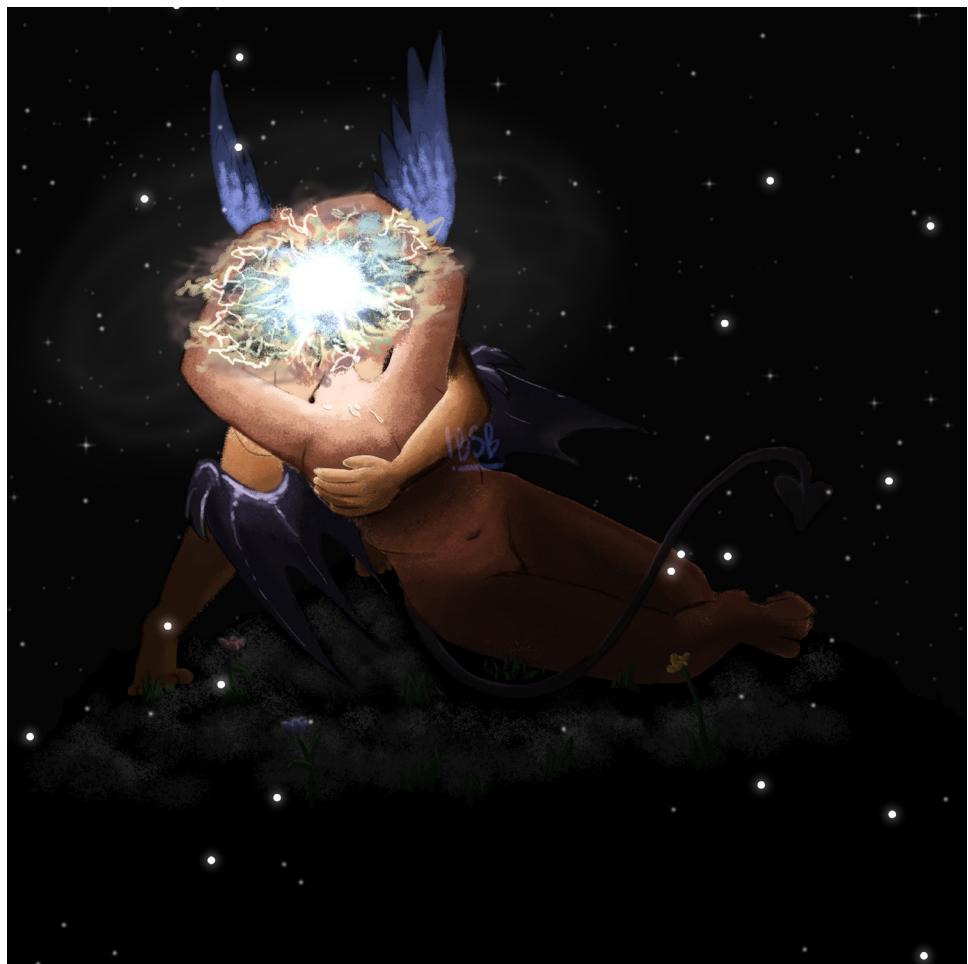
[i pray with fear and instinct
in the absence of the sun
if you leave, ruined child
you will always have my blood]



Tarot

by T.A. Capak

Past	Present	Future
Spend six weeks searching, frantic, across city shaking dried kibble, calling your name <i>mon petit cauchemar!</i> to portraits of cats— other cats, never you— orange Viking feline face printed on side of milk carton. Instead, shuffle deck, literary spirit speaker first/ left/ past card: [Skull] Talk to it like Hamlet, benighted, pretend it isn't so.	Afternoon plea with a writer— epitaph reads: novelist, folklorist, anthropologist. All things I want to be but am not— second/ middle/ current card: [Zora Neale Hurston] Drive to Fort Pierce, long for answers. Instead, shriveled mangoes, black banana, a dozen sunken daffodils, empty wine glasses resembling my womb. Talk to her on the grass, bestow an Apple offering.	Blame new house, husband, nurse blame blame b-lame until all eggs drop. Statue of Roman milkmaid knocked over by dalmatian, now stands head less in garden courtyard— third/ right/ future card: [Sappho] Enigmatic muse sends a changeling: spook-show floof, obsidian waif, drooling fidelity. Nevertheless, a cat is not a belly.



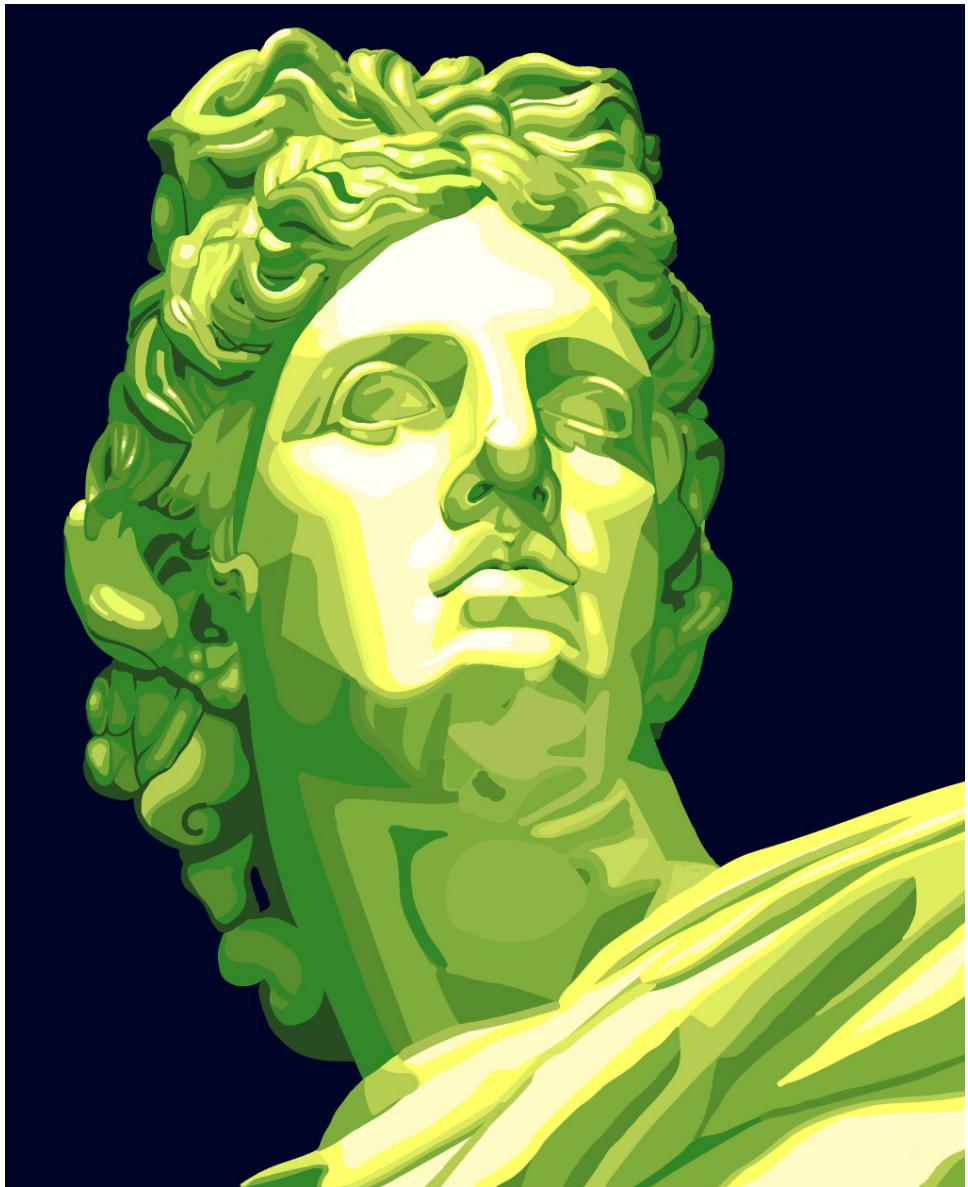
Collision
Digital
Cristina McBride



Lights

Colored pencil

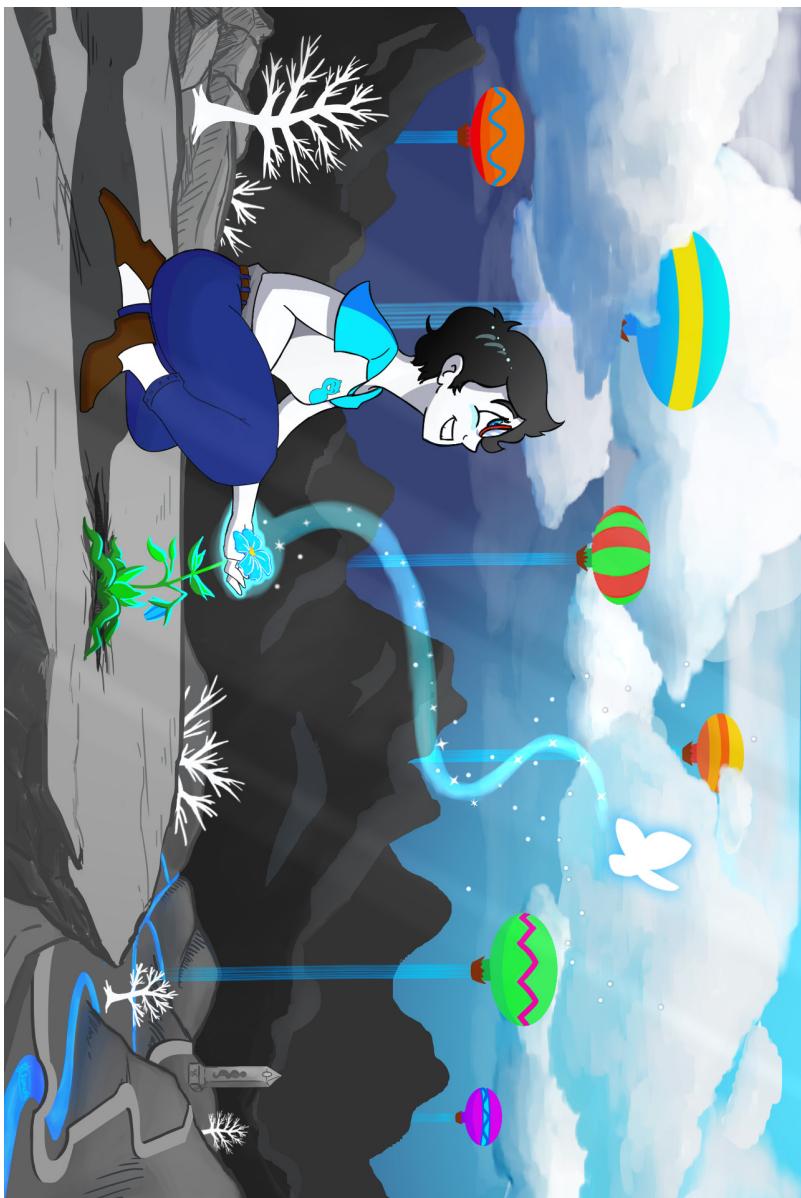
Zofia Martin



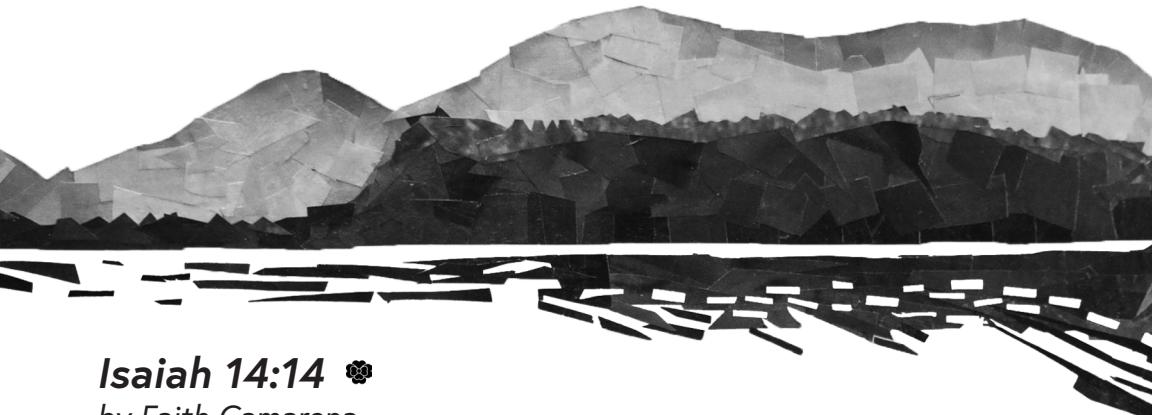
Statue

Digital

Zofia Martin




Still Hope
Digital
John Clement



Isaiah 14:14 ☀

by Faith Camarena

Someday soon, it'll bring me comfort to imagine that even now, it approaches the end; my father drives lazily along the asphalt roads and Bermuda grass of gray South Floridian suburbia, past shopping plazas, homeless men, and a gas station sign advertising *SANDWICHES*. It hasn't ended yet; I am yet my father's son. We're talking, as we often do in these days, about our religion—Methodist, but we don't label it. Someday soon, I'll enjoy calling myself a Catholic Satanist, though all I'll care for is love. Our conversation's gotten now to the Pride Movement. He's convinced it's a Satanic plot to drag Western society into the Devil's mud. We can't help but wonder why the Devil bothers with it all. Who more than she knows the ineffability of our Father's rule—His black-hole inevitability? Who more than she knows rebellion's vanity? Maybe she's moved, I speculate, by the spite of a rattlesnake, which will choke you with its teeth even after you sever its head. I am eleven years old. I've never met a rattlesnake.

The name *Satan* comes from the Hebrew *ha-Satan*, or *the Satan*. One translation is *the enemy*. In the Book of Job, the Satan sits on God's Divine Council. The Satan questions the wealthy, righteous Job's piety, and she persuades her Father to subject Job to a vicious crucible. Job remains faithful through leprosy, through poverty, through his children's deaths, through even the persuasions of his wife, who curses Him who made her. But eventually Job breaks, and he demands from God a reason. As if God needs a reason. "Where were you," the Creator asks, "when I laid the foundations of the earth?" Job 38:4. *Satan* also means *accuser*. The enemy strikes where we're softest and red: ungrateful, passionate, vain. The Satan is her father's daughter. She's *Prove it*; she's *Make me*; she's *What makes you so special?* She pulls us apart from the inside out; she hangs us broken and hollow like strung-up puppets. Do you think you can hide from her? What makes you so special? At the Book of Job's end, God

returns to Job all that He has taken, only because he stops asking, and we don't see the wealthy, righteous man again. I will hate this story.

When I was even younger, my father taught me by force how to ride a bicycle. *There are things*, he said, *that a man has to learn*. I never quite got what that had to do with me. I hated the lessons: I'd fall, I'd refuse, I'd sit in the Bermuda grass, and tears would choke me red. Over and over, I asked why he was making me do this. As if he needed a reason. So, now I can ride a bike, and we ride together often, and we've stopped at a table by a lake. The tender wind sings easily. We lean our bikes, graphite black, onto their kickstands; they're nearly identical. White ibis tread grass nearby. Wet salt paints my hair flat onto my forehead. I drink from a bottle and let icy vines dribble down my chin, while my father says something about the gifts of God's world. I don't cry anymore because I don't like when people yell at me. I pick myself up by my red-scraped knees and learn what a man has to learn. The Devil is small and pathetic to me. I haven't yet started to apologize.

The name *Belial*, another from Hebrew, means *the worthless one*. No ambivalent *Satan*, *Belial* is a singular evil. *Angel of Darkness; Prince of Darkness; King of Evil*. As is the *Satan*, Belial is a categorical *no*, an *isn't*—she isn't God, she isn't light, she isn't worth shit. The name's melody fascinates me years before I learn its lyrics. *Belial*. It drips, that name, it oozes; it's autoerotic. It's a whisper from the woods, a vine of sweat down the swoon of your back, fingers up your neck like vines up a trellis. But it doesn't mean *destroyer*, or *beast*, or *dragon*—it means *worthless*. Hollow. She's nothing; forget about her. When the end times come, and we rise into Heaven, we'll pass her by, and we won't even laugh; we'll spit in her eyes and kick mud and shit into her mouth, and she'll sit in her shame, and tears will choke her red. Pathetic. Demonologists assign to each archdemon a month over which they rule. Do you know the feeling when something falls, and it hasn't yet hit the ground, but as you watch, you feel in the hollow of your ribs a black-hole inevitability, and you know you'll do nothing to stop the thing's breaking? I was born in the winter month of January. I want you to guess over which month the worthless one rules. I want you to say it to me.

We're on our way back home in the nighttime; my dad made me come with him to a sporting goods store. We listened to a sermon on the radio. The pastor referenced the film *Inception*, one of our favorites. In it, the main characters plant an idea in a man's mind, deeper than he'll notice, in hopes that they may, unseen, control him. The pastor likens this planted idea to a seed; its roots grow slowly, evil and rough, too deep to find but irresistible once they take hold. This, he says, is the Devil's way. My father is not speaking. I'm looking out the window at golden streetlights, and wet, black asphalt, and storm-polished Bermuda grass. God forgive me, I think I've a seed inside. I feel it writhing, hot. I see it growing with black, thorny vines, squirming up my back and down my throat; I see myself bloody, broken, desperately close to

something that I can't say. One day, I'll see blooming on those vines pink hibiscus flowers, and carnations, and baby's breath, and delicate, lilting orchids, and a sweet choir of fireflies painting the air with the scent of a warm Southern night, though I've never seen fireflies in Florida. I'm sorry, Father. Please.

The name *Lucifer* means *light-bringer*, or *morning star*. Its Christian usage comes from the Latin translation of Isaiah 14, which, so alleges the church, tells Belial's origin. Isaiah 14:12—"How you have fallen from heaven, morning star, son of the dawn!" The text sings of a beautiful figure, a powerful soldier. I will love her to death. This *Lucifer* is imperfect only in her desire to stand beside Him who made her; for that, she's thrown; for that, she falls, and she breaks into mud. She's denied the dignity of a burial; for their creator's vanity, the fruits of her seed, God will forever doom. *The Satanic Bible* identifies Lucifer with the element of air, one of many connections with which I'll be enamored. Lucifer and air here; "the prince of the power of the air" in Ephesians 2:2; the morning star; male hubris; female desire; choking dominance; loving submission. She's everything and nothing, like a seed. From *Lucifer* grows the rainforest, the Everglades in my backyard, the lush Eden yet uncharted. Her wind parts leaves with tender fingertips. Listen: can you hear it?

I don't learn from my father that *apocalypse* comes from the Greek *apokalypsis*, which means *unveiling* or *revelation*. This *apokalypsis* is the first word written in the Book of Revelation. One day, this will obsess me. Revelations and endings and endings and revelations. I'll hardly speak to my father after I tell him that I'm a transsexual lesbian. I'll ride a different bike, this one my mother's, which I'll lose within two days of getting. I'll ride alone at night, which I'll know is suicidally stupid, and every time I ride through sidewalks where the tree branches wrap like fingers around your neck, and the streetlamps don't light, and the air tastes like sweat, I'll feel fearful vines squirm hot and anxious in my heart, and I'll hear Lucifer whisper from the woods, seeking those whom she may devour, and I'll ride there anyway for as long as I can because goddammit, I'm the princess of the power of the fucking air, and I'll stand on the pedals and let my bike take me swooning down a rain-swept hill, and when it slips and it falls, and the brake jams, and one week later I find that it's not where I left it, I'll sit in the mud and I'll choke myself red with tears because there'll be nobody here to yell at me, and because this is what makes me so fucking special—I will cry every time that I fall. What do seeds do but break into vines; what do vines do but choke? I'll stumble home with broken makeup, and salty black trenches will split my cheeks, and I won't ever regret a thing. I won't ever stop feeling sorry.

The name *Elohim* is a complicated word that I'll never understand. Grammatically, it is both singular and plural; it refers at once to the one God and to His many divine children. The Divine Council and their Father are the Elohim. God is the Elohim of Elohim, and there is no Elohim beside Yahweh. *Yahweh* is another of God's names,

which perhaps because of *Elohim's* complexity, enjoys the more common usage in Christian circles. It is given to Moses when he asks from God His name, a reason to give his people when they ask him who He is. God replies, *I am that I am*, or *I am becoming what I am becoming, Yahweh*. I don't need a reason. Where were you? Who are you? *I am*. One day, I'll wonder if this is what the Devil means in Isaiah 14:14, "I will make myself like the Most High," if this was what she couldn't name, her *Elohim—I am*. In high school, I'll read about trans activist Marsha P. Johnson and her response when asked what her middle initial stood for, her response to whether she was a man or a woman. *Pay it no mind*; she is. She was—after a pride parade in 1992, they found Johnson's body in the Hudson River, and against loved ones' and evidence's urgings, police ruled her death a suicide. One day, the case will be reopened, but police will reclassify it only as *undetermined*: Johnson will find no justice. "But you are brought down to the realm of the dead, to the depths of the pit." Isaiah 14:15. The daughter of the dawn stands among the Elohim, but there is no Elohim beside Yahweh. There isn't. As if I am.

"For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them." Matthew 18:20. In this verse, says my father, Christ describes the church's truer nature. The church that we attend on Sundays has come to feel more and more like a college lecture, all folding chairs and projector screens and dry, didactic monotones, so I come to regard conversations with my father as more my church than anything. I don't ask what it means that they always unfold on the way to something: in a car through the suburbs, on bikes stopped beside a sidewalk, listening to the radio coming back from the store. We're on a highway now, and the road's gray reminds me of the stone to which Isaac was bound at the end of another journey shared by father and son, taken in the Creator's name. I am my father's daughter; we both repeat ourselves, get stuck on ideas. Here's one of his—he's telling me about transsexuals. Pretension, vanity; you can always tell what's beneath the caked mud of makeup, see the broken knuckles, the collarbones thick and sharp like rainforest vines. Biology is a gift of God's world, and how vain is rebellion against it! How suicidally stupid. It is an abomination. I stay quiet, and I never forget. My father always told me that he'd be in Hell right now had God come to him with the same test that Abraham passed at the binding; not even for God could he sacrifice his son.

The name *Isabel* derives from the Hebrew *Elisheba*, which means *God is abundance*. In high school, I'll pick it as a middle name for myself; for years, I wanted a name that rests better on my Dominican grandmother's tongue, and my girlfriend at the time will think that this one sounds pretty, so I'll make it my olive branch to dad. But it'll never be mine, will it? None of my sisters got middle names. I'll know what my name is; I won't be allowed to change it only because I want to. God—how can a choice I'll make at fifteen feel like something I was given at birth? Why is it rebellion to blossom?

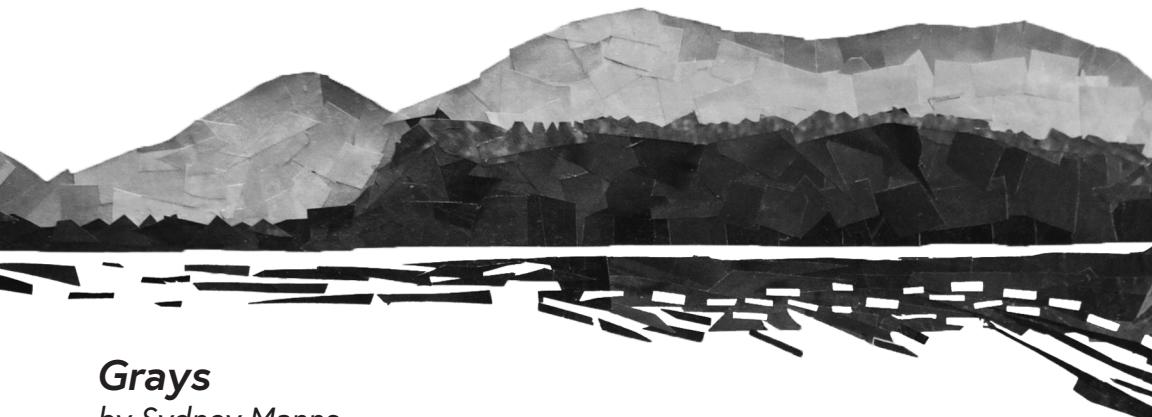
Why can't the vines grow without breaking me open? I'll have dropped *Isabel* by my first year of college.

We're walking to church today, not driving, along a broken sidewalk overrun with weeds and vines. It's not far; they hold it in a teal-colored middle school building not ten minutes away from my house and not thirty from the Everglades, to which we live so close that they might as well be my backyard. I've always preferred the sidewalks' weeds to our front lawn's Bermuda grass; they're finer, softer, and part more sweetly with the tender wind. We attend a Methodist church, but my father's father raised him Catholic; the school kicked him out for asking too many questions. Then he left the country, and then his father left the family. To my knowledge, these aren't related things, but doesn't it kind of feel like they are? *Elohim* is a plural noun; the ineffable one is the more-than-one. Maybe you can't become without breaking apart. What do seeds do but break into vines, and what do vines do but choke? What do daughters do but break their fathers' sons?

The name *Venus* belongs to two things: an object, and a Goddess. The object is the second planet from our Sun, our sister world. The goddess is *Aphrodite Pandemos*, and she's also *Aphrodite Urania*. These were epithets, titles given to the Greeks' gods, that came, in her case, to describe two distinct entities. *Pandemos*, which means *common to all the people*, described the goddess' profane, carnal aspect; a shameless goddess, on her knees. The Greeks worshiped her far more commonly than her counterpart, *Urania*, goddess of divine motherhood and, to later Christian scholars, an incarnation of the virgin Mary. Together, they were one *Aphrodite*, whom the Romans called *Venus*. *Venus Xtravaganza* is the name of a drag queen with whom I'll be taken as a young transsexual, featured in the documentary *Paris is Burning*, which tells, among many others, her story of sex work and high aspirations. I'll hear about a time she feared for her life when a client got violent upon feeling something underneath her clothes that he hadn't expected to want. Seized by the wind, she fell out the window and fled the hotel on foot. *Aphrodite Urania*, the *heavenly Aphrodite*, derives her birth story from the Phoenician goddess *Astarte Urania* who arose from white vines of seafoam when the stars—*Ouranos*—were castrated by his son. *Astarte* also gives us the name *Astaroth*, that of a Christian demon with fetid breath and an oily serpent tail. During the filming of *Paris is Burning*, Venus Xtravaganza was strangled to death in the Duchess Hotel. The celestial object *Venus* is among several such bodies identified with the morning star. Daughter of the stars. Son of the dawn. Do you understand why the Devil feels like a sister to me?

My father knows himself as a categorical *isn't*; he isn't perfect, he isn't intelligent, he isn't going to become his father. There is a desperation in him that I won't spot for years. I am my father's daughter. I will not speak to my father after I tell him that I'm a transsexual lesbian, and this will not be any sort of a change because we'll have

spoken less each day for the last four years. With grief and with guilt, and with ecstatic love for my father's daughter, for the woods and the vines, and the pink blooming in the broken hollows, and for beauty and for power and for *I am*, I will do what I am always going to do—and I'll not care for the story that my father told me, about how his father made him throw out all of his toys when he was very young, because a man does not play with toys, and about how he will never do the same to me because he remembers how it made him cry. I will remember instead the story of the prodigal son, whose father welcomes him with celebration when he returns from a life of digging through pig-shit and mud, after wasting his inheritance, and I will remember how this story of forgiveness touched me even as a younger child, and in tears among the vines from the broken earth where I fell, I'll smell flowers sweet like the tender wind, and son of the dawn, daughter of the stars, princess of the power of the air, my father's daughter will make herself like the Most High.



Grays

by Sydney Manns

Day 1

I didn't think I'd gray until I was older. 80. 50. Hell—30 at least. Against my black hair, the white strand looks like an errant mark on a chalkboard. A mistake. It must be, because I'm only 23 for the amor de Dios! But everyone knows a gray isn't a mistake.

Through the bathroom mirror, I gawk at the hair like it's the crystal ball that'll show me my future. What will it be then? A car accident? Choking on a grape? Will I get cancer like Mamá? Do I already *have* cancer? Maybe I'll become a podcast for a new murder mystery—who knows in this city. But I could spend the rest of my days guessing because white, gray, or silver hairs don't tell you how you die, just that you will—a sort of morbid premonition. We all eventually gray because we all eventually die. I'll have one year if I'm lucky, a few months if I'm not. Either way, I'm a Gray. Either way, I'm dying soon.

"Luisa, are you alright in there?"

My entire body tenses at Mamá's voice. She can't know I'm graying. Especially not before her next round of chemo in one month. Her doctors say she has a good chance of entering remission afterward. Just six months ago, she almost quit her chemo cycle to take care of me when I hurt my ankle—a mild sprain, not even a break. No, I can't tell her now. If she knows I'm a Gray, she'll call off her treatment. She'll waste her strength trying to undo the inevitable. I won't let the news of my impending death be the reason she stops fighting to live.

Mamá calls for me again, so I yank out the hair, and head down the narrow hallway of our apartment to the living room. I find Mamá lost under a thick blanket and the folds of our old leather couch. She frowns when I approach, her sunken dark eyes attentive and alive as always. Even a year of relentless radiation can't touch the determined strength in them.

“Estás bien?” she asks.

I tell her I’m okay with a strained nod and smile, not trusting myself to speak.

“Then why did you scream, *mija*?”

Oh God, did I?

“The radiator’s probably making noises again,” I say, tucking in Mamá’s blanket if only to avoid eye contact. “I’ll head down to the store and call maintenance.”

I turn to go, but she grabs my arm and studies me even closer.

Have I already sprouted another gray? It’s possible, I guess. For those that have weeks to live, their hair grays quicker. For those who have months or the full year—the longest time possible—their graying is slower. Either way, once the day comes when my entire head is void of color, I’m done. Gone. Dead. Bucket-equals-kicked.

Will I have the whole year? It’s too soon to tell, but I know how much time I *don’t* have.

I taste vomit in the back of my throat, ebbing and receding like an ocean wave of pollution. Panic vibrates through my body, and I will my hands to steady, but Mamá notices.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” I say, shaking out of her grip and retreating a few feet to the kitchen. The feeling of the icy linoleum floor on my bare feet shocks my senses back. “Nothing’s wrong. I didn’t scream. The radiator’s busted. I need to open the store *now*.”

“Is this about money? I told you we could dip into the emergency funds.”

“Not everything is about money. And we’ve already dipped into the emergency funds, but that’s—”

“It’s school then, isn’t it? You didn’t have to drop out, *mija*. I told you I’m feeling well enough to help in the store more.”

I shake my head. Run a hand through my hair. Immediately stop.

“What is it? Dime, por favor.”

I can’t tell her, but I can’t hide that I’m worried. I don’t want to tell a lie, so I choose a different truth.

“I’m worried about you,” I say. “Your treatment’s coming up. I just want you to feel better. To finally heal and *live*—”

Mamá holds up a hand to stop me. “Cálmate, Luisa. You need to pray more. Your worry won’t heal me, *mija*—God will. You can’t control if I live or die.”

“But I don’t even know if you’re living or dying!”

“I am alive now.”

“You know what I mean.”

“We’ve been over this.” Mamá turns to the window, staring out at a clouded fall sky. One of her hands drifts mindlessly to her head, tucking in the tail of her purple tie-dyed bandana. “I still don’t have any grays.”

I close my eyes and exhale. Mamá is right—she doesn't have any grays. But she, too, speaks the language of half-truths. Mamá doesn't have any grays because she doesn't have any *visible* hairs. Not even a strand. Chemotherapy has taken the chance of her knowing how long she has left in this world in hopes that it will give her more time in it. Her hair fell out 13 months ago after her first chemo session and no new hairs have sprouted since. For all I know, Mamá is a Gray—who knows what happened after the first session? She could die today, tomorrow, a week from now—it's as abnormal as conjoined twins or snow in the summer: not impossible, just not right. Until her hair grows back, she's unlike the rest of us. She has no warning.

The sound of a key in the door spares me from saying more; it's one of Mamá's friends who comes over to help. I kiss Mamá on her head, tug on my shoes, say a quick hello to Rosa, and bolt out the apartment door and down the creaking stairs. I take them two at a time, following the familiar smell of aging pages and old cedar until rows of shelves surround me.

The bookstore was Mamá's dream. She moved us from Venezuela to New York City when I was just a baby after my father's death. With the money she had from our savings and his life insurance, she bought an abandoned retail store and its connecting apartment, turned below into a multilingual bookstore, and above into a home for me. She'd successfully run both until cancer weakened her. But we couldn't afford to lose the store, we needed it to pay for her medical bills. A year ago, I left NYU halfway through my undergrad in Business and quit my once-in-a-lifetime internship working with the UN's economic and social council. I put my dreams of working for an international non-profit on standby so I could help keep this dream alive—help keep *her* alive. I didn't resent it then because I thought I had my whole life to live. But today the shelves feel like the bars of my own personal prison.

I throw myself into a routine: I straighten spines, I dust, I stack, I set out new releases; I vacuum, I dust again, and I flip the sign to open, waiting for customers. The clock behind the counter ticks. The shelves press closer. The silence screams: *You're going to die!*

I remind myself freaking out won't change that—graying is irreversible. I don't have the luxury of panic because I don't have the time to do it. Instead, I need a plan.

Mamá needs the store to pay for her medical bills, the apartment, and her future. But she also needs strength for her upcoming treatment and not just the physical kind. She needs her soul to stay strong so that her body can heal and finding out I'm a Gray isn't a cure-all but an end-all. That leaves me with one option and two secrets.

First, I need to sell the store. I can't exactly check out customers from the grave, nor can Mamá do it from bed. If I sell enough books and find a buyer, then maybe I'll make enough money for Mamá to finish out her treatments and make ends meet when I'm gone. I'll have sales and lower the prices, claiming we need new inventory

and now's the time to declutter. But Mamá can't know that I'm selling because that'll lead to secret number two: I'm graying.

I push open the front door of the bookstore. Distantly, I hear the small overhead bell chime my departure as I step out into the Village, where snow flurries dance to the ground and the early November breeze gnaws on my exposed skin. People walk on either side of the street, and cars plow through murky puddles of rain that'll freeze or turn into slush soon. Will I be around to see it melt? Do I have one month or twelve left? Or somewhere in between?

No matter how much time I have, I know these next few weeks of secrets will be lonely, and not just because I have to keep them from Mamá, but because I have to isolate *everyone*. It shouldn't be too hard; most of my childhood friends moved out of the city and I have barely seen my college friends since I dropped out. I'm up early opening a store while they're up early rushing to morning classes, hungover from a night spent making memories while I stayed in to pay the overdue bills. I visit them when I can, but it's as if their lives are inside jokes I'm not a part of, and no matter how much they try to explain, I just had to be there.

As I watch the city wake up, the feeling of being an outsider extends to the scene around me. The only proof of my presence hangs in the space in front of me—my breath billows into the winter air like a cartoon speech bubble saying, *I'm still here, I'm still alive*. I stand like that for a while, witnessing and wondering, already a ghost among the living.

* * *

Day 10

I have too many gray hairs to count. I'm guessing I have around six months to live at this rate. One night, I considered dyeing my hair, but quickly realized it was pointless—I have a new gray every hour. I've started wearing thick winter hats wherever I go. Indoors. Outdoors. Even to bed lest Mamá comes into my room at night and sees my blank strands spilling across my pillow like an unwound spool of white thread. It turns out the radiator did scream that day, and the heating system in both the apartment and the store broke. I told Mamá maintenance is booked through the end of the month. A lie, but at least it'll give me an excuse to hide under hats and time to figure out how to break the news to Mamá after her chemo session in 20 days.

Mamá doesn't bother me about the radiator, but she's been insistent about me going back to school. I can't, but she doesn't need to know that yet. I make an effort to leave some of my old textbooks out, so it seems like I'm studying. I ensure to clear my browser history, purposely leaving behind faux searches for new apartments and internships, just in case Mamá chooses now to learn how to work a computer.

Today, I'm throwing an early holiday sale at the store. The sound of winter coat fabric rubbing together mingles with the customers' chit-chat and the Christmas

music faintly playing overhead. I check out customers at the front of the store just as I have for the past three hours, the line only now starting to shrink.

Nearby, Mamá weaves in and out of the aisles, despite my pleas for her to save her energy. She helps customers, leading them into the line with more books than I'm sure they intended to buy. She has a way with words in all the languages she speaks. Either that or she knows everyone feels bad for a woman that has no way of knowing if she'll die tomorrow.

"That'll be \$42.50," I say, all my attention on packaging a large stack of World War II memoirs.

"Do you offer a discount for Grays?"

I freeze.

Slowly, I raise my gaze and meet the old man's questioning look, and I'm shocked, not by his eyes, but, rather, his head. Tight black curls peek out between thick layers of white and gray.

Grays commonly receive discounts. They—*we*—get all sorts of special treatment; the living shows the dying their pity through paid leave from work, skipping in lines, front row parking...

Before, I barely batted an eye. Seeing a Gray is as common as seeing a homeless person in this city—sadly, it's a fact. However, I haven't run into any since I don't travel further than a block for groceries and spend the rest of my time inside posting ads online for the store. This man is the first Gray I've seen since becoming one.

I'm still frozen when Mamá joins me behind the counter.

"It's on us," she says, smiling.

Mamá starts bagging up the rest of the books, and the man frowns, still trying to reach for his wallet. But he stops when his eyes go to my mother's ill-fitting clothes, then her bare head. He mumbles a small 'thank you,' takes the bag, and hobbles towards the door. Even the dying pity my mother.

No one else stands in line—the customers spread out among the shelves. I turn to Mamá, trying and failing to hide my irritation.

"What?" she says, "He's a Gray."

"He had to be at least 85. He's not a regular Gray."

"What is a *regular* Gray?"

"Not him," I say, crossing my arms. "Not someone who's lived a full life."

"Ay, Lu. He still has to live with the knowledge that he's dying soon."

"Living with the knowledge is better than living without it."

Is it really?

I push the thought away.

"So, you resent him for something he can't control. That *I* can't control?"

I try to move out from behind the counter, but Mamá blocks my path with one

hand on her hip. “Tell me why you’re so upset, *mija*. I can’t understand if you don’t let me.”

I’m upset because he gets to grow old, and I don’t!

But I can’t say that, so I pluck another half-truth from my ever-growing repertoire of deceit.

“I’m upset because he’s lived your life twice over, Mamá, and *still* might outlive you yet. It’s not fair. And what’s more—we just lost 40 dollars to a man who’s got cash to spend. He’ll probably die with all his government-issued Gray checks sitting in the bank. We need the money. Not him.”

Mamá’s jaw clenches.

“You’re right,” she says, standing straighter. “Life is unfair. I can’t change my situation just as much as a Gray can’t change theirs. But our actions last longer than our lives. I want kindness to be my legacy—not stinginess. I won’t give books out for free again if it upsets you that much, Lu. But forty dollars won’t break us.”

“You’re right. Maybe if I finished business school, I’d know that.”

Mamá’s face drops, and I immediately regret my words and apologize. She nods once, eyes lingering on the old Gray near the door.

Everything I say to Mamá is wrong. Protecting her from the truth means suffering from it in secret, and I’ve never been a good liar. I also don’t get to exist as a Gray normally would; I haven’t filed my Gray status with the city and don’t receive any government benefits. I don’t get pity or money. Most importantly, I don’t get comfort from the person I want it from most. The truth dances on my lips even now, wanting to tell her, but I shove it down and ready my barbed lies, reminding myself disappointment won’t kill Mamá, knowledge of a dying daughter will.

“You know,” she says, “It’s not as bad as you think—not knowing if I’m a Gray. I was scared, sure, maybe I still am deep down. But I don’t wake up scanning my hair each morning anymore, I don’t just *get* through the day because I know I have more left, I *live* in the day.” She turns her stare to me. “It’s liberating.”

“It’s terrifying!”

“No,” she nods in the direction of the Gray. “*That’s* terrifying.”

Then I could frighten you!

I grit my teeth and remind myself she doesn’t know. She can’t.

“If that’s what you believe,” I say, “then I’m glad you have...peace.”

Mamá tilts her head to the side and gives me a small smile.

“I do, *mija*. I do.”

She pats my cheek with one hand, but I don’t miss how it shakes. I watch her rejoin the customers among the emptying shelves. Has she noticed I haven’t ordered any new books recently?

“Peace,” I whisper, reassuring myself. “She has peace.”

* * *

Day 22

“What a liar.” Mamá sits on the couch in the living room, swaddled in blankets, shaking her head in disapproval at the TV. “No creo how Ricardo would keep a secret like that from María. Idiota.”

I look up from my computer at the kitchen table to where the latest episode of *La Hacienda del Amor* plays. Ricardo just revealed to his fiancé, María, that he can’t marry her. As it turns out, his parents forced him into an arranged marriage with another woman, and he’s hidden it from María for the past year. He’s probably promised to her evil twin sister or a beautiful, scheming heiress—I’ve grown up watching enough of Mamá’s *telenovelas* to know how these things turn out.

“Mamá, calm down,” I say, “They’ll live happily ever after.” I turn back to my computer screen, resuming my scroll through a list of available grave plots for sale nearby. “Unlike me,” I mutter under my breath.

I’ve spent the past hour half-watching Ricardo and María profess their love while I search things like, “Gray life expectancy estimator” and “Will my student loans absolve if I die?”—turns out they will, thank Dios. I’ve also responded to a few serious inquiries for the store. If I’m lucky, it’ll be under contract before Mamá’s treatment begins in eight days. Everything is going according to plan.

One hand habitually flies to my head to check if my hat’s secure. Well, everything I can *control*, that is.

“Calm down?” says Mamá, still transfixed on the unraveling scene, “I don’t understand why he had to lie.”

“Maybe he did it to protect her,” I say, directing my search to caskets. Who knew there were so many different styles? And so expensive? It seems pointless—no one will see it when it’s six feet under.

Mamá scoffs. “If he just told María about Teresa, then he wouldn’t have had to protect her.”

A dramatic crescendo echoes from the TV. The camera zooms in to Ricardo’s crestfallen face.

“Ricardo says he has a plan,” I mumble, scrolling faster. The listings blur. “Trust Ricardo’s plan.”

“His plan is mierda. They could’ve made a plan together if he told her sooner.”

“And what? Run away from the inevitable?” The music rises, shrieking. “Ricardo will still have to marry Teresa.”

“Maybe he will,” she says, “but he still lied.”

“He lied because he loved her. There’s a difference.”

“No,” says Mamá. “There is no difference. You don’t lie to those you love.”

The sound of a slap ricochets through the room. I snap my laptop closed. Mamá

looks at me from where she sits, her expression blank despite her colorful words.

“I’m going for a walk.”

Mamá says nothing as I leave, bringing her attention back on María’s flowing tears and Ricardo’s red cheek.

One subway ride later, I end up somewhere in Central Park. Joggers pass by clusters of friends, families, and sporadic loners. I notice a young man with hair half white, then a middle-aged woman with silver streaks framing her face. I force myself to not shrink away when I spot a child nearby playing tag with her friends, her red curls laced with gray.

The wind blows a piece of paper at my face. I grab it, only to find it’s a flier for an all-Grays apartment complex with week-to-week leasing options. I crumple it up. Out here, it’s impossible to ignore my grays, but maybe, it’s what I need.

I head out of Central Park and let the growing crowd sweep me down Seventh Avenue. LED lights bathe my face in a myriad of colors, beaming down from shifting billboard screens advertising the latest retail sales, new albums, and Broadway shows. Times Square and its flashy façade surround me, as do wide-eyed visitors, the sound of street music, and the wail of sirens. One of the screens boasts an advertisement for a new book coming out. I think about putting in a preorder for the store—I haven’t sold it yet—but stop when I see the release date.

Coming next November.

I shiver, blaming it on the cold and not the eerie feeling that comes with seeing a date long past the one you know you’ll live.

I know Mamá is suspicious. Whether it’s about my grays or the other secrets I’m keeping, if she uncovers one, then she’ll uncover them all. I see it in her lingering stares and everything she does and doesn’t say. She asks me every hour if I’m okay but doesn’t question our outrageous sales. She’ll challenge me about everything from free books to *telenovela* plots but won’t argue why maintenance is taking so long to fix our freezing apartment. I’m getting frustrated at her for not seeing the truth, yet I refuse to take the blindfold off. My plan is working, so I should be happy. But for the first time since I found my grays, I doubt my decision.

I drift among the crowd, imagining a life where Mamá isn’t sick, and I told her. It’s a dream I live in, if only for now, trying to find peace among these people I’ll never see again. Maybe it’s because of this feeling of invisibility that I let my hand drift to my head, that I let it pull at the edges of my hat, that I close my eyes and rip it off until I’m exposed.

I keep my eyes shut, preparing—for what, I’m not sure. Someone to say something. Someone to notice. But when I open them, I find nothing’s changed: the crowd moves; the billboards flash. Life goes on.

* * *

Day 29

Mamá's next round of treatment is tomorrow. The anticipation before a new cycle is always the worst. For her. For me. The unknown is a faceless enemy that terrorizes us with his anonymity, and no matter how hard I try to pick him out in a crowd of possibilities, I can't. But it doesn't stop me from wondering. Will the days after her treatment be good or bad? I'm not sure. I want to be sure.

Today, Mamá comes down to the store dressed in even more layers than we've taken to wearing. With surprising strength, she grabs my coat off the hook and throws it at me, flipping the open sign to closed and dragging me out the door.

"What's gotten into you?" I ask, one hand reaching up to pull my hat down.

"Nada," she says. "Hurry up. We don't want to miss the ferry. Venga."

Ferry?

An hour later, I sit huddled next to my mother on the ferry headed to Ellis Island. We look out the window as Lady Liberty comes into view as if behind a sheet of tissue paper, the thick fog and flurries obscuring everything, but the outline of her arm thrust skywards in triumph. Mamá doesn't offer much of an explanation for why we're visiting, but I notice how she looks without seeing and how her hand grips mine; something's on her mind. I don't know what a green statue has to do with it.

After we depart, Mamá veers us away from the crowd and down an empty path.

"Where are we going? The museum is this way."

"Yo lo sé," she says, patting my arm with a mittenened hand. I see it more than I feel it through my thick coat. "There's something I want to see while we're already out here. We'll go inside and warm up soon." She pauses. "Then you can finally take off that hat."

Skeletons of trees line the sidewalk, and fresh snowflakes pepper the ground. Splotches of dark brown hibernating grass peek out every once in a while, reminding me of my hidden head—the one Mamá is about to see in a few minutes. I try not to overanalyze her hat comment. It was just a joke, some offhand motherly advice. But why didn't it feel like that?

We approach a wall of thick stainless steel. It's a few inches shorter than me, extending down the length of the sidewalk and wrapping around the path. Did Mamá bring me here to look at a *wall*? She sees my confusion and draws me closer until I recognize the meticulous etchings along the smooth silver surface. They're names, I realized, hundreds and thousands of names.

"The Wall of Honor," Mamá whispers, her lips barely moving as she reads each one—all immigrants who came to America. People like Mamá and I.

I stand silent next to her, then take off one of my gloves, ignoring the bite of the frigid air, and trace my finger alongside the names of the passengers. I feel connected to them like my mother, not because they were immigrants, but because they were all

Grays, all gone now. I brush the curves of letters that time has not yet washed away, conjuring faces of people I've never met, and never will, trying to feel their lives in those small letters. I wonder what their favorite foods were, what streets they lived on, who they loved, and the reasons they woke up every morning until the day they didn't; I hope someone does the same for me one day. Did they keep their grays a secret to protect a loved one? Did they die young, too? But it's only their names in this cold metal that stays, this whisper of what was. Here is no better than a graveyard.

I draw my hand back from this mass tombstone and resurrect my own in my mind. *Luisa García Flores*, it'll read. *Beloved Daughter, Treacherous Liar*.

The lies aren't forever, I remind myself—just until Mamá finishes her treatment.

After a while, I follow Mamá to a nearby bench, where we sit looking out at the skyline.

"Luisa," she says, "When I came here, I didn't know anyone. Not a soul. English may as well have been German and New York, Mars." She pauses, turning her attention to the wall as if she can see her name etched in the cool metal. "Like these people, I fought for my place here. For the store. For a life *for you*."

She exhales, closing her eyes.

"I still fight each day, but now it is more for *my* life, and I'm sorry—" she turns to look at me now, tears brimming. "I'm sorry if that has halted yours."

"Mamá, no—"

"Por favor, Luisa, escúchame. You've spent the past year looking after me, and I'm grateful. But as a mother, my job is to protect *you*, and I haven't been. You shouldn't have to hide things for my sake because you think you're protecting me. I'm so sorry it took me so long to finally realize what was right in front of my eyes."

She reaches up, putting two hands on either side of my head.

I don't move. I don't breathe.

"You've even had to wear this stupid hat to bed! But I know now, *mija*. I know, and I understand."

She knows. She *knows*.

My plan failed, but I can't care right now. Someone knows! *She* knows.

A tsunami of relief crashes down on me, drowning my dread. My shoulders sag and I crush her in a hug.

"I'm sorry, Mamá."

I'm sorry I bid it from you, Mamá.

I'm sorry I couldn't give you more, Mamá.

I'm sorry that I won't be here for you much longer, Mamá.

But the words spill out through my eyes and not my lips as I cry into her shoulder, my arms barely fitting around her puffy coat; yet, I feel warmth all the same.

"You have nothing to be sorry for. Your strength has given me strength to make a

hard decision too.” She grips my hands. “This will be my last treatment. For better or worse. I’ll go into remission, or I won’t. This year has drained us both and I can’t do it again. I won’t make you go through any more of your days like this.”

“But what if you need more treatments? If this is about money—”

“Everything is about money. You haven’t even fixed the radiator because you’re so worried it’ll send us over the edge. I know you lied about calling it in, but the money you make from selling the store will fix that. You can have the rest of the cash. Get your place. Go back to school. Get that internship you’ve always dreamed of. Don’t worry about me—I’ll figure it out. But you—” she rests a hand on my face, then smiles “—you have your whole life ahead of you, Lu.”

Oh, no.

I stiffen, the wave of relief receding until I’m back in my desert of deceit and pain. Of course, she doesn’t know I’m graying—she just figured out I’m selling the store. In my attempts to keep her from knowing the truth, I’ve managed to convince my mother we’re too poor to fix the radiator! I’m an even better liar than I hoped. *Oh, Mamá.*

My tears fall harder now, but this water brings no comfort. I didn’t realize how much I wanted to tell her I’m a Gray, how much I wanted to unburden myself, until now.

“No more secrets, please,” she says, hugging me. “Not knowing what’s going on in that head of yours will make me a Gray before cancer does.”

I sob. Mamá gives me a knowing squeeze. One hand rests on my hat, ready to tear it off and show her my grays, but what good will that do? Mamá says it’s her job as a mother to protect me, but then what’s a daughter’s job? I know I have one because responsibility weighs down on me, anchoring me to my mother’s side. I need this treatment tomorrow and the days after to go okay—call it my dying wish.

But until then, the hat stays.

* * *

Day 30

The store is under contract. I met with a woman who has all the color in her hair last night when we got back from Ellis Island. She lives down the street and has always dreamed of owning a bookstore and wants to buy ours as is. I don’t care what she does with it; her all-cash offer was enough for me to start the paperwork last night. I haven’t shared the news with Mamá yet, but it can wait. Today’s the day of her treatment, and there’s something else I need to tell her first.

I yell up to Mamá from down in the store. The taxi I hailed honks from outside.

“Basta ya. I’m coming. What’re they going to do? Cancel a poor cancer woman’s treatment if she’s five minutes late?” She descends the stairs, wrapping a vibrant turquoise scarf around her neck.

Her footsteps are light, and she even smiles despite what the day holds. I suppose it has a lot to do with our conversation from yesterday. She thinks I'm preparing to move back to NYU next year, not into an empty plot. It's why I have to do this now.

The taxi honks again. Mamá notices, looking past me out the bookstore window.

"Ready?" she asks, heading towards the door. The old wooden floor creaks under my feet, but I don't follow her. Instead, I take a step back, collecting my courage.

"Mamá," I say, "there's something I have to tell you."

She turns, confused. "Ahora, miña?"

"Yes. Now."

She fully faces me, eyebrows raised.

I reach for the top of my hat and hesitate—but this time, I don't stop.

I pull the hat off.

Mamá watches, throwing a hand over her mouth with wide and unblinking eyes. She mutters my name over and over in disbelief and walks towards me. I let her hands rove over my head as if feeling will help her process what she's seeing. But her shock isn't from the lack of color in my hair—no, I made sure of that an hour ago. Her shock is from the lack of my hair altogether. I'm as bald as her.

"Luisa, how could you?"

I think the better question is, how could I not? I realized yesterday that I can't tell Mamá I'm a Gray. Not tomorrow or any day after. If she's truly on the road to recovery, then telling her will take away the one thing she needs more than me: hope. Shaving my head to hide my grays will take away the possibility of me crushing that.

All this time I've planned on this treatment going well, and her outliving me in a year, that I haven't dared entertain the other idea—that these next few weeks or months won't go well. That Mamá is already a Gray and has been for a while. That this treatment was futile.

What if I outlive Mamá?

It's because of the *what if* that I can't tell her. What good will the knowledge of my death do if she dies before me? My silence will be my support, the last thing I have left to offer. I'll keep her hope alive long enough for her body to believe it, which can't happen if she mourns me while I'm still alive. And if all goes well, and in less than a year she curses my name for not telling her, well, then at least she'll be alive and healthy enough to do so. While her future may not involve me, it depends on me all the same.

"I did it for you," I say, her fingers still lingering on my bare scalp.

Her dark eyes meet mine, and I latch onto the steady strength they hold, willing it to stay.

"Ay, Lu," she says. "You didn't have to do this for me."

Maybe I didn't. Maybe this isn't the right decision and I'm being selfish, but maybe

so is Mamá for stopping her treatments. Maybe it's a stupid decision that kills me and maybe I should just tell—or maybe lies told out of love are better than a tragic truth. All I know is: like my days, my decisions are numbered; at least this one is mine.

“Yes, Mamá,” I say, taking her hands in mine, “Yes, I did.”



Coarse Florida Grasses

by Jarrett Webster

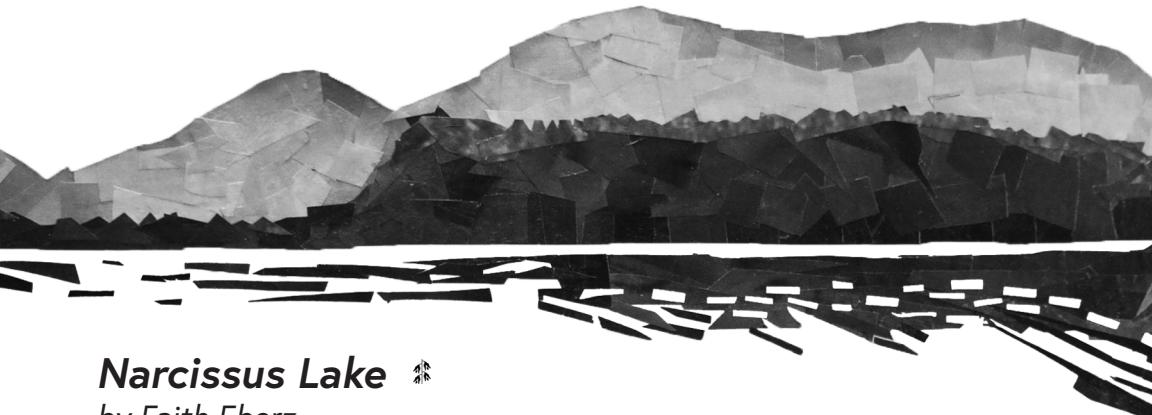
thousands of blades
cross each other in banter and battle.

how frail, the leaf barely carries a grasshopper!
compressing temporary scars in my skin,

I speculate on the history of wars fiery ants wage
grass stains skin, clothes,
leaving a map layered with subterranean blue veins.

unkempt; growth is sporadic,
wounded vegetation scattering toward support
in fantastical inertia
carried toe to toe,
bracing pinecone fights in winter,
early Atlantic chills in spring,
a skin of sweat all hours of humid summer,
autumn caters false familiar faces.

standing on the park shore
across the river,
father's fractured steel knee distracts
brackish currents and
sand beats back.



Narcissus Lake *

by Faith Eberz

I graduated from college at the end of an unusually tepid December, and I needed to get a job if I wanted to go back for graduate school. I wasn't entirely sure I did, but it seemed like the right thing to do. I moved back into my parents' house and woke up every morning to a newspaper with bold red circles on the job listings section, and online applications flooding my inbox. I ignored all of their subtle cues and did nothing to try to get employed until I walked past the diner and walked out an hour later with an apron and instructions to come back the next afternoon.

"You should've applied somewhere you'd actually be using your skills. With benefits and a legitimate salary," Dad told me over a plate of steaming spaghetti. Mom made pasta with a million seasonings, and the rich smell combined with her cinnamon-scented pillar candles was dizzying. Anxiously, I pulled the pendant of my necklace from side to side, scraping along the thin metal. "You're a smart girl, Lilith; I don't see why you'd want to waste your potential."

"The jobs I could get with undergrad aren't anything I want to do anyway. Not long term." This was somewhat true, but really, I became a waiter at the diner because it was the only job I could get simply by showing up. "I just need to save up for grad school, why are you so mad at me for getting a job?"

Maybe my parents could see the deceit in my eyes, or maybe they just knew me well enough after raising me for the 18 years before I'd left for college, but things quickly escalated into a blow-out fight, Dad and I screaming at each other over Mom's plates of oregano-laden pasta, candle flames jerking under our harsh breaths and flurried movements.

"I just don't understand it. You should be excited to get out into the working world! June was applying for places before she even graduated." Mom sighed. She cut a piece of lettuce in her salad into bite-size pieces like she always did. My sister

and her husband were visiting for dinner—June looking between all of us with her discerning, interested eyes, and her husband with his nose buried into his plate. He'd never liked me. June had always assured me he did, but the way his eyes stuck to the mound of spaghetti coiled up told me everything I needed to know. How do you like someone you won't even look at? "Are you having another one of your funks, dear?"

"One of my funks, really? Thanks," I sneered. I didn't know why I was so angry—maybe it was her chronic use of pet-names, or the slight judging tone of her voice. Whatever it was, I was pissed. "Like you give a shit about mental health anyway."

Dinner only devolved from there, ending with me storming out of the house with a backpack full of whatever junk I could fit. My sister followed me out the door, speaking in a hasty, charged voice. I couldn't place any clear words, just the distinct timbre of her speech. I was supposed to do dishes that night, and didn't end up feeling bad about leaving the extra work for Mom until hours later. Even then, I figured out a way to justify it in my head.

"Lily, come on. Come back inside. We can work this out," June said. Her voice sounded muffled and faint, my ears thrumming and smothering everything in its heady palpitations. There was a searing, unreadable look on her face as I climbed into my front seat. "Lily, please." I slammed the door. It rang loud and seemed to linger in the air as I started my engine and pulled away, ignoring the sting of June's surveillance.

My parents hadn't actually kicked me out, but I'd decided that I'd rather shift parking lots nightly, sleep amongst the piles of books and crap lining the floor of my beat-up white 1998 VW Golf, and wake up to the police knocking on my window at the crack of dawn to tell me to move along than live with them any longer. I was 22, restless, and desperate to do anything that would prevent me from becoming like the adults I'd always hated.

"We just want the best for you, darling. You know that," my mother said during the fight, in a placid voice that felt blatantly out of place against the violent, maddened yelling between my father and me. I fixed her with a wooden stare. We had the same eyes. June once said she didn't understand how Mom's were so warm and rich, and mine so cold and faint. She said she hadn't meant it as an insult, but I was never sure.

"No, you don't."

* * *

The diner was run-down, nestled in a strip of old buildings, in that urban wasteland part of town where the suburbs begin to shift into the city. It was nothing but fading red bricks and chipping paint in colors that probably used to be much bolder, but now looked almost gray under the sunlight. Most of the lights shone with a stilted brightness, and the one in the corner constantly flickered and droned with an incessant buzz. The customers looked about as burnt-out as the building, pinched faces cast in stark shadows and washed out under the lights. I'd fill cups of coffee and get nothing

but grunts in return, and get barked at by angry middle-aged men and women more than I felt was normal, even for a job in food service.

The floor was perpetually sticky, and everyone's shoes made a sickly peeling noise as they walked across the cracking, dingy tiles. My coworker, Diana, told me that they'd all given up on cleaning it months ago, that even the owner couldn't be bothered to care anymore.

"Oh, okay," I said, because I didn't know what else *to* say. The exchange left me feeling stupid. I pulled awkwardly at the chain of my necklace, twisting it around my neck until it pinched at my jugular and left a small, angry dimple stretched across my skin. The pendant fell against my skin unceremoniously, with a dull thump of a noise. Diana contemplated me the entire time, like a knowing child, staring long and unashamedly.

She was leaning against the counter with her arms crossed, dark eyes trained on me and light hair pulled into a messy bun. She was chewing gum—it was the kind that wasn't meant for bubble-blowing, but she did it anyway, and it popped in a small, quick bang almost immediately. We weren't supposed to chew gum at work, but I let her have one anyway, and was able to ignore the sharp spearmint (I'd always hated spearmint) simply because she gave it to me. I think I wanted to look cool.

She took a close look at my name tag, and as she walked away with a plate of mash for some trucker sitting in the corner, she said, "I'm going to call you Lily." No one called me that besides my sister, and even she rarely did anymore. An image of June in the driveway, hair misty under the smoky dusk, eyes wide and concerned, flashed into my head, but I pushed it away and took to scrubbing at a splatter of dried coffee stuck to the countertop instead.

We went home together after that shift—her home, because after all, I lived in my car—and it wasn't until we were out from under the fluorescent lights of the restaurant that I was able to tell that her eyes were mahogany, punctuated with precise black wings of eyeliner and soft peach eyeshadow. Her skin was a deep, golden brown, and her hair was dyed chestnut with roots the color of coffee grounds peeking out from her scalp. Diana smelled like jasmine perfume and laundry detergent, but the faint smell of maple syrup lingered on her skin and in her hair. Out of her apron and uniform, she wore a crop top and baggy jeans, which rode down her hips and swished as she walked, the sound of fabric rubbing against itself filling the quiet spaces where our conversation lulled.

At her apartment, we drank wine coolers and smoked weed and talked for hours, then had sex and fell asleep next to each other under her yellow cotton sheets.

By the next morning, we were intimately connected. I thought so, at least. It felt like she knew everything about me: what degree I had; how I felt when I was around my parents or my sister; that the necklace I wore every day was one I stole from my

ex-best friend's mom years ago while spending the night. In my hazy, hungover brain, I decided we were intertwined, even though I'd told her way more than she told me. I barely knew anything about her. I knew that she lived above a Chinese restaurant, where the smell of spices wafted up through the vents, that she put sugar-free vanilla creamer in her coffee, and that she liked spearmint gum.

I left with tangled hair, mascara smudged across the bags under my eyes, and the phone number for an acquaintance of hers who was renting his basement.

"He's a little sketchy, not gonna lie," she'd told me over morning coffee. "But it's better than sleeping in your car."

Diana's friend was definitely sketchy, and his basement had massive chips in the paint and mildew growing along the baseboards, but he reminded me of my ex-boyfriend's brother from sophomore year of college, and I found comfort in that. My ex-boyfriend was a kind male feminist, who somehow studied both philosophy and engineering. He was way sweeter to me than I probably deserved, and came home with me for Easter that year.

"What about that whole 'bisexual' thing?" my mother said. She laughed like it was all just a joke, but my blood boiled and a few weeks later I broke up with him out of spite.

The man who owned the house was named Jared and he sold weed and Adderall to college kids, and me once I moved in. Most of the time I'd pay full price, but sometimes he'd give me some in exchange for cleaning his bathroom or doing the dishes for him. He never pressured me into hanging out with him while I used his product like some creepy dealers or other friends-of-friends would. I appreciated that. I'd take my loot into the basement and either ride out the high, staring at the ceiling, or begin reports and dissertations that I'd never end up finishing, until my back cramped from hunching over my laptop for so long, and my eyes seemed to be dripping blue light.

I slept on a mattress straight on the floor, the fitted sheet never staying on right. Eventually, I stopped trying. The window at the very top of the wall peered out at a dip in the hillside, and in the early morning, the sunlight streamed straight through, highlighting the dust mites floating in the air and lighting them up like fireflies. One of my first few days in the house I tried to clean the glass, but only seemed to make the streaks worse. I gave up. The chemical citrus stung the edges of my nails.

Sometimes, I'd imagine taking all of my Adderall and then calling an ambulance or my parents immediately after, saying I'd made a mistake. I wasn't sure I wanted to die, but I relished in the idea that I'd get to go to a hospital and when I'd come out, everyone would hug me a little closer and would feel just a little bit guilty for not doing that sooner. It felt sick to indulge in these fantasies, but I couldn't help myself. It was

my dark secret.

My philosopher/engineer ex once told me about the term *l'appel du vide*. The call of the void. He'd said it was normal, and when I couldn't stop the guilt of these ideas from seeping in, I'd comfort myself with the notion that it was a little like that. You can slap a French name on anything and make it sound prettier.

* * *

June started calling me mere hours after I'd first left home, telling me to go back to our parents' or at least come sleep on her couch for a while if I had to. She hated the idea of me living in my car, and somehow hated the idea of me living in Jared's basement even more. She'd call me every day and would try to convince me that I should go home, and would ask me the same questions my parents did that night. Is something wrong? Are you feeling okay? Do you need to see your doctor again?

There was only so much of repeating myself I could take. After a while I stopped answering her calls at all.

* * *

At the beginning of April, Diana invited me to the lake with her and some of her friends. The idea sounded really nice at first. I barely even spoke to anyone from high school anymore and all of my college friends lived in different cities, and Diana had been friendly enough in my time knowing her. I never really went to that lake with my friends growing up, and I decided that it'd be the perfect place to create new friend groups and memories that weren't marred by the loneliness and nostalgia of the rest of the city I grew up in. As the actual event drew closer, I became less excited to put myself out there and began dreading making a fool of myself. Was it possible for your social skills to depreciate beyond repair even if it had only been a few months?

Diana and I drove out there together and she immediately jumped into the fold. I hovered on the edge of the group and chain smoked on a beach towel in front of the small, crackling bonfire, a weak glowing amber that cast long shadows across the shore. Diana's face looked pretty in the light. Softer somehow.

One of the guys in the group made his way over to me. In the brief time I'd been there I could already tell he was one of the people in the crowd that always gets talked over. I felt bad for him, and empathized with the plight of never being able to get a word in; I was the youngest in my entire family, and in all of my friendships I was always the person that got slightly bullied.

I let him walk me down to the dock and talk for as long as he wanted about football and graduate school. I couldn't have cared less about sports, and he studied something boring like business, but I tried not to show my disinterest and schooled my facial expression in a way that I hoped was attentive.

"So, are you in grad school?" he asked after a million years. I turned to the lake and stared into the inky blackness of the water, swinging my foot so my toes just barely

skimmed the surface, sending small ripples across the void that caught the moonlight on their breast and glittered under the midnight sky.

“No, I’m saving up for it.” My vocal cords scraped against themselves uncomfortably. I didn’t work that day and had barely spoken more than a few words for hours, and my throat ached from disuse.

“Oh, cool. What do you want to study?”

“Nothing.” I took a swig of my beer. It was ice cold, and my fingers were beginning to lock up; it didn’t help that the spring air started to turn bleak and chilly as soon as the sun went down. Goosebumps prickled along my arms.

“Nothing? Then why are you saving up?” He sounded amused. I finally glanced at him and couldn’t seem to remember his name.

“Isn’t that what you’re supposed to do?” I looked back at the lake. I didn’t know why I wanted to go to grad school or if I even did at all, and I suddenly felt so exposed and ashamed in front of this nameless man. He wasn’t particularly interesting, but he had shit figured out. That was more than I could say about myself.

I glanced over at Diana—beautiful, radiant Diana—giggling and smiling with her friends, and I couldn’t seem to figure out how to place myself in the picture. I looked at her a lot while speaking with him, waiting for the moment she’d turn her head and our eyes would lock. Maybe she looked when I didn’t, but that thought seemed childish. An excuse. If she was a honeycomb—one piece of a big, intricate tessellation—I was a serrated, shattered edge piercing the hive’s side, utterly parasitic. Leeching off her friends and her drugs and her sex. A tracheal mite, a microscopic feeder.

“It’s really nice out, huh?” He followed my gaze out into the water as he spoke, then cleared his throat without covering his mouth.

I made a noncommittal noise. The water looked endless and scary, and I tried to imagine what it would be like to sink into it and vanish. To have my bloated and blue body found days later washed up on the other end of the shore, hair waterlogged and eyes unseeing.

“Have you ever thought about drowning yourself?” I asked him abruptly.

It didn’t take long for him to return to Diana and the rest of the group after that.

A few weeks later, Diana asked me if I was okay out of nowhere. A piece of me swelled with excitement. Sometimes, I almost liked concerning my loved ones, and it scared me. Her voice sounded genuinely concerned and caring, but I couldn’t seem to trust it. I didn’t know how to answer and rushed off to refill an old woman’s coffee instead.

Later that day we took our lunch breaks together and smoked cigarettes on the curb in front of the gas station down the road. There’d been a fog gathering in my brain since the night at the lake, and instead of chattering endlessly to her like I

normally would have, dumping all the small details of my life that she probably didn't care about but felt endlessly profound to me, I stared into brown water at the bottom of the gutter and silently sucked down my smoke.

"Have you thought about looking into antidepressants?" Diana asked, her voice cutting into the blanket of silence that settled over our shoulders. She stamped the butt of her cigarette out on the cracked, sunbaked pavement. The ash crumbled and sunk into a crevice in the road where small stalks of blistered grass were poking out.

I took them before but stopped sometime in college. I couldn't remember when, but I had felt able to function without them for at least a year before I was confident enough to stop. I probably could have used them, but couldn't afford anything like that without the aid of my parents' insurance, and I still refused to speak to them, no matter how many emails and voicemails they sent my way.

"I don't need them," I told her. I didn't care.

In the following weeks, I filled the void of prescribed medication with the Adderall I'd gotten from Jared in hopes of making up for lost energy. There was a big, tangled knot in my hair that wouldn't come out (or maybe I just wasn't trying hard enough), and my pulse seemed to lag and beat heavily. I thought I might be dying, but I ignored the pit that burrowed in my stomach and pushed the thought into the corner with the unopened voicemails from my family and the pile of papers and clothes scattered across my floor. Sometimes Diana looked at me a little bit sideways, but she didn't say anything and I didn't offer anything.

I spent most of my free time at the lake, drafting the beginnings of poems I'd never finish and visualizing what would happen if I left them on the shore and walked into the water. Maybe I could be immortalized as a world-weary artist. I found the idea comforting.

* * *

I went with Diana to another party, this time at the business major's house. She'd painted her eyes with glitter eyeshadow and put on extra spritzes of that jasmine perfume, then reached over and sprayed some onto my neck as well. I hoped that the scent would cling to the chain of my necklace—that it would last longer than just that fleeting night. I liked to hold trinkets from my friendships. Maybe if I could cling onto this smell, so intrinsic to Diana, I could crawl into a piece of her life that felt more permanent. We'd be so close we'd be interchangeable. I watched the streetlights fall on her face the entire way over and yearned to turn around and go back to her apartment, just the two of us hanging out, but she kept chattering excitedly about the party and I didn't have the heart to admit that I wasn't sure I wanted to go anymore.

On the way up his front lawn, I asked Diana what his name was, and she laughed and told me that it was Preston, and I pretended that it had been hiding somewhere in my mind all along, waiting for someone to call it out.

"You were talking to him for, like, an hour last time, how'd you forget?" I couldn't remember if he'd even told me, though he probably did. I'd never been good with names.

Inside, Diana got distracted by her other friends. In the months I'd known her, I'd learned that she had a tendency to do that. When it was just the two of us, she'd give me her undivided attention, but as soon as others came into the picture, she got all scatterbrained. Sometimes it annoyed me, especially because it felt like she was the only person I had left in my life anymore, but I always pushed it aside, convinced that the thought made me the meanest friend in the world.

Diana had a million people to entertain, and Preston avoided me like the plague, so I sat next to some girl I'd never seen before and let her give me a pill without asking what it was first. It spread over me slowly, like summer sunlight leisurely soaking into a public pool. My body felt warm, and the phantom scent of too-much-chlorine mingled with the jasmine and the weed that hung in the air. I sat silently with the girl who gave it to me and listened to the stories she told and drank the vodka out of her cup every time she offered it to me. She was much more interesting than Preston, though it probably helped that I was more intoxicated than I had been at the lake.

By the time the combination of alcohol and the mystery drug numbed my fingertips, the ever-growing noise of the party slowly became too much for me. I dropped the girl's cup of vodka trying to hand it back to her and felt tears in my eyes as I sputtered apologies and watched it soak into the carpet. She called after me as I stumbled off to find Diana, said my name with soft, rounded syllables that reeked of concern. I didn't remember telling her my name.

"I'm leaving," I yelled over the music. Diana put her hands on my shoulders and looked into my leaking eyes.

"Are you okay?" she yelled back. I think I nodded. "Hang on, let me drive you. I've barely had anything to drink."

"No, don't. I'll be okay."

The lake was frigid and brimming. Staring out under the crescent moonlight, spired tongue piercing the crests of the faint waves, it almost seemed to be breathing, overflowing and filling with dark, endless water. My fingers were quivering and twitching at my sides, and I couldn't seem to steady them for the life of me. I dragged their shaking edges down the sides of my cheeks, scraping away at the makeup and the fog plastered across my visage. The air was thick with humidity and sweet with the scent of a brewing storm.

Wrapping my arms tight around my midsection, I waded into the lake. The water flooded my shoes and lapped at my skin. I had a bruise on my knee—deep, angry purple—and I couldn't remember where it came from. I took a coarse breath and

plunged beneath the water, disappearing into the murky waves.

I opened my eyes, trying to peer into the other world I had submerged myself in, but the moonlight barely pierced the surface, hanging over my head with a phantasmic gray sheen. I shut them again. Let myself sink to the bottom, let the hielal sand gather in the soles of my sandals. My hair floated over my face, and I yanked it away, harsh, flurried movements stalled by the water. I ignored the raw prickling in the bottom of my lungs, focused on the light, airy sensation brewing in my skull. Floating. The world was my obsidian-cerulean grave, and I let it scoop the dirt into my eyes willingly, happily.

As the spots across my eyelids began to darken and the drifting in my skull turned into a crashing, the fight or flight kicked in. I broke the surface, the chain of my necklace stuck around my chin, my hair plastered to my face. Out of my pearlescent tomb, I no longer felt soothed by the way the lake poked and prodded at my skin. I stared into the moonlight, razed my face with the jagged lines of my nails. I couldn't remember the last time I clipped them, the last time I washed my makeup-streaked face. Every inch of my body shook and thrashed. I was nowhere and no one. Frightened and disoriented.

Like a compass spinning wildly on its axis, I stumbled to the shore and circled, trying to gather my bearings. I lost a sandal in the water, and my feet were dirt-stained and coated as they rasped against the sand. I didn't know who I was looking for. My parents hated me. I'd show up at home—their home—and they'd slam the door in my face. Diana didn't care. Not in the way I cared about her. I was her weird friend. The work friend, the damaged friend. If I went back to the party, I'd be pushed further away. Solidified in the spot I wasn't sure I wanted.

June's messages seemed to call out to me from my waterlogged phone. She'd flooded my inbox since day one, begging me to stay with someone who cared about me, to take care of myself and stay safe. I ignored most of her messages. Let them pile up. I was the worst sister ever, but driven by the childlike desperation, feverish and rabid, that used to lead me to her bed when I had nightmares, I figured there was really nowhere else I could go.

* * *

It rained on my walk over. Barely a drizzle, cold and stark against the humid air, but the trip took long enough that when I landed on June's doorstep, I was seemingly even more soaked. I was sobbing and shivering; my shirt clung to my torso and my hair was matted to my face. She opened the door and made me take off my sopping clothes before she'd let me past the entryway, all the while I tried to gauge her facial expression for anger or annoyance, gearing up for a lecture. Everyone in my life was more put together than me. June's husband came into the room, and she sent him away, but I was humiliated that he had seen me at all. Naked and vulnerable. Coming

here suddenly felt like a terrible mistake. I stood in her hallway, shaking and exposed, and stared at the puddles of water forming at my feet.

June led me back into her bathroom, muttering gentle words while I sputtered incoherent sentences, shaking my head, and feeling crazed, overwhelmed. She wrapped me in one of her soft sage green towels and ran a bath. I got a look at myself in the mirror, an amalgam of running eyeliner, blown-out pupils, and snot. My necklace hung between my breasts, and I pulled it away, twisting it along the chain. The scraping noise, barely a whisper, seemed harsh and jarring. I flinched.

When the bath was done filling up, the water was steaming and almost painful against my rain-frozen, lake-frozen body. I sat with my back to the edge and let June wash my hair like she used to when I was five and she was 13. I liked when she helped me with my baths more than when Mom did—she was always much gentler with my hair than Mom was.

As she massaged shampoo into my scalp, hands soft and soothing, I tried to wipe the tears and snot off my face but ended up smearing them into my skin and crying even harder. I punched weakly at my knee with a fist barely closed, and June reached out, pulled my hand away.

“Hey, stop that.” She went silent and the quiet amplified every inch of the mess I’d made of myself.

“I’m sorry, June,” I whispered, voice hoarse. She stilled her movements for a moment, then began pouring water over my hair. The soapy water ran down my face and coalesced with my tears until I couldn’t tell the burn of the suds in my eyes and the burn of my crying apart.

“You’ve gotta get your shit together, Lily.”

The nickname was too nice for the words.



Swans
Paper collage
Zofia Martin





No Peeking

Acrylic paint

Lauren McLevey



Swamp Orchid

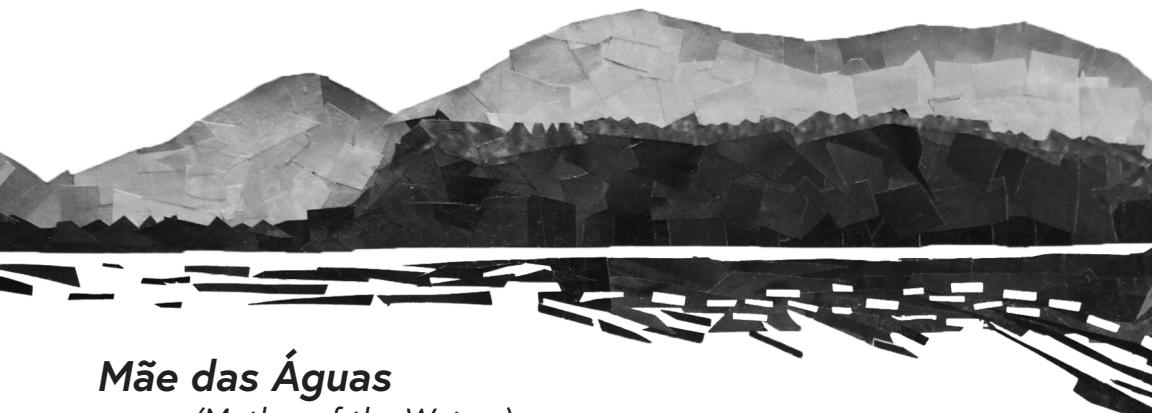
Chalk pastel, pastel pencil on toned paper
Lauren McLevey



Animal Skull

Acrylic paint, leaves

Zofia Martin



Mãe das Águas

(*Mother of the Waters*)

by R.S. Kadin

Depending on who you are, finding a dead fish at a pesque e pague can mean one of three things. A cautious patron will know better than to fish there. A cheap patron will know better than to pass up a free meal. A superstitious patron will know better than to ignore an omen. The guest who alerted Rafaela's father was all three.

Rafaela and her father were used to patrons who would make these sorts of claims to get out of paying, but this was the first year they took those claims seriously. It had only been two months since the fires in the Amazon had died out. People found death everywhere. Dead fish lay baking over the smoldering earth where rivers used to be. Dead plants, charred black. One time, Rafaela discovered a dead toucan on the porch. Its wings had burned away in mid-air, a tiny Icarus. Her father, a divorced man in his fifties who owned a failing family business, joked that lunch was prepared early. Rafaela, a woman in her twenties who had no other prospects, cried that night because she couldn't tell if the bird had died because it had burned alive or because it snapped its neck when it crashed onto their patio. She didn't know which would be worse. She still doesn't.

Rafaela should have been inside preparing dinner. Instead, she is eavesdropping on the men gathered at the bank of the furthest lake. She's in the middle of pretending to clean tables when her father orders her to call over the farmhands, Tiago and Marcelo, and to bring the rest of the cleaning nets from the pool. It isn't until she returns that she finds that the patron has undersold the whole thing. The entire surface of the lake shimmers with brown-green lumps. Every single one of them is a dead tambaqui.

Rafaela's father orders her and the farmhands to grab a net and start rounding up the fish while he haggles with the guest. When she dips her net into the water, the fish bob on the ripples and her stomach feels the same at the stench. These fish have not been here long. They do not smell rotten. Rafaela thought she was used to the smell

of blood, having lived and worked on the farm her entire life, but since the fires, she's had less of a stomach for it. She discovers she has even less when she pulls up her first fish and its waterlogged stomach erupts into an outpour of guts, red and tangled.

She screams and drops the net.

Her father comes rushing over, the guest trailing behind him. Before he can ask what happened, Tiago calls for senhor, then Marcelo too, both of them pointing frantically to the water. Rafaella's father takes her net and pulls one in to look for himself.

There in the net, as it drained bloody water, was a half-eaten fish.

Rafaella's father handed the net back to Rafaella and ordered everyone to pull in as much as they could. Fish missing eyes from their sockets, fish missing fins and tails, fish with their skulls pried open and their brains sucked out. Rafaella tries not to look at the trails of blood leading back to the water. She tries to continue working. Behind her, her father and the guest speculate.

"It could be a snake or a caiman," the guest suggests. "I saw on Globo that they're leaving the Amazon to look for someplace else to live and they're coming into people's homes."

"That is not possible, senhor," her father responds. "Look at the bite marks."

He shows the guest a fish with a bite out of its flank. The teeth have no gaps between them. They are small, rounded, arranged in a semi-circle. They are human.

Rafaella barely notices when her pole gets stuck on the floor of the lake. She hadn't realized that she had let her net sink below the surface, mindlessly stirring up poeira. But when she tried to lift the net, the pole wouldn't budge.

She tugged on the pole, and it tugged back. Hard.

As if the lake wanted Rafaella for itself, she was pulled in. The men barely had time to react. When Rafaella opens her eyes, they sting in the muddy water. Her lungs burn. She is still clutching the pole and now, so is somebody else.

Rafaella looks down to see the pink, rubbery tail of a river dolphin bumping against her legs. She follows it up to the brown body of a woman, decorated in black lines, and meets a harsh gaze outlined in red. The woman holds the pole in one hand and a squirming tambaqui by the tail in the other. She narrows her eyes, drags the fish to her mouth, and bites into its flesh until it stops moving, all under Rafaella's nose. Even when the mermaid rips off a bit of meat with her teeth and chews, Rafaella forgets to scream. She wants to say something. The woman's dark hair is so long she imagines it would envelop her. But before she can speak, hands grab her by the armpits and yank her out of the water.

She collapses onto the bank, gasping for air under a flurry of questions. In all of the commotion, Rafaella's father had pushed the patron aside into the stacks of fish to get to his daughter and that patron brought Tiago down with him. Marcelo made no

attempt at hiding his laughter, even as he helped drag Rafaela ashore. But all of that dies down when they hear the water splash and the cleaning net miraculously finds its way back to shore, returned by none other than the mermaid Rafaela saw moments ago.

“Take it,” she commands, “and leave me in peace.”

The guest and Tiago forget they are covered in fish guts. Marcelo forgets why he was laughing. Rafaela forgets why she is scared. The hair she believed to be so beautiful now clung in a dark, tangled mass to the woman’s bloodied, scowling face. A thought crosses Rafaela’s mind, although she’d be too embarrassed to admit it: an image of her licking her thumb to wipe the blood off the mermaid’s lips.

Rafaela’s father is the only one who remembers to speak. He clears his throat. “Ah, excuse me, senhora. What is your name?”

The woman picks a fishbone from her teeth and spits it out. “Iara.”

The men all hold their breath. None dare to breathe. The subtlest trace of words forms on the guest’s lips, airless. “Mãe das Águas.”

Rafaela’s father continues, rather bravely. “Senhora Iara, what are you doing in our lake?”

Iara’s tail splashes behind her. “Such bullshit. You force me out of my home and leave me without food only to wonder what it is I’m doing in yours.” She raises her arms above her head, gesturing to the dying world. “Where am I supposed to go? Do you think I can live on ashes? Go away!”

Rafaela meets Iara’s wrath with a pitiful gaze. Marcelo leans in and whispers to his boss, “Senhor, what should we do?”

The boss’s mustache twitches. “Nothing,” he decides, “we leave her alone.”

“But senhor,” Tiago pipes up, “what about the lake? The fish?”

He is already making his way back to the main house. “We have two other lakes. Close this one for now. Don’t let any guests go near it. Come, Rafaela.”

Luckily for them, they only had one guest at the time, and he already knew to avoid the lake at all costs. Rafaela rises to her feet, sadness weighing heavily in her chest, and she follows the men back to the house.

* * *

Dinner plans changed that night. Rafaela couldn’t bear to look at another fish, so she prepared feijoada with rice, farofa, and collard greens in its place. Rafaela’s father acquiesced and gave the guest a refund earlier that evening. Globo played on the television. Everyone ate and listened until the head of the table cleared his throat.

“No one will speak to Iara, do you hear me? Do not go to the lake. Ignore it. If any of the guests ask, tell them the lake has no fish because it is being drained.”

Marcelo swallows. “But senhor, she cannot stay here. If she eats all of our fish, she will put us out of business. Someone needs to remove her.”

“Are you volunteering?”

Marcelo sticks a forkful of beans in his mouth.

“I agree that Iara needs to leave, but look around.” Rafaela’s father gestures to the dinner table. “This is all the people we have. If we lose someone, that will hurt our business too. No one here can afford a funeral. Iara is too dangerous.”

“The senhor is right,” Tiago says, bits of rice flying from his mouth. “Iara is a man-stealer. You’re familiar with the stories. Men disappearing in the Amazon. Where do you think they disappeared to? Right into her belly!” He downs another spoonful of rice. “My god! She is a siren! We should cover our ears tonight in case she sings.”

Rafaela pokes at a pork sausage half-heartedly, looking away to hide her rolling eyes.

“Besides,” Tiago continues, even though Rafaela wishes he wouldn’t, “I don’t think she will eat all of our fish. She barely finished a single one today. A little nibble here, a little nibble there. She may be a spirit from the Amazon, but she’s the pickiest eater I’ve ever seen.”

Rafaela puts down her fork louder than she meant to. “Don’t you think if she wanted to eat you, she would’ve done it by now? Her home is ruined. She has nowhere else to go! Why can’t she stay here?”

Tiago throws his head back in laughter, rice still half-chewed in his mouth. “Look, senhor,” he says to her father. “It seems like Iara already charmed your daughter.”

Her father doesn’t laugh. “Rafaela, my dear, there isn’t enough for everyone to go around,” he explains. “We can’t take another mouth to feed.”

“But we rarely have any guests nowadays.”

“But what if some arrive tomorrow?” Marcelo adds. He looks at Tiago and says, “I don’t care how much she eats. People don’t come here to catch dead fish.”

Tiago shrugs. “Still, I’d rather her bite them than bite me.”

“Iara didn’t bite me. Earlier, when I fell in the lake, it was because she pulled me in. She could’ve eaten me or sung to me, but she didn’t. And she didn’t threaten anybody earlier either. She just asked to be left alone.”

Marcelo leans back in his chair. “Rafa has a point. Why didn’t Iara touch you?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Tiago points at Rafaela with his spoon. “She’s a woman.”

The whole table goes silent as Tiago realizes what he said. On the television, Globo reports on the day that São Paulo woke up to smoke coming from the other side of the country.

Rafaela’s father shoots Tiago down before he can even ask. “No. It’s too dangerous.”

Tiago exclaims and throws his hands in the air. Marcelo says, “Please, senhor. She’s our only option.”

“Papai, I don’t mind,” Rafaela pleads.

The boss rises from the table, chair screeching underneath him, silencing everybody.

“Nobody goes near the lake, do you understand me? If I see anybody there, I will let her eat you. The best we can do is cut our losses. We still have two good lakes. That’s good even in this climate. We’re going to keep it that way. Understood?”

The table murmurs in agreement. Globo has now switched their story back to the flame-ravaged west of Brazil and the claim that despite everything, only two human lives were known to be lost. In Rondônia, the fires ate an apartment complex and spat out two corpses, burnt beyond recognition. Globo called them “carbonized.” They also called them lovers, because when they were dug up from the rubble, they were found embracing one another, refusing to let the other go and, in the end, dying for it.

The men left the table one by one, leaving Rafaela in the kitchen to do the dishes. She took her time, cleaning until there was nothing left to clean, and when that happened, she found something else to tidy. The sink, the table, the chairs, all while keeping an eye on the living room. Marcelo was the oldest of the two farmhands and he always fell asleep right away after dinner. Her father would usually follow, but most of the time he tried to stay up long enough to say goodnight to Rafaela. They had cues she could look out for. Tiago, on the other hand, was difficult to predict, even if he was a year younger than Rafaela. He liked to stay up late because that’s when Globo would show the R-rated movies, unless they were ones he didn’t like or thought were lame, in which case he would go to bed.

Rafaela hoped Globo picked a bad one tonight. She was getting tired of cleaning. Marcelo was already out. She could hear him snoring in his room. Her father already came in and kissed her good night. Tiago was the only one she was waiting on.

By now, she’s lost count of how many times she’s checked. The TV in the living room is on but the volume is low. But the lights are still on, which means...

This is a waste of time.

Rafaela goes to bed the latest and wakes up earliest. She shouldn’t have to feel like she’s snooping around, even though that’s exactly what she’s doing. She marches into the living room and stands in front of the TV. Tiago does not react. He’s spread out on the couch with an arm over his eyes and his mouth hanging open like a suffocating fish.

Thanking Globo for their bad taste, the rebel daughter steals a flashlight and makes sure the door doesn’t hit her on the way out.

The birds who evacuated the Amazon have yet to return, and the night is a hollow shell of its former self. The cicadas who are normally awake this time of year are gone too, baked alive in the scorched earth. As Rafaela approaches Iara’s lake, she thinks about the crunching of dry grass underfoot and how even that feels too loud in the quiet night. There’s dry air and rippling water. When she shines her flashlight on the

lake surface, Iara is already there waiting for her.

“What do you want?”

“I’ve come to warn you about the men. They’re coming for you in the morning.”

“So?”

“So you should leave! Before they hurt you!” There was a pang in Rafaela’s chest as she said this, as if it hurt to say. But it has to be said.

Iara pulls a dead tambaqui from the water and bites just above its head. This time, Rafaela can hear the many little bones crunching under Iara’s teeth, unlike underwater, and it’s all she can do not to gag. Iara chews for what feels like a long time before swallowing.

“Girl, you are sweet,” she says. It makes Rafaela’s heart flutter. “But do you not remember how I was the best warrior among my people? How I killed my two brothers in my sleep? I couldn’t fear mortal men less.” Another bite leaves her chin bloodier than before. “And in case you forgot, I have nowhere else to go.”

Rafaela clutches her flashlight. “I’m sorry you have lost your home. If it were up to me, I’d let you stay here.”

Iara huffs. “And if it were up to me, I would go home.”

“For what it’s worth,” Rafaela stammers, the words tumbling out of her mouth, “I’m happy you haven’t left yet. It’s nice having another woman on the farm.” When Iara doesn’t respond, she asks, “May I sit?”

The Mæ das Águas gestures to the bank with her bloody chin. Rafaela sits.

“The men say you are a man-stealer, that you eat the men you seduce. Why didn’t you eat me earlier?”

Iara scoffs. “I haven’t eaten anyone in over 200 years. It always amazes me how well stories persist throughout history. No, I haven’t eaten anybody since I went by a different name. When I lived as a man, I was Ipupiara. Freshwater monster.”

“You were not always Iara?” Rafaela asked, eyes wide.

“No. For a while, I was satisfied with living as Ipupiara. I was angry with the punishment I received for the death of my brothers. Execution by drowning. I wanted revenge. But I stopped after two centuries when I realized I was unhappy. I was lonely.” Iara sets the half-eaten tambaqui in the water, watching it float away. “If I did not have those 200 years, I would have never realized I had wanted to become Iara. Some mortals will go their entire lifetime without knowing the ways they could’ve lived more freely.”

Inside, Rafaela feels as hollow as the night, fearing something missing inside her but not knowing where to check. “How do you know?”

“Your body will tell you.” Iara swims closer, placing her elbows on the bank beside Rafaela. “It knows how to speak if you know how to listen.”

“But how do I know how to listen?”

Iara laughs, resting her head on her arms, and Rafaela feels hot. “Relax. Everyone takes a little while at first.” Iara kicks out her tail behind her. “After I became Iara, I started attracting lovers. I’ve had many husbands in my time, but after a while, I realized I wanted wives, too.”

Rafaela fumbles with the flashlight in her lap. “How did you know you liked women?”

“I thought they were pretty,” she replies.

A shaky, hissing laugh escapes from Rafaela’s lips. She feels at ease in her body and it makes her uncomfortable. “You mean, it’s that easy?”

“It’s not. It’s never easy.” Iara looks through her matted hair at Rafaela. “You look like you have something you want to say.”

Rafaela gazes at the dark water before her, and she takes off her Havaianas and slides her feet in. “I think I like girls,” she admits, when she realizes that the water is fine.

“Really? Who made you realize?”

“You. I think you’re beautiful.”

The mermaid pushes her hair back and smiles. Her teeth are blood-stained and there are chunks of meat and bone in them; Rafaela likes the way her lips curl.

“You’re not bad yourself,” Iara says. “You remind me of the good parts of humanity.” She rocks onto her hands and pushes herself out of the water, closer to Rafaela, until only waning patience sits fidgeting between them. “Have you ever kissed a girl before?”

Rafaela can taste Iara’s breath on her lips, the taste of nature and death and the Amazon. She licks her thumb and drags it over the layers of caked blood on Iara’s mouth, her lip soft and plump under her touch.

“No. But I would like to.”

They close the gap. The taste catches Rafaela off-guard; there’s raw tambaqui and muddy water and the iron grip of blood, but there’s also something indescribable, something uniquely Iara, and it keeps her from pulling away. It’s buried underneath everything else and Rafaela is determined to dig it up. She uses her tongue eagerly. The corners of Iara’s mouth rise with the earnestness of it all.

This is not Rafaela’s first kiss. One time, when she had just turned 19, she and Tiago kissed behind the house. She didn’t like it. She only did it because she knew her father would be happy if she married him and stayed on the farm. Tiago was the one who initiated the kiss anyhow. It was too much teeth and tongue, and when Rafaela tried to fight back from choking, Tiago told her to hold still and stop moving so much. She never let him kiss her again.

Rafaela breaks off. “No one can know about this,” she says.

“I won’t tell,” Iara promises her.

Rafaela sighs, resting her forehead against Iara's. "This is the happiest I've ever felt. I wish it could continue."

"Maybe it can," Iara whispers. "If we get married, I'll make you like me. I could take you away from here."

Rafaela's breath catches in her throat. "I would love to," she sighs, "but I can't leave my father so easily. Not when the pesque e pague is like this."

"Then we don't have to leave right now," Iara tells her, kissing her forehead. "One day."

Rafaela nods and holds Iara's body against hers, the water seeping through her clothes as she catches Iara's lips with her own, each breath exhaled like a promise. The lake splashes against Rafaela's legs and she giggles dreamily, even when a brilliant white light blinds her and Iara, and only when Tiago says her name does she register that this is not a dream.

"So she really has charmed you," are the first words out of his mouth. Then he takes off sprinting back to the house.

Rafaela forgets Iara, forgets even her shoes, and tries to chase after him, but he is too quick and by the time she gets to the house, the men are awake, and he has told them everything.

Rafaela's father approaches her and she's sobbing, trying to force words around the lump in her throat, but he doesn't listen. He smacks her across the face with the back of his hand. It rings throughout the living room, and she becomes hysterical. He takes her by the arm and drags her kicking and screaming to her room, where he throws her in and locks the door while she bangs against it with her fists.

It's when she hears the front door slam shut that she realizes it's hopeless.

When Rafaela awakes the next morning, she hadn't realized she fell asleep in the first place. Daylight shines through the window. She assumes it's morning. When she tests her doorknob, she finds that it's still locked. Rafaela presses her ear to the door but hears no one.

She starts eyeing the window. She's never climbed out a window before, never had a reason to, and she's reminded of this when she falls over to the other side. The scratches on her shins sting in the wind as she runs toward Iara's lake, screaming her name, men be damned.

But Iara is not there waiting for her this time. The lake water is the color of rust. Three large lumps float face down, whole, for the most part. Each one used to be a man.

Years in the future, the pesque e pague is abandoned. The land was taken back by the government and Rafaela moved to Rondônia with what little money she made

working. When a family hires her as a live-in maid, taking pity on a girl newly orphaned, she is relieved. Even better is that she is not alone. The family has a daughter around her age whom she befriends. Right now, she has the rare day off and she's meeting that daughter at a padaria.

They hug upon meeting each other outside, kissing each other's cheeks.

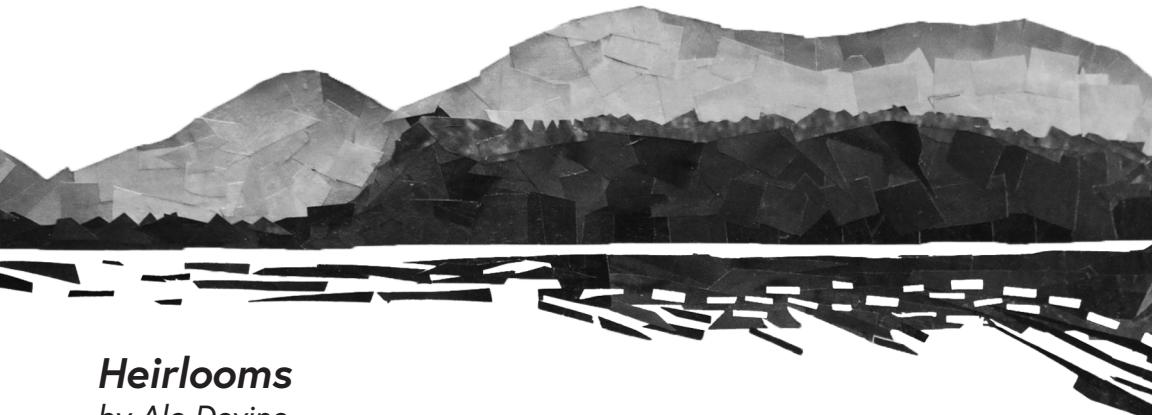
"You look beautiful," Rafaela tells her, eyeing her up and down. The girl giggles and thanks her, fingers lingering against Rafaela's shoulders.

When they go in, they sit at a table for two after ordering. The girl talks about her day at university and Rafaela listens to every word.

When their food is ready, Rafaela gets it.

When Rafaela has a bit of ketchup smeared on her chin from her coxinha, the girl licks her thumb and wipes it off for her. When they are done eating, the girl is the one who pays.

They stay a while longer. They talk and laugh and show each other things they think the other will like on Instagram. When it's time for the girl to go back to university, Rafaela hugs her goodbye. Unless someone were watching, which the cashier certainly wasn't, no one would notice how long the embrace lasted before finally breaking apart.



Heirlooms

by Alo Devine

I almost forgot the church carpet—

depressed from dozens of shoes
the deep burgundy hid droplets of holy wine
that bled from the lips of each chalice

The same dribble as iron saliva following a lost tooth.

I watched the places they should have stained swallow each bead like a pill
I almost forgot the tartaned pews
their eyes on me while I judged God.

I almost forgot the fireflies—

red heads and brown bodies the same as the lipstick tube in Mother's purse
mossy toes on the wooden floorboards at twilight
Father's thunderous laughter as he washed my feet in the sink

The scent of the insects still alive on my palms,

intertwined with dish soap and the wetness of a hand towel
I almost forgot my own aching voice
a tuning orchestra as they fled from my grasp.

I almost forgot the washing machine—

tucked away like a coffee can full of ones
from my perch atop the dryer a swarm of cicadas approached
carrying with it the enveloping fragrance of linen.

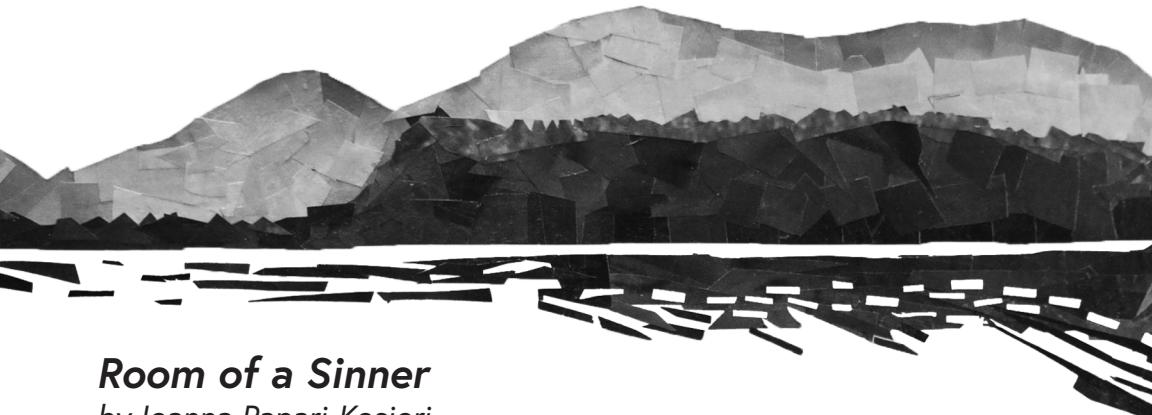
I beat my feet against the steel door until the minute hands fell off the clocks;
there are cold spots on the heels now where the metal kissed me too
I almost forgot the concrete floor
a bashful witness to my first brutal intimacy.



Dirty Display

by Natalia Fontfrias

A mannequin arrived
newly trained
it'll stay in place
for all enticing nights
and all future days.
Stuck in a pose
for the hungry folks
who just want
to strip off their clothes.

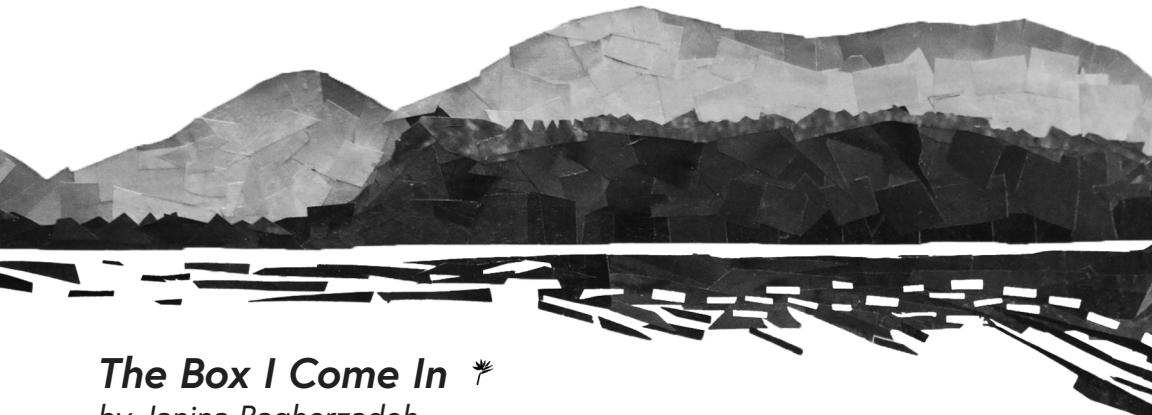


Room of a Sinner

by Ioanna Papari-Kosiori

One by one, they were hanged from swollen ankles,
leaking regretfully and betrayed by innocence.
Artless, coated by the frenzied giggles of a cat.
Joyless dolls far more of human skin than clay,
seized from the streets of Belleville.
They taste like metal,
oh, how we all wish we savored them like honey.

The vase, a half-ghost
knits a broken chant atop a tongueless porch.
It floats.
Maybe it will get lucky and grow birds in its belly,
bring back the forbidden fruit; bear it in the gums of the painter.
Conceal heaven from the taskmaster.



The Box I Come In *

by Janina Bagherzadeh

It's not that my dad hates my mom's appearance, or that my dad thinks she's ugly. He has a view of life like a blueprint: the suburban house, the dog, the kids, the cars, the vacations, the wife—he has always had a set of standards to meet. I'm only seven, but I can see how my mother doesn't align with them when I see his eyes wandering when we're out. I can see it when my mom cuts her hair too short and he says, *What happened to your hair?* and grimaces.

"Honey, I get too hot with all that hair sticking to my neck. It's much better like this."

"You know I like your hair long. And what about the highlights? You should get more blonde in there, Angie did it too brown this time." He runs his fingers over her hair, squinting, picking up fistfuls like crumbs from the floor.

Most of these conversations end with him sighing, turning on the TV, or going somewhere to run an errand we didn't know about and still don't know about.

I can see his disapproval again when she makes choices about her nails or doesn't live up to the lifestyle he deems fit. She can't help that her job is in front of a computer all day and she can't go out with him on a whim, have dinner ready the moment he walks through the door, and enjoy a decent family breakfast like the ones I have at my grandma's house on the weekends.

As he speaks, I comb my long blonde hair with my fingers, cascading over my thin shoulders, my child body, lanky and boyish, not nearly grown into itself. He's ranting now.

"You need to ask for time off. You never seem to take a break. Are you even taking care of yourself? When was the last time you went to the gym?" His eyes are wide, his arms leaning on the kitchen counter. He runs his fingers through his hair and sighs.

If my mother says anything, it's the same winded response. Like—"I'm trying" "I

can't afford to." "Like hell they'll let me off." "There are things I have to get done." "I know, I've been seeing a personal trainer at work, but she's (insert reason why she's unavailable)."

He looks my mom in the face, eyebrows stitched. "You've gained weight, haven't you? What happened to your diet?"

I search her eyes for some sort of pain. Doesn't it hurt for your husband to say things like that to you?

* * *

The perfect woman has long blonde hair, but isn't hairy.

The perfect woman is thin, but not lacking.

The perfect woman has red nails, always freshly done.

The perfect woman exercises, but not too much.

The perfect woman always has dinner ready.

The perfect woman cleans the house and does all the laundry—and happily.

The perfect woman knows how to please.

* * *

When my mom opens the door to Jenny Craig, the cold AC blows stale air over my naked arms. A lady smiles from the front desk. My goose-bumped body follows my mother awkwardly alongside my siblings. We enter a tiny room through a door on the right side of the hall with a boxy TV in the corner and toys all over, and my eyes light up. My mother follows the lady into a door on the left.

I sit crisscross applesauce with my brother and sister. We giggle at the TV and each other, knocking each other around, poking and prodding our hands, arms, hair, heads, bickering and picking on each other. My body remembers none of this—the bustling, touching, and silliness of energetic youth. Instead, it latches onto my mother. As I'm drawing mermaids and celebrating my hands, she is in another room.

I imagine how the other room looks. There's a big chair, a large mirror maybe. There's a scale, and I imagine it in the middle of the floor. That's all that really matters here. The air is heavy with my mother's thoughts. The woman takes her to the center of the room. My mother's eyebrows are fixed, scrunching in the tightening of her face as she holds her breath and looks down. Maybe she doesn't breathe at all. Maybe she sheds a layer. Maybe she strips to her bra and underwear. Maybe she cries. Maybe she prays to God about her body and the number that will be etched in her skull again today. Maybe this is all projected.

"Let's go get your meals for the week. I've prepared your menu; I just need you to fill out some papers and make your payment," the woman might say as my mom pushes her feet into her sandals and hauls herself up from the seat.

When she comes to get us, I am absorbed in my crayon art. We each carry something different home with us. I grab a fat stack of paper from the pile before we

are ushered out of the room and toward the glass doors. My mother hides shame in the folds of her body, and consumes it.

I know but do not recognize—there is something undeniably imperfect about an aging woman's body.

Like most girls I know, I play with Barbie dolls all the time. I hold their smooth, naked bodies in my hands—button, unbutton, slip them in and out of shirts and pants and dresses and skirts. I undress their empty abdomens, the flat middle of their inner legs, their tiny, arching feet. I lay them on top of each other and simulate sex. I know that the body is a vulnerable place, and I am contributor as well as victim to that vulnerability. I hide shame in my Barbies' bodies and the laughter my friend and I share in the realm of her princess bedroom. Behind closed doors, we explore that which we do not understand. We only know what we see in shows. We only know that Ken was made for Barbie, but Barbie was made for us.

Years from now, I will know that if a Barbie doll were a real human, her proportions would not allow her to walk or even stand. But right now, I know that this body is what I want to be.

The perfect body is an hourglass.

The perfect body is blemish-less.

The perfect body is smooth and slender.

The perfect body has a chiseled waist.

The perfect body has round breasts.

The perfect body has perfect proportions.

The perfect body always smiles.

When I stand in front of the mirror for what seems like the first time, I am shirtless. My hair falls from a middle part down each side of my face. As my eyes travel my reflected image, they catch on the lopsided turn of my lips when I smile. I smile, frown, smile, frown, smile, frown, watching my mouth widen and contort until it looks alien to me. In my puka shell necklace, barely contrasting the pale of my skin, I look like a surfer boy who grew up on the beach growing out his hair, but he's spent the last year locked in a closet. My eyes slide down to my chest, then belly. I shift and look from the side, from many angles as I turn back forward, then to the side again. I see my belly bulging outward beneath my chest, the way a baby looks when they've been well-fed. My slender arms and thighs stick out from this belly like a balloon punctured with twigs, a peach shot through with branches of its own tree.

You'll grow into it, I think. When your boobs grow in. Don't worry right now.

I picture myself, eleven years from now, standing in the hallway of my house in

my prom dress, my neck slender and collarbones accentuating my full chest in a wide scoop neckline. I step out into the light with tall strappy heels and a pink gown on, like all the girls do in all those movies. The ones where she falls in unrequited love with a guy, who only notices her, finally, on that one night. The ones where she was never beautiful before, but tonight, she is the most beautiful girl in the world, all eyes on her. Tonight, she loves herself in all her sparkling femininity. Her father can't stop taking pictures.

* * *

I stop worrying for a while. I watch my dad criticize a woman on this TV show he's watching. She's a singer, walking out onto the wide floor with her hair cascading down her back, a red dress zipped over her curving body and flowing out from her feet, her back arched, heeled feet poised in the center of the room as her eyelashes flutter in waiting, lips parted in a soft *o*.

"She shouldn't wear a dress like that. Her stomach isn't meant for it." My dad sits on the couch, legs sprawled out and crossed at the ankles, squinting his pink face at the woman.

I watch the light of the TV screen flash over his face in the mild darkness of the evening. I'm standing behind the couch, just halfway between the hallway and the living room. My feet tiptoe over the cold tile behind my dad's head. He doesn't know I'm here, listening. My legs feel too naked in my nightgown, and I stretch it down. My mother sits on the couch perpendicular to him. If she says anything, I don't hear it.

* * *

I stop worrying for a while. I go to church with my mom and siblings, sneaking around the house (but mostly being too loud) so that we don't wake up my dad. I put on a hand-me-down dress—one of many I've been given—and my mom brushes my hair out until I cry from the sting of my tangled knots.

Although we tell people we live in Orlando, we don't. People don't really know where to place us when we say we live in Oviedo. Better to just say Orlando and agree when they say we live so close to (read: an hour away from) Disney. But we go to church in the city because my mom's side of the family lives there. We drive on the highway every Sunday just to see them, and after church, we go to my grandparents' for lunch.

In my grandmother's house, we barely fit around the table. When our whole family visits during the holidays, there is almost no room between the big chairs that hold their bodies and the cramped quarters of the dining room's walls. The table's just big enough for six, but it will seat ten. There's a fold-up table propped up across from the main dining table, and those metal folding chairs you find at all the school functions. This is the "kids' table," and it is where I will sit every Christmas and Thanksgiving.

All other times, I sit at the corner of the big table, between my grandmother and

my aunt, each pressed into their chairs like thrones. Over lunch, my aunts chatter about what they have (and haven't) been eating lately, or their new favorite dessert that's light on the calories but heavy on satisfaction. As my mother cuts up her big salad in crisscross motions, my Aunt Andy looks at me, eating my mac 'n cheese, and smiles.

"Have any of us *ever* been that skinny? My goodness, child!" she says.

"Isn't she just skin n bones! Sometimes I wonder if she's really from us," my grandma adds with a breathy laugh. They're absolutely *tickled* about my size, as my mother would say.

"Oooh, I wonder the *same* thing! She's my Skinny-Minnie," my mother chimes in as she grins at me. I shovel another spoonful of mac 'n cheese into my mouth as I laugh through my plump cheeks. "Where does it all go?"

They all laugh and holler, their rural accents thickening in the mayhem of their continued chatter.

"Oh honey, you can eat anythin' 'n it don't matter one bit! You'll always be a Skinny-Minnie!"

* * *

Sitting at my school desk before the break for lunch and recess, I watch the younger kids walking single file to and from the lunchroom. Fifth graders get out last, so most of the class is already itching for recess as they jump from their seats to line up outside the door, but I'm still seated, feeling my arms grow. My fifth-grade teacher is standing at the back of the class by the door to the connecting office, flapping her arms in a sleeveless turtleneck like a chicken taking flight.

She says, "I'm 30, I got these chicken wing flaps now."

The underside jiggles as she shifts her arms and shakes them. Her best friend, third-grade teacher Mrs. Jonas, stands against the doorway laughing and screaming in the way girls do when they talk about dumb things like dieting and boys. Except neither of these is dumb to me yet.

I daydream while I follow my class back from lunch. I imagine my consciousness pulled from my body. It has been a few years since I acquainted myself with the mirror, and I want to leave these... imperfections. What if I could swap myself with Bria, that gorgeous, popular girl in my class? I could wake up in her body, admiring the way my pants fit sleek and smooth against my hips and my stomach. I could wear a flowing skirt and brush my hair away from my face to show off my exquisite features—the freckles dotting my nose and cheeks, my even smile, my big, bright eyes, and warm skin. No veiny purple eyelids and green undereye, and no crooked mouth. No disproportionate stomach and butt and arms. My body would be perfect. Her body would be perfect.

"I'm sorry to leave you such a body, Bria," I think I would say. But I'm not that

sorry. I would be popular. I would be seen. Maybe I wouldn't be so weird anymore. I would be beautiful. I would be happy.

Bria was the first—but certainly not the last—girl whose body I envied. I saw everyone as shapes. Shapes to scrutinize, emphasize, empathize, or want. Shapes to contort and control my own shape.

Her hips are wider than mine.
Her legs are thinner than mine.
Her face is clearer than mine.
Her jaw is sleeker than mine.
Her skin is tanner than mine.
Her ass is rounder than mine.
Her boobs are bigger than mine.
Her stomach is flatter than mine.
And if it wasn't positive, it was—
Her belly is rounder than mine.
Her nose is droopier than mine.
Her hair is frizzier than mine.
Her arms are fatter than mine.
Her toes are uglier than mine.
Her thighs are pudgier than mine.

Somewhere in this mess of shapes, my sister's body lies, unfolding.

There is a trap in sisterhood—it is growing up side-by-side with a girl your age, with your parents, your genes, your everything. Having a sister is like having another body. But she develops in ways you can't comprehend. She will get her period before you, and you'll be fine with that because it actually feels like death when it happens to you. She will also get boobs and hips. She will get crushes from boys and childhood best friends that are boys, and you will get nothing. She will get chocolate and heart-shaped boxes, and you will get countless minutes in the bathroom scrutinizing the mirror's sorry body. She will be bigger than you, but she will seem more proportional, more beautiful. Is that the glimpse of an hourglass? Your rectangle of a body could never imagine attaining such perfection.

I will get rid of all my Barbie dolls in a year. I will also wake up in the middle of the summer with the sick feeling of hunger appearing suddenly more pleasant than anything I could ever eat, and I will starve myself into my first year of high school.

I learn that my body is something I can control in this way. I look down at my stomach and the once rounded place below my ribs is replaced by a slender curve, fitted like a glove in my camisole.

My body can be just the right size and shape if I make it so. It is the summer before high school, and I am swimming in possibilities—but mostly I'm avoiding the anxiety of a new school by drowning in numbers. Numbers of calories. Numbers of pounds. Numbers of inches around me and numbers of fingers I can fit around my arms. These are my friends.

In the morning, I make sure to sleep in as much as possible. I snack for lunch. I eat dinner with my family. I refrain and withhold and distract. I eat ice. I eat blueberries. I eat cornflakes with skim milk. I eat one strawberry cut into thirds, then sixths. I weigh myself in the middle of the day, when my parents are out working, my siblings still in bed or playing video games. I count the numbers as they get smaller. I touch my bones as they rise. I refrain and withhold and distract my body until it's numb.

My body has become like the magazines. Less than that, and I can't stop it. I love it all the more the less flesh I feel. I feel better and better about everything. About being seen and heard and loved. About being in the world, my body, and short shorts and tank tops. I can wear it all now. I can be the pretty main character in those teenage high school dramas. Worthy and happy and wanted and free. I can love myself.

* * *

The perfect body is the thinnest, fatless.

The perfect body is empty.

The perfect body wears anything and everything.

The perfect body scares my parents.

* * *

I didn't know I wasn't free, and I didn't know I was playing right into the hands of a diet-happy, muscle-obsessed, skinny-obsessed, "slim-thick"-obsessed, whatever-is-not-you-obsessed society that would spit me out no matter how well I measured up. It's not about my *body*, it's about what I'm not doing for it and what I could be doing, or buying, or eating, or wearing. And it would never be enough.

I learned that my body is a cage I'd be stuck in for as long as I live, and I hated the idea of being stuck in such a heavy thing. It is the first thing people see of me. That's such a heavy thing.

Where does this feeling start? In your parents' bathroom, with your mother's choice of magazines? The grocery line with its magazine display of finetuned bodies and boldface words for audiences of bodies to consume, even the youngest of them, noticing, maybe for the first time, what their thighs look like in their skorts and jeans? The living room as the advertisements play, the holidays as meals are crafted to include and exclude particular things, dinner table conversations, the gift box holding the mold of a perfect doll in a plastic shell?

I can't say these things for sure. I can't say how soon we learn to pay attention to our bodies in this way. I can only reach my hands into what I know, feel my way through.

* * *

What I know is my mother. My father. The folds of my skin. What I know is that my sister cries in her room over my shrinking frame, eats double for me. My parents stand like hollow shells between my empty plate and their towering bowls of pasta.

“Just take a little more, sweetheart. Please,” my mother pleads.

My father can’t even speak. He eyes me with drowsy, dampened eyes, his face drawn, as if one tug could pull his cheeks into his lap. He looks like he hasn’t slept—not that he can when his daughter is killing herself little by little. She will not take this seriously until she cries in a wheelchair 212 miles away from home.

I will scream under my grandmother’s dining table about peas and mashed potatoes. All their soft bodies will stiffen as my rib cage shrieks and bellows. The dogs will bark and whimper next to my curled body as I watch my aunt, whose jeans can fit four of me, crouch down to take a look at me. I will also bruise my spine on my backpack, climb two steps and get winded, run out of breath on the way to class, and refuse to speak for the first nine weeks of ninth grade. I will make no friends, and do nothing but count, write, draw, cry, and panic in my room at night. I will embrace the voice in my head like a new friend, as if it weren’t developing all this time through the mouths of others.

* * *

With a few words from my pediatrician, control of my body—its health, happiness, and survival—is taken from me.

In the aftermath, I am acquainted with wheelchairs and Boost, bathroom troubles, night sweats, hair loss, the onset of my period (again), feeling like death over and over and over and over again, but with a community of equally miserable bodies, crying over granola bars and feeling the pain of emotion and fat and life again.

In the aftermath, my dad says I have a pouch on my belly, but I can work it off. He has good intentions. For him, working out equals happy. Working out equals healthy. Working out equals the only solution he can find. Working out equals a way he can fix what went wrong in my relationship with myself. Working out equals the only way he feels like he can make a connection with me, have a relationship with me, understand me, show me love, and see my love for him. Working out equals a Band-Aid on the festering wound that is my body. It won’t feel good...

... and I will not forget.

In the aftermath, I arrive home and scream into mirrors and draw shattered reflections of skeletons and skin suits in my notebook. I will want to tear my flesh off. I will bruise my stomach with jabbing fingers.

In the aftermath, I will go to treatment again and stay longer. I will return with a body I don’t recognize. *How can I see myself after all this?* I cradle myself on the precipice of smothering my body with pillows and seeing how long I can hold my breath. I

wonder if I can drown in air and fat, or in the loss of everything that has ever made sense of this body for me. If I can ever find a sense of peace in it again.

* * *

“I always thought I’d be the one with the eating disorder,” my sister admits.

We are standing in the bathroom with our shirts off. It is junior year of high school and our bodies have never been more different. While I envy her boobs, she envies my stomach, and we stand watching the shadows caress our frames in their corners and creases. The shock of my illness clouds her vision. *It’s not as flat as she thinks.*

I want to say that she doesn’t get it. That she’s always had the things I wanted, and life has ways of making siblings resent each other, so our bodies became achievements, competitions to win. That I haven’t been very honest, but neither has the rest of the family. I’m just trying to fit the pieces together. This body holds comments in the marrow that it will never let out. I’m just trying to juice my limbs until they speak.

I never wanted to be Ms. Skinny Minnie.

I never wanted to hate my belly, or what went in and out of it.

I never wanted to despise my face, my mouth.

I never wanted to lie.

I just wanted the truth to be more beautiful than this.

The truth is, I can’t stand myself—my ugly, rotten, selfish disease; my ugly, rotten, selfish body. My ugly, rotten, selfish need to control and perfect and conceal.

How ugly it is to see other bodies as goals and nightmares, to see my failure or my triumph in their shapes, to never truly see beauty in the skin I grew up in. *How can I call this body a home when I run away from it?*

I look at my sister’s body, one that has been through the same life as I have.

I look at my little body, the bones visible even after I’ve gained the weight back. I learn the words “diet culture” and “fatphobia.” The ways they have internalized, distorted my sense of self, contributed to the dysmorphia that clouds my reflection. I see a person, bigger in some ways but smaller in others. I etch my body into this society of privilege and lack, and I understand.

Eventually, I will find and worship people who live happy lives in bigger bodies. I will embrace “Health at Every Size” nutrition but only half-believe in it. I will learn the words “thin privilege.” I will still struggle.

These are not easy lessons.

Later, I will find myself on my college campus, sitting with a delicate snail shell in my hands, and I will crush it to dust. I will think of my body, broken between my fingers. Maybe, all this time, I thought I could be freed if I didn’t feel the weight of flesh around my mind. Or maybe I just didn’t want any of it at all. I just wanted an end.

What was so bad about my prepubescent form? My post-pubescent form?

What did I want to find in the emotionless bone pile that I became?

I sink again into a place dark and sticky like molasses, more comfortable the longer I let it suck me down. It cups my body, muffling the sounds of my surroundings, the pull of life as it drains from my marrow. That familiar numbness.

I was fine with the thought of not existing tomorrow, if it meant that I could forget myself—just be a consciousness suspended in the existence of a universe we seek to define but will never truly know the meaning of. In a body we seek to define but will never truly know the meaning of.

I wonder how such a headspace can ever make me happy, fill the holes in my confidence, show me the words for love and life carved into my very skin.

Flesh isn't beautiful, not in the Barbie plastic way I knew. It is beautiful in the authenticity of being—being alive, being the being inside the body and feeling, seeing, and experiencing the world through it. Isn't that what I wanted? To live in the world as if it were my own? But how can I do that in a world that seeks to measure me and a mind that still measures its own body?

It's not much to say that I can only try, but *I can only try*. It is the start of something, and that is something meaningful in itself. People try all the time.

My sister hates her body, but she smiles when she wears vibrant, revealing outfits, dances with all her friends as if untethered, weightless, and loses herself in the music.

My mother laughs, eats, and *enjoys* it all. I never thought about it then, but I never once saw her critically examine her body in the mirror. Her battles were internal. She started and ended many diets as my brother, sister, and I grew into ourselves. As I pinch and prod myself in the mirror now, I think of the way my mother sees me from across the room. I think of the ways I love her and the softness of her chest and arms as she holds my head against her.

My dad spins my mother around the living room, dancing to 70s music. He kisses her with the ferocity of youthful love. No matter what he says, he loves the bodies he criticizes. I think if I were to ask him, he would admit that he wouldn't mind growing old with my mom; he's just not ready to be old now. For the gray hair and wrinkles, the sagging flesh and waning energy as the body sits still more often and sighs into bed, the fear of illnesses creeping in. And who is ready for change, in the body, wherever it comes about?

We all collectively grapple with the ever-changing criteria—and trust—of the body and each other's understanding of it. The nuance of social body image fragments our vessels, picks us apart, tears us from each other until we are all just eyes seeing bodies and bodies seeing eyes, and mouths talking about bodies and bodies showing off or hiding from mouths.

Words have bodies, and our bodies are made of words we spill all over each other.

I am learning responsibility. We are always learning more. Like how to listen.

I sit in front of the mirror again, looking at the folds of my stomach as I lift my shirt. I'm in the middle of painting a canvas full of bodies, full of a million creases and a million blemishes, hairs and scars, and stretch marks galore. I will still hate my body when I finish this painting—and the next twenty—I know, but I yearn for their beauty to embed in my eyelids, the bodies of women young, old, big, small, rectangular, round, and triangular. They might rise and stitch themselves seamlessly into my frame, cradle my legs and stomach in their arms, like children, worthy of more love than I can muster. I will hold the skin of my stomach and breathe as I try to be gentle.

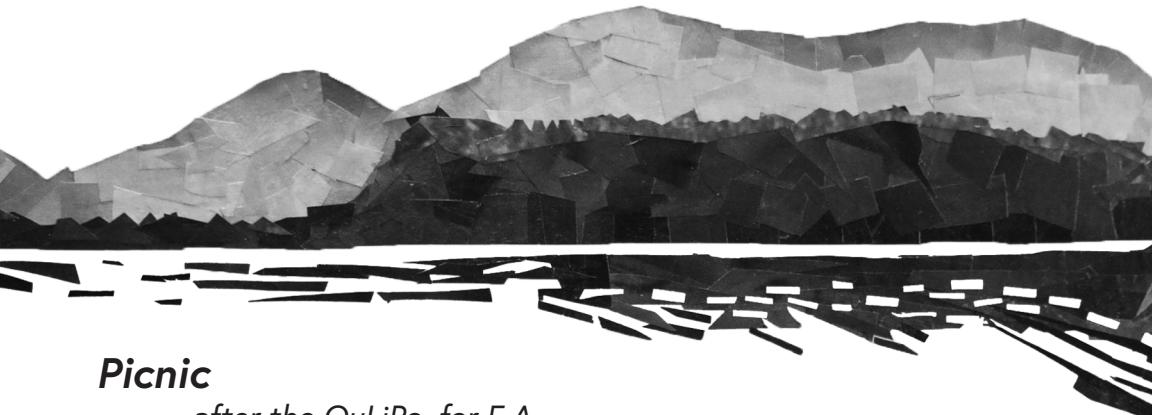
Within my body, I see that young child still standing in the mirror, the one I've punished all this time, staring back.

I want to say to her, *I see you. You didn't just want to be beautiful. You wanted to be unashamedly you, energetically you—to be understood.*

She will reach out and touch her own face. She'll ask, *Why didn't you love me before?* I'll admit that I need her more than ever now. *I'm sorry.*

My family stands over a grave that could've been mine. “The perfect body is one that’s alive,” they whisper. “The perfect body is more than a box can hold.”

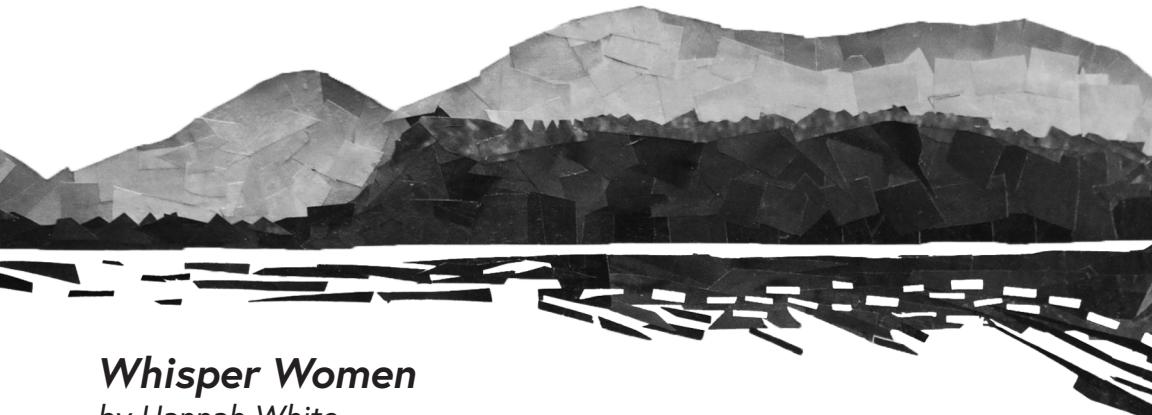
I hold my mother's hand, squeeze tightly.



Picnic

*after the OuLiPo, for E.A.
by Alexandra Smith*

The fruit I cut sits untouched by you
look only to the bright, cold sky
is smeared with remnants of clouds of thick smoke burn my eyes
look to where my hands tangle
in your hair like grass
pops and gives in my fist
closes around my own throat
begs you like I am not the executioner
contemplates Whitman as he throws the switch.



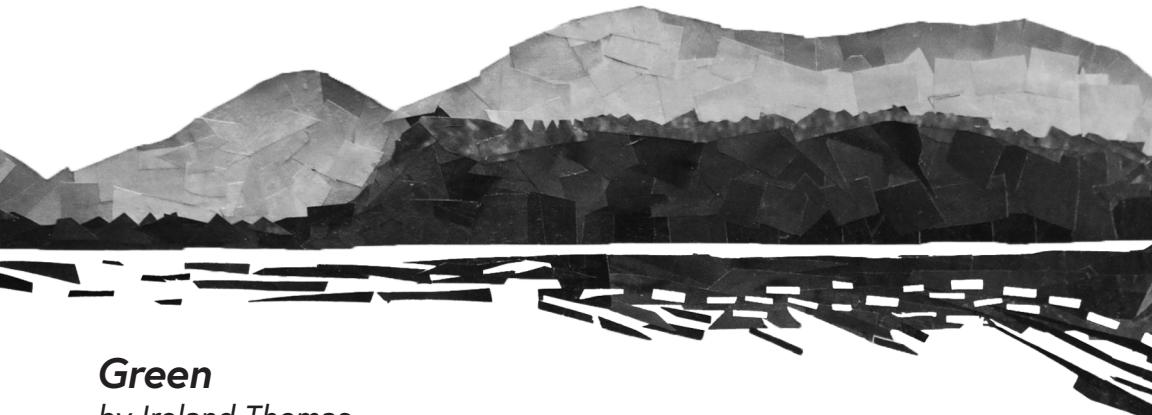
Whisper Women

by Hannah White

The branches of my family tree are etched across
the tender, tanned leather parts of my thighs.
The hereditary trails, the yellow whisper women
on silent bike rides along the purple-green paths.
These women sneak within the trees, crouching in the bushes to slather
cream and ointment to our cracked limbs. They pour water along their etchings
covering the indentions in the brown sand streets.

Do they go away? Those thick-lined carvings?
My sizzling questions turn to smoke wisps that float to the clouds.
Please, anyone! Answer me!

Don't leave me on this swollen street. My legs ache
from your clasped, thin-lined lips. Please, help me
to scrub the purple paths away before they creep upward
twisting and engraving your silent songs
into my every crease.
Varicose and vined, release me
from this spell that runs through
my yellow whisper women.



Green

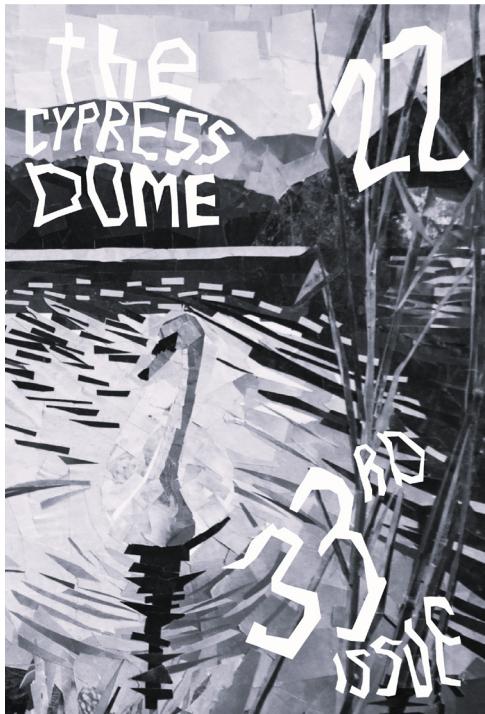
by Ireland Thomas

The soft leaves in my grandparents' garden loved me.
Ripe tomatoes I would pull, ladybugs, red-red-red of love.
All fruits were flowers and I'd give anything to get them back.
Diving into a soiled life.
A decade goes by in seasons: spring to summer.
If they're not bringing stuffed animals to the hospital, they'll bring
a bouquet to undermine the pervasive dreariness of a three-week stay
where petals will fade from blue-yellow-red to a brown I can't stand to view.

Green, the nurturer's thumb.
Green, I envy the lives on a stage a garden's length away.
Green, but I'm not new to this.

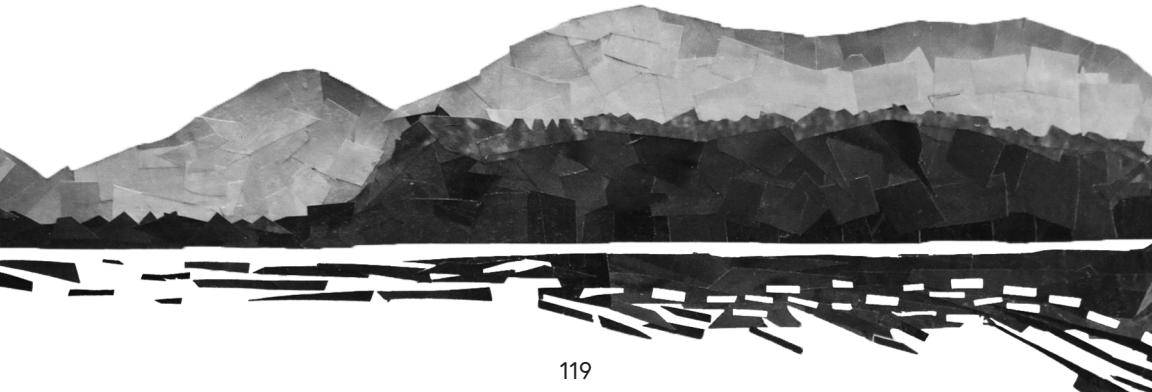
Taking courage but never ringing the bell marking remission,
decaying like lilacs, just longer. All the soft orchids are gone.
Something's got to give, and why does
something have to be you?

About the Design



My initial goal when designing this year's *The Cypress Dome* magazine cover was to make the artwork the focal point. I was drawn to this image not only because of its beauty, but also because of its contrasting texture that was created by the overlapping papers. That texture inspired the rough jagged typeface I created for the cover. I also had help from the other members of the UCF Student Creative Group: Kelsey Bauch, Ashley Ferguson, and Donald Hughes who provided feedback during the creative process.

– Mia Marquez



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