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# Trains

Mark De La Ree



Metal speeding bullets  
blaze through the city.

Horns howl.  
Crossing signals blare

Red lights flash  
My eyes ignite.  
My legs explode

I'm sprinting for the tracks.  
Oh yes. I always find the tracks.

Seconds pass  
Skin erupts  
Red mist  
Paints the air.

Tattered clothes  
That never fit  
Tear in to pieces like  
Shattered bones.

I've been around the block.  
This don't even hurt.  
The carcass  
The spirit  
Always reform stronger than before.

That's the old life  
This is now.  
I'm retired  
Then you came inside my house  
You slept on the couch.

When I awoke I didn't even notice  
All the tracks that stained my kitchen

You made it to the bed.  
There is more tracks than floor  
Finally, I see Them.  
Hell I must have always.

It's too late regardless.

Hit me.  
I want you to hit me.

Cacophony of the senses  
Lights, sounds.  
Whistles blow  
Pupils dilate.  
Blood rushes  
It's so close

No eruption.  
I'm still here.  
People burn inside the carriage  
Others crawl out of the wreckage  
They can hardly breathe.

I should have moved.

# Cuca, Queen of Harlem

Anthony Salas



Last night, I sat on the Uptown D train. My pink wig and flashy jewelry made me look like a young Celia Cruz (Cuban singer). The bubble gum pink wig, electric blue (faux) fur coat, sparkly gold dress, pink heels (which obviously complemented the wig), and dramatic eye shadow gave me a bit of an edge. It was also a nod to Edie Sedgwick. One little hindrance became unavoidable.

“Mommy, are those water balloons,” asked the little boy sitting next to me.

His loud voice garnered my boobs much unwanted attention. I smiled nervously. His mother, who looked like an urban earth mama (stringy hair, yoga pants) hushed him. After looking me up and down, she became increasingly interested in my appearance. I fiddled around with my purse, as a way to avoid her. The mombie kept smiling at me, in an obvious attempt to garner attention. After smiling back, she analyzed me further.

“You look a bit like a younger Celia Cruz. Really love your outfit! So, where are you going tonight,” she asked.

“Thanks, just came back from a work party. I work at this cool coffee shop in the East Village, St. Mark’s Coffee,” I said.

She nodded her head in agreement as the little shit next to her swung on the subway pole. Some guys and even old ladies slyly stared at my tits. “Shit, fuck, shit,” I thought to myself. Obviously, my boobs were artificial. Having unwanted attention made me nervous. In the grand New York tradition, I ignored their glances and adjusted my pink wig. It was one of those nights. Obvious sexism and gawking would’ve provoked me to kick someone, with my very sharp high heels. As fabulous as they were, it’s doubtful anyone would want to deal with one angry queen (or my fabulousness). I just wanted to get home to enjoy a campy film marathon.

The subway tunnel faded. Columbus Circle Station appeared. Throngs of people with shopping bags waited for the train’s arrival. The mombie and her little shit prepared to exit. She gave me a wink and walked out. Most of the train emptied out. New passengers arrived in the subway car. Passengers battled for seats. Music roared from headphones. The old and young read paperbacks, gleefully.

Before the train’s doors could close, three teenage boys with a boom box arrived. Unassuming New Yorkers looked on in dismay. The train doors closed. Quickly, the train roared out of Columbus Circle station. One of the younger boys dressed in a red Adidas track suit switched on the music. Grandmaster Flash

blasted from the boom box, as the three boys struggled to hold their balance. Then I stared at my boobs, and thought, “This can’t end well.”

One of the boys yelled, “It’s show time.”

These two words struck terror in even the most jaded of New Yorkers. Their break-dance routine began. One boy clapped. One boy spun on the floor. A brave-boy swung from every pole. As he swung, my fake breasts stared back at me. If this kid accidentally kicked me in the boobs, the train would be flooded. The express train slowed down, and then sped up. Train lights went on and off. 72nd Street, 76th Street, 86th Street flashed by, as the music grew louder. As 110th Street approached, the dancing only intensified. For once, I internally prayed to La Virgen Maria. “Por favor, don’t let these assholes make my boobs explode.” Reaching for the rosary (from my purse), I suddenly became a good Catholic.

The train came to an unexpected halt at 116th Street. After the longest delay ever, the subway train sped up again. Simultaneously, the break-dancing show ended. Some people clapped. Most people rolled their eyes. The “show time” boys asked for generous donations from the subway riders. Obviously, I refused to give them any money. As I stared down at my fake boobs, they were still intact. Afterwards, the “show time” boys ran into the neighboring subway car.

Gritty 125th Street station looked like the promised land. I was almost home (with my tits intact), just one more train. A local B train waited in the opposite track. Maneuvering in uncomfortable high heels, I made it into the next train. It would take me to 135th Street. Then a lady ran into me. My boobs exploded. Water flowed from my chest to the grimy subway car. My black dress was drenched. People ran out of the train. They thought I had pissed myself. Mortified, I just stared at the puddle.

“Surprise, my boobs are really water balloons,” I yelled.

“I am sorry, mija,” said the fortysomething lady, in a heavy Cuban accent. The voice sounded familiar. She looked into my eyes. I looked into her eyes. The train doors closed. As the train headed toward 135th Street, I stood in shock. The lady also stood in shock. Her grocery bag was drenched. Taking a gulp, I muttered something. Then it became legible. I muttered it again.

Ma, I’m sorry,” I said.

My ma looked at me. She folded her arms. I wasn’t sure, if I was going to receive a bit of Cuban Catholic guilt for dressing like a fabulous lady. She obviously didn’t know I was a drag queen. Taking off my wig, short black hair was revealed. I became a boy again.

“You look good, but shit I have to teach you to do make-up, mijo. You look a little like ‘la grand Celia Cruz,’” She said.

“That’s the point, ma,” I said, with a chuckle.

The train arrived at 135th Street. She handed me a grocery bag. We exited the train and walked toward the 135th and St. Nicholas exit. Anxiety rushed through me. Predictably, uncomfortable silence followed.

“You make a pretty girl, Alex, just no water balloons as tetas next time,”

she said.

“It’s Cuca, Ma,” I replied.

We finally walked up the stairs onto the busy 135th Street & St. Nicholas Avenue. Buses, gypsy cabs, green cabs, car horns, and flashing deli signs welcomed us home. We reached our beautiful brownstone with its bay windows and commanding stoop. The “great subway odyssey” was over. My evening campy film marathon commenced (Polyester, To Wong Foo & Pink Flamingos). Cuca no longer had to hide in the drab shadows. When I look back, love, acceptance, and a bit of Cuban guilt are the main themes of that most colorful evening.

# Atomic Clock

Mark De La Ree



Since we buried you  
I've been 2 minutes to midnight.  
1953 has come again.  
How many cocoons have  
I burst through since then?  
Everyone prayed to the  
Beautiful beast with black and red wings.  
Their longing song played as they presented  
Giant plates of home cooked meals for  
The Giant moth.

That was long ago.  
Now it is two minutes to midnight,  
All the singing has stopped.  
Without wings I flail about  
Stoned out of my mind  
Looking for something to eat,  
But no one will feed a worm.

It's two minutes to midnight  
And those who would oppose me  
Know I'm weak.  
The Reptile who owns my apartment  
Wants his rent  
He will devour me.

Those wise men and women who once strengthened my flight,  
said they'd get me back on my feet  
Are all on sabbatical.  
Like time is infinite.  
Like it is not 2 seconds to midnight.  
When the radiation comes they won't even feel  
Me burn  
As they sip their tea in Europe.

You felt this before,  
When we met  
Your doomsday clock  
Only had a minute left.

This chain won't be broken.  
I'm too old for metamorphosis.  
Fuck it.

Let my writhing shadow stain the walls of this apartment.  
So the landlord can't  
Pay his Mortgage.  
Let the timer run, I won't stop it.

Let these eyes boil  
They've seen enough.  
It's one second to midnight  
And I grow impatient.

# Checking Baggage

Vicki Mandell-King



A place between  
good-bye and hello,  
here and there –

today the airport is deserted.  
Too few fellow travelers  
with whom it is safe  
to share secrets,

and even fewer behind counters,  
who speak of baggage  
carried or stowed away,  
and of destination.

Instead of a smiling face,  
a machine asks,  
Do I need more time?  
Time for what –

to get back  
before that fatal heart attack,  
say I'm sorry before death  
changes everything?

Get a grip.  
Angry at automation,  
I press  
no –  
no more time wanted

in this relative space  
between too late  
and forever.

# She Fed Love

Noemy Segura



Maddie would look at it for three hours straight. She always felt bad for not polishing it and even more for calling it “it”. It was her mother for god sake! She knew better but somehow this ritual practice only made her feel worse. Her eyes would redden, and her stomach would flatten every time she would try to make sense as to why she no longer loved her.

Her mother was sick. Maddie had begged her to fight, please mom live, and her mom begged her to leave her alone. *You aren't letting me live by telling me to keep on living* she'd say. All Ms. Katie wanted was for everyone to know that after she passed, at least her soul would not die with her. She lingered at the thought that her mother's soul was wandering in that dusty vase. Maybe she wanted to get out, maybe she liked being inside because it was like a cocoon. Maybe, only maybe. Ms. Katie had said before *it's better for a soul to have a comforting place where love is nurtured by those outside of it. The fruit bears out of love my child. The soul must be fed, and it is only fed by those who the soul accepts.*

Perhaps her mother never loved her. The more she'd stare, the more she'd feel the spirit of her mother push her away, the more she felt herself wanting to crack the vase and eat the ashes away. She'd at least feel peace knowing her mother's soul was inside her and not inside the stupid green and pink flower vase she had bought three months ago at a thrift store.

Sitting in her blue dress, ten feet from the vase, she wished her mom would come to take it off. She wanted her mom to see her nudity like the day she saw hers. She found her mother naked in the bathtub. *Mom it's time for dinner,* and her mom like a moth caressed the tub. If only her mom had waited to take a bath after dinner, maybe, she wouldn't have died. The Chinese food she had prepared that day would have given her a smile or the pumpkin pie she had baked would have given her the sweetness she needed. No, her mother was so stubborn. That's why she had so many wrinkles. She yelled all the time at Maddie for obstructing her schedule if she hadn't done what she wanted on time. *Mom I'll clean the garden, you go inside and rest.*

*No child,* and she'd continue to tug on the weeds as she felt her heart barely beat up in the air. Her white hands reminding her that her veins weren't carrying enough white blood cells anymore- killing her as they diminished in blood quantity each day, hour and second.

She hated herself for hating the vase, and she hated that her mother never cared for her suffering. She sat up from the rocking chair and took the vase in her

hands from the countertop of the kitchen. She gripped it with all her might just as her mother would hug her at bedtime when she was a child. Goosebumps rose from her toes to her fox face, and she felt her mother choke the words that wanted to fly out of her mouth to say, *I hate you mother. I hate you for not letting me help. It's your own fault you died!* A tornado of birds started to form inside her. If she broke the vase her mother would be mad, and if she didn't, she'd have to continue to do her rituals until one day her mother would finally give in. Until her mother finally realized she was wrong.

*What's so special about living in a fucken vase!* She yelled. Maddie cried as she remembered all of this. She felt her hands weaken. She slipped onto the floor holding the vase at her chest. Bent down, her knees dug for help, and her head crossed a bridge of hopelessness.

From the window of the tight cardboard house a butterfly flew onto the vase. Maddie stopped crying and the tiny colored creature slipped onto her fingers. Maddie held it with such sensitivity. She examined it as she had examined her mother when she first found out the news she had breast cancer. Momma is this you? She spoke to the butterfly and not at the vase. She placed the vase next to her and still in a prayer position, she hugged the butterfly.

*Sitting and waiting  
Maddie fought  
She fed her mom since-  
The leaves of summer and spring  
The love that outgrew her hatred  
Forever will be*

# Remnants

Kent Rogers



My mother passed a few years ago.  
She'd made it to ninety-two,  
Quite a time,  
More than I expect myself.

Her presence occasionally wafts about, becomes apparent:  
A tattered quilt in the back of a closet  
A brown photo between two pages.

I used an old desk phone a while back when my cell phone died.  
The old phone had an answering machine in it.  
I plugged it in and the message light began to flash. The notes of a past sounded in the room:  
Two wrong numbers  
Two advertisers  
Two scammers  
Two hang-ups.

And then there she was, clear, present, alive.  
I held my breath: she said the weather was too hot and nobody had called her all day.

Last night I lifted a plate from my cupboard,  
An old teacup saucer that I used as a remnant, a mismatch,  
the last of a set whose other members had long ago vanished.  
Made of bone china with a light gold inlay, roses painted across the borders.

The last of my mother's tea set.

The plate slipped from my hand, shattered on the counter, plummeted to the floor.  
Pieces, pieces.

I stood, stared, gathered the sight:  
One more last remnant of her splintered, fractured, gone.

# Funeral For Two

Benjamin Oyler



“I’ve sat for hours, stressing, trying to find the perfect words that could encapsulate and explain all of the thoughts and feelings swirling in my brain. But nothing seemed right, and maybe that’s the perfect phrase. The perfect way to describe how I feel. But I know that’s not true because nothing’s perfect anymore. Not since-“

I read the words to myself out loud, practicing funny accents and mispronouncing words just to make the whole task less arduous. I’ve written page after page but the words seem stilted and boring, an affront to their intentions and a clear indicator that I’m the wrong guy for the job. But my complaints and misgivings go unheard, lost in the turmoil present in the minds of those who matter. My mother’s a wreck, one brother’s an alcoholic and the other’s a gambling addict, and my only sister’s currently riding the little red rocket of some ass-backwards Republican in a backwater town in Nebraska; in short, I’m the only one who can do this job. I put my pen back to paper.

“Hello. Thank you all for coming, I know that Leon would’ve appreciated it. This is not a funeral ladies and gentlemen; rather, this is a celebration of life, dedicated to remembering and cherishing-”

It all feels wrong. Every word, every syllable, every letter - all of them, out of place, out of sync; akin to a modern translation of a long-lost language which operated entirely on hand signals. The words in front of me are not sad; ipso facto, they don’t *mean* enough. They read like we’re having a party, like I’m introducing the guest of the evening. But who the *hell* is here to celebrate? Not I, said the fly, and certainly not anyone in attendance. Don’t get me wrong, someone out there is throwing a rager, the likes of which have been absent since the Y2K scare - but they’re out there, and we’re in here, and our echo chamber is a whole lot louder than theirs, speakers included. I shake my head, put my pen back to paper.

“A rose by any other name -”

Scrap that.

“Leon was a wonderful man, devoted husband, loving brother, dedicated father. Words fail to do his legacy justice, truth be told. But I guess that’s why they picked me, right?”

I stop myself - what I’m writing reads like any other funeral speech, and the thought makes me sick. But I keep writing, so there’s something on the paper. I don’t want to proofread what I’ve written - and I can’t bring myself to do so. This won’t be published, won’t leave St. Mary’s Catholic Church. This will be a private broadcast, for a trusted few and I to absorb. But today’s broadcast is on a schedule,

one that must be followed. As I finish, there's a rap at the door, and I know the time has come for me to rejoin the living. And the dead, I guess.

I step out of the confessional and greet my mom with a hug. My mom gives a small smile and puts her hands on either side of my face. She can't speak, her tears threatening to drown her. I return the smile and take a second to look at what she's wearing. It's a simple black piece, one I remember Leon spent hours picking. He must have spent two hours choosing, all while I sat and complained about the process. She's chosen to match it with an elegant set of pearls, a gift from the alcoholic, picked up last minute at a pawn shop. I nod and we part, my mother finding her place in the front pew and myself moving towards the pulpit at the front of the room.

"Hello everyone. My name is Frank. I'd like to thank all of you for being here today, it means a lot to me and my family. Um... where to begin?" I look at the paper in front of me, picking out choice words, critiquing myself. "Leon was... a wonderful man. He was a devoted husband, a loving brother, a dedicated father. Words fail to do his legacy justice, truth be told. But I guess that's why they picked me, right?" This elicits a small chuckle from the room.

Everyone is here for the same reason: Leon. But everybody here knew Leon differently, loved him in their own way. Aunts, uncles, nephews, nieces, friends, and my mother all wipe away tears, hoping against all odds that these will be the last. I see Leon in every one of them. Every one of them has his smile, or his nose or lips or hair or something – something that proves he's not dead. I look at the paper in front of me and shrug, crumpling and trashing it, drawing looks from my mom and aunts.

"I'd like to tell you a story. On my eighth birthday, Leon bought me this puke-green little beach cruiser, complete with training wheels that were almost as big as the bike itself. And I remember looking at this cruiser – shiny, brand new, begging me to ride it – and feeling... hate. I hated that cruiser. I hated the color, that god-awful green... I hated the training wheels with their huge, metal saucers as hubcaps, reflecting all that childhood angst and drama that was bubbling beneath the surface... I despised the dinky little bell that sat on the right handlebar. It would make this horrible little dinging sound that reminded me of an elevator in a horror movie. Leon had gone to great lengths to procure this bike for me, and here I was disgusted and appalled by it. The worst part of it all is that Leon could tell I hated it. He could see it in my eyes, or when I tucked the side of my stomach in to avoid brushing by that stupid bell whenever I walked near the bike. The next morning, I went out into the garage to get my bike... and it was missing. Gone. Vanished into thin air without so much as a trace. Despite how much I hated that bike, despite how I felt when I saw my towheaded self-reflected in those hideous silver dollar hubcaps, despite all my whining and crying and my general apathy towards the bike – despite all of that... That was my bike, goddammit," I smirked, picturing Leon's signature smile creeping across his face, a result of both my blasphemous curse and my mother's over-the-top bristling at its use.

“I ran inside, blasting through the house, anger and indignation fueling my every step as I marched towards my parent’s bedroom. Someone would help me get that disgusting bike back, and I knew of all people, it had to be Leon. I stomp into my mom’s room... and Leon’s gone. I knew better than to wake up my mom, so I stormed out into the hallway, and stomped through the house with a mean look on my face, as though the mice in the wall had stolen my bike. I charged into the garage, fuming... and there it was. My bike. Except it wasn’t my bike – what had once been a paltry excuse for a puke green paint job was now a smooth blend of steel grey and orange flames, and the enormous training wheels had been stripped away. Even the bell was gone. It was like I had a brand new bike... and it was all because of Leon. I remember him stepping from behind the door that led to the backyard, his signature smile spreading across his face, crawling up to his eyes, drawing lines in the sand and marking its position. He was beaming, happy as a clam. I took one look at him and I freakin’ lost it. I ran to Leon and grabbed him by the leg and started sobbing. Leon had no clue what to do, so he kind of took a step back and got down on one knee, so he could see eye to eye with me, and he started talking to me in the gruff voice he’d always use it to calm my mom down, whenever one of my brothers lit a fire under her ass or my sister got sent home again or her anxiety flared up. ‘What’s the matter, kid? I fixed it for you, just how you like, with the flames... and the... why are you crying?’ I was a wreck, tears pouring out, and I threw myself into him, and I wrapped him tight, and I kept crying. And all I could do was cry, because I felt so bad. I knew he had to have spent the better part of his sleeping hours working on that bike. I knew how much it must have hurt him to see my reaction, and how that must have spurred him to ‘do better’. And I couldn’t even explain why I was crying, because in his eyes it wouldn’t make sense, because in his eyes, that was all part of the job, and seeing me happy was worth all the work.

“Look... you all knew Leon. Probably better than I did, and he was my damn father. Some of you grew up with him, or fought alongside him - hell, some of you might have fought the guy yourself. I don’t know why I was chosen to do this, or why we’re doing this in the first place. My dad hated shit like this. He never went to a single funeral or ‘celebration of life’ in the entire 23 years I knew him. He wasn’t religious, and he didn’t care what anybody outside of his family thought of him. And maybe that’s what made him... him, ya know? Because despite all his faults, all his misgivings, my father was a good man. He wasn’t perfect, far from it. Not every story is like the one I told. There were a lot of slammed doors and broken plates growing up. But from day one, dad was consistent – in his love, in his faith to the family and his undying devotion to my brothers, my sister, my mother and I, in his actions and words. ‘Do better’, that was his motto. Every day, pushing and grinding, forcing us to ‘do better’.

But time went on, and we all got older, and we moved away and moved on. And we stopped caring. We stopped listening to the words we'd heard all our lives, stopped paying attention to the actions that had become commonplace. My dad said that 'life isn't perfect, but if you find the people who make it worth it to get out of bed every morning, you're about as close to perfect as you can get.' For a while, we were perfect, but that faded, and our imperfections shone through like diamonds. We stopped being what Leon needed. And for that, I'm sorry. If I could go back, if I could stop you from going out that night, if I could get one more day to cherish you and hear you tell the stories I've heard a thousand times and hug you and let you tell me that you're proud of the man I've become and that you're excited to see what I do in life, if I could do better – if I could have one more chance at that... I would give anything. But I can't. There's nothing anyone on this planet can do to change that, either," My words have long ago become directed at my father, rather than those in attendance. These words aren't for them. This choked prayer is an offering to a god only I can see. I close my eyes and turn my head up, and as the levee threatens to break and tears threaten to drown me under their crushing weight, I offer my final and most sincere prayer.

"I'm sorry, dad. I'm so goddamned sorry." It's these words, above all, I hope Leon hears.

# The World is Wide Enough for Both White People and Me

Crystal Solano



Like a good Mexican I got there late. The fiesta started at 4:30pm and sure enough I didn't pull up until 6:00pm. I spotted the house right away. It was a wedding, but there was a jumper in the front yard for children. As I walked up, I watched seven or eight brown faces appearing and disappearing behind the inflated faces of Mario, Luigi and Princess Peach. My sister greeted my boyfriend David and me at the entrance.

"You're late," she said as she kissed us, "and now there's nowhere for us to sit."

I smooth-talked excuses into the air that no one paid any mind to. My sister and her husband led us to the back gate and the music began to grow louder and louder. The DJ blasted Banda through the speakers. This made absolutely no sense because there was a live Banda lounging lazily on the other side of the gate. Como les gusta tirar el dinero, my mother would say. Next to the Banda was the DJ with one hand on his headphones, nodding his head to the music. This was my sister's best friend Rocio's wedding and there was no place to sit. While my sister scoped out the area, I ran into the bride and groom. Rocio is a Mexican American, daughter of immigrants just like me. The groom, Michael, was born and raised in Connecticut to a very Caucasian, conservative family. Michael's family welcomed us warmly and told us to sit anywhere we'd like. We laughed and thanked them.

I looked around and caught my sister trying to make eye contact with me across the yard. She pointed at available seats for us directly across from each other. We made our way over. A Caucasian couple was blocking two of the seats and I asked if they were sitting there. They enthusiastically shook their heads no and motioned for us to please sit. I noticed that as my sister was making her way across the table to sit, she had a decision to make. There were three available seats. To the right of them was a chatty Mexican family while on the left was an older Caucasian woman and man scrolling through their phones gripped tightly against their chests. My sister glanced once at her options and promptly sat next to the Mexican family without missing a beat. I suddenly became aware of the fact that I was taking note of my sister's biased actions. I wondered if I would have done the same thing if I hadn't been scrutinizing my surroundings, including my very own thoughts.

All of Michael's friends and family came directly from Connecticut. I visited Michael's family with my sister over the summer and was shocked by my very first visit to a small town where everyone knew everybody. I remember

driving two hours through a pine green forest to get there only to find myself actively trying to get out. Every time I stepped into town, my inability to escape their long gazes resulted in my defense mechanisms to activate. With lowered eyes, I became painstakingly aware of the color of the arms that swayed back and forth beside me. “What a pretty color?” I’d think to myself realizing I was keeping my head down in shame and embarrassment. Immediately after this realization, I shot it right back up and locked eyes with anyone who would dare keep staring. A few did and I imagined myself walking right up to them, my finger poking their chest repeatedly and saying “If you were in my hood, you’d. Get. Shot. For staring like that.” It’s funny because now, in Santa Ana, California, They are the ones keeping Their heads lowered. I wonder if any of Them recognize me and realize They, too, had made me feel this uncomfortable. The thought of their potential repentance made me feel a bit sorry for Them.

My sister attempted a conversation with us across the table with no success. The live Banda began playing unbelievably loud so we motioned toward the taco stand on the other side of the yard. I stood in line and noticed very few Caucasians with street tacos. Instead, they forked at their small plates of salad and pasta. I turned back to the taco stand and as I ordered “tres de pollo con todo, por favor!” I became acutely conscious of the way the taquero showered my tortillas with grease and rubbed them around the grill. I had observed this hundreds of times in my lifetime so why did it now appear sweaty and dirty to me? Is this how They view my favorite food? That’s ridiculous. Imagining their ghastly faces disgusts me and I can’t help but coo. “You’re not sweating, little tortilla! You’re glowing!” Then I told the taquero to add two more to my order.

The wedding had a Mexican antojitos stand and I’d never seen one at a party before so I was ecstatic. The party was elegant and white but once you made your way over to the antojitos corner, it was a different story. Lining the table in a flamboyant fashion were bionicos—chopped fruit covered with yogurt and topped with raisins, shredded coconut, and tiny, colorful marshmallows, tostilocos—Tostitos, pig skin, cucumber, jicama, Japanese peanuts, hot sauce and chili powder, chicharones—fried wheat snacks topped with hot sauce and lime juice, micheladas—beer mixed tomato juice, limes, and hot sauce, Tajin brims the edges of the cup. I looked around the fiesta again and was deflated to see that They wouldn’t even try it. I felt a pull to befriend them and coax them into trying a tostiloco or a bionico. I would even go easy on the hot sauce. Before I could step a foot in their direction, I imagined their face scrunched up in disgust as I’d present them with a treat I’d prepared. Instead, I frantically looked at the table with treats and tried to find a way to swoop them into my arms and run. I was defeated. I was unable to protect all of the things that I loved. For the second time tonight, a battle ignited inside of me. A part of me wanted to initiate conversation and make them feel welcome. The other half of me wanted to keep Them as far away as possible and to keep Us safe. This awareness caused me to act. I recognized a woman from Connecticut who showed me a picture of her cat. As I made my way back to my table with arms full of tacos, tostilocos and bionicos, I tapped her and

said, “You’re the cat lady!” She smiled and nodded, then turned her back to me. I admit it, that may not have been the smoothest way to start up a conversation but still, there was my attempt at being friendly with White people. I shrugged and let the battle rage on.

As I silently thanked the genius who suggested the antojitos table, I watched more and more people get up to dance. The old school Mexican dads at the fiesta began to do the traditional zapatiado, the shoe dance, similar to tap dancing. At first glance, the dance seems like a mindless combination of kicking and stomping, but if you pay close attention, you could feel the smug spirit of our ancestors gloriously and adamantly refusing to let traditions die, even in a new country, even in a new world. I burst with pride as I watched the Caucasian people clapping along and laughing with the rest of us. Soon after, Rocio’s mom announced the traditional Vibora de La Mar, or the Serpant of the sea game. In Mexico, this is a traditional singing game for children where two individuals clasp their hands together in the shape of an arch and the rest of the kids form a line grabbing on to the person in front’s waist and run through the arch until the two kids decide to bring the arch down on someone and capture them. In weddings, it is quite the opposite. The bride and groom stood on chairs clasping hands while being held by 4 or 5 of their most trusted friends. Two lines separated by gender formed and one line began to run through to try to knock down the bride and groom.

Everyone began crowding around. The music began to play and the whole backyard buzzed with excitement. I forgot the differences in skin color and grabbed the cat lady by the hand. The women went first. The lyrics began, and we were off. Round and round Rocio’s sister took the lead maneuvering us through tight crevices between the tables and straight through the chair holding Rocio with a feisty shove in her direction. Her loyal five including my sister successfully kept her up as we went around and around in a laughing frenzy. It was a whole three minutes of uncontrollable laughter once we finished.

Next was the men’s turn. Rocio’s brother took the lead and began slowly skipping until the climax of the song. He then led them to rush full speed towards Michael and his four brothers holding him. Rocio’s brother rammed right into Michael’s chair and stumbled to the ground, taking down with him one of Michael’s brothers. The two of them reached for the chair Michael was standing on and the unsteadiness caused Michael to topple over both of them. The yard howled with laughter but I saw the intense anger in Michael’s eyes for a fraction of a second before it became a smile again. All feelings of joy and laughter left me as I dared to look around at the other Caucasians. The older women, including Michael’s mother and aunts, had tight, disapproving smiles that I feared might turn into snarls. “Would you look at these hooligans and savages finding enjoyment in knocking my beloved son off of a chair?” I heard the mother say. “This is what our poor Michael is marrying into?” I heard an aunt say. My cat lady grabbed my shoulders from behind disrupting my imagination and yelled “Why are you still standing here? Run, the bouquet toss is about to start.” I looked up

and it was just me. No one was snarling. No one was calling us hooligans. It was just fear. Everyone was smiling again. No one was overthinking Michael's fall but me. I felt robbed of all enjoyment tonight but who did I actually have to blame but myself? My feelings of mistrust interpreted every smile as fake, every laugh as mocking, every comment as judgmental. I, more than anyone, should know what allowing fear to win does to a victim. Victim? Am I a victim? No. I, too, would be cautious to try a food I didn't recognize. I, too, would be bewildered if my loved one fell off a chair and a room full of strangers roared in laughter.

This epiphany engulfed my thoughts and I sat back at my table and watched two women screech at having the bouquet tossed in their direction. These Mexican women tugged back and forth before one of them lost her grip then proceeded to walk off and smooth out her hair, giggling. I wondered if They were having a good time tonight. I wondered if They were as paranoid as I was. Everyone was laughing. Everyone was smiling, except for me... and the kid with chamoy drenched fingers and face pleading with his mother for another round of tostilocos. "Andale ammmaaaaa" I heard him say.

# Freed

Marlo Brooks



Call me by the truth  
of your thoughts, aligned with  
the sight of your heart.  
But, listen to me clearly...

I am the mistakes of my past.  
Adapted to change,  
I have been freed. I am me.

My real name is obsolete.  
You see me! Empowered by my autonomy,  
weary to the thoughts of harmony,  
I'm incomplete, yet I've been freed. I am me.  
My secret name is discreet,  
so that secrecy can protect me, yet  
those protected still wind up dead'ly,  
even so, you've been told...  
I am freed. I am me.

My true name is belief, though at times I  
find it hard to believe in me  
and to separate my identity from my reality  
through my surroundings, and though I  
still feel grief over the deceased and  
those who cease—to exist.  
You have been freed. You are me.

# El Cu-cuy

David Guzman



With heavy eyes, we watch the fate of what was once our land, yet we sing ‘this land was made for you and me’. . .

The sun was beginning to set as Richie was sitting outside his broken house on the barrio. He looked out and saw the chamacos playing soccer on the street. As they were screaming like little creatures, one of the abuelitas called one over to put on a sweater. Richie took a breath and took it all in... his barrio. It was everything he was and all its imperfections. From the flickering streetlights at night to the cracked, pot-hole streets that never seemed to end. Richie’s shoulders were tense, and he clenched his jaw real tight. His eyes were lost, and every now and again, his left leg would suddenly jolt and shake violently up and down.

“Richie.”

“...” He didn’t hear anything, except ayudame...ayudame.

“Richie!”

Richie didn’t look up for a while, he was checked out, he didn’t want to come back.

“Get your head out of your ass.”

“... Oh, Sup Happy.”

“Foo, you blast my phone como un loco and tell me to go to the park, and when I do, you’re not there. And you say ‘oh. Sup happy’. No soy pendejo foo, what happened?”

When Richie saw Happy looked up at the white, two-story house with the patio on the second floor, he knew that something was wrong by how the door was open- there was a square dent on the side of the doorway right next to the doorknob. It looked like Richie’s place was robbed: Clothes were everywhere, the mesa was in front of the stairs with a broken leg, plantas ripped from their soil and the vase made by my tia in Michoacán was destroyed, glass was shattered in almost every room and some were stained with blood. Even the candles of The Virgen and the Lord Jesus Christ was left broken on the floor. Richie can still hear the screams of his mother and father telling them to stop, his mother begging not to take her baby away from her. His father was fighting them to get them off his Amor, the love of his life. Now, silence only filled the void

along with Happy's voice. It was lower, but Richie was still able to hear him talk.

"Richie. que pasó, tell me, foo. Roberto isn't working on his car and your mom isn't inside watching her novellas."

"...i.... my mamá-"

Richie wanted to tell his homeboy what happened, but every time he'd try to speak, it would replay in his head and nothing would come out. Ayudame... ayudame. He trembled as he stared off into the barrio again. He wanted to run away from it all, even if it was for a little while. Richie took a deep breath. One by one, the little creatures of the barrio went home when their mothers and abuelitas called them in for dinner. The clouds were stained a dark pink, and the trees began to silhouette in darkness.

"... El Cu-cuy man" Richie said in a hoarse whisper. He fought the tears that he tried to hold back, but all dams break eventually.

Richie's walls were being ripped apart faster than he can fortify, rotting piece by piece, destroying pillar by pillar. They grew old and crumbled until there was nothing left. Richie looked down and stared at the pavement, it too was cracked, sprouting from it little weeds that he stepped on to get rid of. His father always hated the weeds on his lawn.

"El Cu-cuy... he took away everything from me, Happy. Everything. you know, he comes when you least expect it. he knocks on your door with a smile and says, "tengo un paquete para señor y señora Ramirez".

His breathing became quicker and shallower than the last. No matter how much he tried, his thoughts raced inside his head. Richie wanted to relax but he just couldn't. The world stood still but it felt like he was spinning. It was absolute fear. It was the type of fear you have when you get stung by a bee and crying for mamá to make it feel better. It was the type of fear that leaves a constant pit at your stomach and leaves you hungry for the last supper because you knew you were in for a whooping from papa because you were suspended for fighting at school. It was the type of fear that leaves you with tears in your eyes so heavy that you could drown at the thought of being on your own without your parents. it was the type of fear that leaves you forever broken because your parents never told you they were undocumented.

"El Cu-cuy? ...what the fu-... oh, El Cu-cuy".

Ryder saw Happy ball his hand into a fist. 'How could this happen' he must have thought. It probably made happy think about his parents, and his older sister Estrella. How he would feel if that were to happen to them since they too were undocumented. Happy was tearing up now too, but he didn't look at Richie. He didn't dare to. They didn't look at each other at all.

“fuck. I’m... I’m so sorry.”

That’s what he hated most, people feeling sorry for him. He was just like his father. It made him feel low and inferior, a cucaracha. That’s was all he needed to rip the remaining walls and pillars he was hiding behind. It broke him. He wasn’t Richie anymore. Ya esta muerto

“...”

A silent tear instantly began to fall from Richie’s left cheek.

“...”

He leaned forward, and his face planted in his hands. Happy heard the haunting moan coming from Richie. shame, anger, and the longing for his mother brewed and simmered in him until he couldn’t contain himself any longer. Richie was sick of crying, no matter how much he tried, he couldn’t stop. The pain never did. He even felt it in his throat. His eyes got blurry from the tears and he just wanted to scream at the top of his lungs.

“They’re gone hap. They’re really gone.”

“Richie... You’re gonna be ok. entiendes? Understand? You’re gonna b- “

“How the fuck do you know that!”

Richie screamed with tears in his eyes, refusing to look at happy.

“how the fuck do you know that Happy.”

his breathing was so erratic even Happy heard his tremble. His heart going full speed with no intention of stopping. He sprang up in front of happy and threw a brick from the planter his father had been making. ‘it’s all my fault’ he thought.

“you’re gonna be- “

“They’re. gone. Happy! -”, Richie’s eyes darted right at Happy, and all he did was stare at the top of Richie’s shoe.

“And guess what? it’s all my fault. I heard the door knock. I opened it and saw the Cu-cuy with their helmets and armor. I slammed the door on their faces and yelled for amá y mi apá. I’m the one that got that dent in that door, and broke amá’s candles. I’m the one who made y mi apá bleed. Im the one that let the Cucuy in and take them away. What the fuck was I doing happy? What the fuck was I doing? Like a pendejo I stood there... frozen, scared. Mi amá y mi apá were fighting, and it took four people to hold him down. Ama was screaming ‘ayudame’ ... she was fucking screaming ‘ayudame’ man”.

Happy just jumped up and hugged his homeboy. Richie flinched but he didn’t back away. he just fell into his best friend’s arms, broken and letting out another loud broken wail to dios. He was tired of fighting it all. Tired of fighting himself, he couldn’t do it anymore.

“you won’t be alone” happy said, “you’re my brother, right? Remember when we first met? I was getting jumped at hazard by 38th street, two people just slamming against my head and my ribs-”. Happy’s voice sounded like he was trembling. “I thought I was dead. I was ready to go with dios and be in heaven. Or I don’t know, maybe I’d go to hell when I passed out. Then the pain stopped, and I saw you over me checking to see if I was alive. That was you, foo. you didn’t have to and could have left me there for 38th to have, but no. I owe you everything, Richie. Everything. You helped me survive. That’s some really gangster shit. You said your familia is gone, but you have familia right here. you won’t be alone, Richie. You’re my brother, for life.”

“Si, you won’t be alone Mijito” a soft, feeble, and familiar voice said.

Happy and Richie turned towards the voice and saw Senora Cisneros from across the street and all of Richie’s neighbors on his front lawn: there was Senor Diaz with some water. Abuelia Julia Alvarez brought with her with some towels and blankets, Senora Castillo with her famous frijoles, Tikis from next door had school supplies because her abuelita can’t get out of bed, she was followed by her three older brothers. Even cranky Senor Valdez had clothes and even dog food for Chewy. It made Richie chuckle in between his sobs. He knew his father would have a meltdown if he saw this many people on his lawn.

Senora Cisneros was the barrio’s abuelita. Everyone knew her, and she knew everyone. She had very long, dark hair and didn’t look a day over 50, but she was really sixty-three. As far as everyone knew, Senora Cisneros had family, she’d always glow and smile when she had the opportunity to talk about her nietas Lala And Esperanza. She would always ask people how their kids were and smile hearing about their good grades and good attendance. If they were good, she would give them five dollars. Even if her ‘nietos’ weren’t doing so well, as long as they promised to better themselves, she would still give them five dollars. Senora Cisneros is the barrio’s diamond in the rough. It’s the people like her who save people like Richie from being broken forever.

“aye, pobrecito. Poor little thing. I saw what happened” She said in Spanish. “I heard your mother and went outside to see what was happening. I saw those matones go in there and take them. Los Animales. Those animals.” She clicks her tongue while shaking her heard. don’t worry Mijito-“she came over to Richie and Happy slowly and rubbed their backs with a soft and somber smile. “I already told her time and time again that if anything ever happened. Abuelita Cisneros would come and watch over tu y tus amigos. Yo y la comunidad. Your Ama knows, and como Happy, says

not to worry, you won't be alone mi vida. everything will be ok".

"how do you know abuelita? How?"

"porque yo estoy aqui. Mijito. Im right here"

Abuelita Cisneros wraps her arms around Richie and hugs him tight, she smells of too much perfume and Jamaica. But still, her voice was soothing to Richie. It made his breathing calm; his heart was still racing but it would soon be at a cruise. It wasn't pounding out of his chest as it was before. His eyes were sore from the crying, he still couldn't talk. But he heard his other neighbors rally behind her soon after.

"Simon limon!" said Tikis and her three brothers.

"Por Vida! For life!" said Senor Diaz.

"Richie you're going to be ok, you're with us" Said Abuelita Alvarez.

"Abuelita Cisneros knows best" Said Senora Castillo.

"We are all familia!" Said Senora Cisneros.

That's what rang in Richie's ears the loudest as his neighbors cheered with Senora Cisneros. 'We are all familia'.

Looking at everyone's smiles, he couldn't help but smile himself- it was contagious. Abuelita Cisneros giggled seeing that beautiful smile Richie always had- it always made her glow too. Happy backed off and nodded with what everyone said to reassure Richie that he would always be there too. Abuelita Cisneros hugged Richie tight again and gave him a kiss to the forehead. Her red lipstick left a mark, and everyone else with soft and happy cheer came over and patted Richie shoulder. It did make him feel better, his walls and pillars that were demolished were slowly starting to repair themselves again. It warmed his heart to see that people cared for him in the barrio.

"Si. A todos somos familia. Yes, everyone is family".

Abuelita Cisneros held onto him like she would her grandchildren and sighed contently before looking at the battered house.

"ya. Let's all clean the house so you can do tarea and get ready for school Manana. No?"

Richie nods and looks at everyone, taking it all in... his barrio, his familia.

"gracias. Gracias a todos....no hay palabras. There are no words..." his voice cracked. His throat would probably be sore for a couple of days.

Abuelita squeezed his shoulder and motioned everyone to follow her and Richie and they all began to pick up and clean Richie's house.

Fin

# Homeland

Nana Howton



It was the second time Shawn was picked up by ICE agents and delivered to Mexican authorities on the other side of the border. Well, it had happened three times, really, but the first time ICE was still the INS and then he was a teenager. He stepped out of the bus into a dirt parking lot, his shirt stuck to his back and his jeans feeling heavy in the 2 p.m. heat.

He had spent 26 hours in a detention center with crying babies, desperate women and resigned men before he was deported. That was lucky. Many people had been moving from detention center to detention center for weeks, some for months, before they were close enough to Mexico to be sent back by bus. Shawn had refused the prison chow and now he was hungry.

He checked his wallet and found a grand total of 12 dollars. In his jeans coin pocket he found a quarter and two dimes.

“Mister, por favor, a coin!” asked a boy, white powder surrounded his lips, like he had eaten a donut and forgotten to use a napkin.

His broken English reminded Shawn of something he had learned on his previous deportations to Mexico: It was clear to them that he was American, though ICE had not bought it and deported him anyway.

He gave the boy a quarter, but kept the two dimes. The boy waited, as though expecting Shawn to give him more money, but Shawn wanted to keep the dimes.

“No más,” he said. The boy shrugged, and walked away, the back of his legs catching dust as his sandal flapped against his heels.

Shaw went on the other direction, his hands stuffed in his pocket twirling the dimes between his fingers. Tijuana was chaotic. The disorganized drive-at-your-own-risk traffic produced nauseating fumes of burnt oil and gasoline and the sidewalk were crowded with kiosks. Vendors screamed as he passed, trying to lure him into buying their trinkets. He walked, followed by scent of gasoline, fried foods and a broken sewer pipe for several blocks, until the smell of carne asada with a dash of cumin compelled him to enter a taqueria. The establishment was too small to have tables and a few people stood, holding paper plates under their chins with one hand and stuffed soft tacos with on the other.

He was happy to see a handwritten sign that read “U.S. dollars acépeted.” He bought two tacos, paying a dollar each. He remembered from his previous deportations that though businesses accepted dollars in Tijuana, they never seemed to have change and he had a pile of pesos back home, which he should start carrying, considering how often immigration was picking him up.

The place with its hot griddle and an open vat of boiling oil was far hotter than outside. He ate standing on the sidewalk, where a California poppy grew out of a crack, its orange petals drooping. His brother would not get home until 6 p.m. that evening and wouldn't turn on his cell phone until 8 because he couldn't afford to pay for calls during the daytime.

His brother would have to go find their tio so they could drive to the border and sort things out. He tried to remember if his passport was not expired. What a drag if it were! He never used it to go anywhere. It was not like he traveled, but after the first deportation he had gone to the post office and filed the papers to get his passport. He had used only once (his brother brought it to Tijuana on his second deportation).

"Hey gabacho," someone called him.

He looked over at the three teens on the other side of the narrow street. Gabacho, really? Only in Mexico they called him white American.

"Wasup?" another said, but he was not friendly at all.

They were fidgety, as though they were getting ready to pounce on him, but not sure if it was a good idea.

"What is up?" he said.

"Whatch' you have in pocket?" the "wasup" guy asked. He was obviously the leader, with enough English skills to convey their intentions. His overgrown hair covered his ears and most of his cheeks.

"Mis cojones," he said.

The "followers" laughed. They were all short, but they were stocky and if Shawn had to defend himself, he'd likely lose.

"You think you funny?" the guy insisted. "Whatch' in your pocket?"

"Seriously, I have nothing," he said. "I'm just happy to see you!"

The translator looked puzzled. The others waited. Shawn was in no mood to explain the joke. They talked among themselves and he considered his escape route. He glanced up and down the street. There was an old woman at the window of a decrepit house a few yards away, staring at them.

"Maricón," the shortest one taunted.

The old woman hacked loudly enough to get their attention. She spit on the sidewalk and, in a thunderous voice, told the kids to get lost.

They called her bruja vieja and told her to mind her own business. She stared them down and they left.

Shawn made his way back to the border and sat on the square, if you could call that a square. It was a stamp-sized piece of partially paved rectangle that at some point had been landscaped. There were remains of a badly dried-up rosebush, and weeds grew around the lonely tree, leaves blackened by smog and other debris spewed by the heavy traffic going by.

There was no place left to sit, the two cement benches being occupied. Some people sat on the ground in circles playing cards or staring at the ground together, as if it somehow made them feel better not to be alone in the misery. For it was a collective misery, no doubt, which he might have to join soon enough if

his brother had forgotten to add credit to his pay-as-you-go cell phone.

He could go hang out near the immigration building, where the crowd waited – some to legally cross, and some for a miracle, as if having come all this way and unexpectedly found there were walls, guards and helicopters patrolling the American side they had exhausted the resources to return home or to find another crossing point.

After a while, that's what Shawn did. He walked up to the border patrol building to cool a little, but soon they asked him to move out if he wasn't going to cross.

"I am an American citizen," he said. Sure his English was pretty good, but he had to admit he always had the cadence he had learned from his mother, even a slight accent, and the ICE agent heard it, looked him up and down, and shrug.

"My name is Shawn Kilpatrick," he said. "Can't you find me in your computers?"

"Are you Irish?" the agent asked. He had a full hair of red hair and seemed misplaced in that corner of the world. He turned to another agent, a tall white guy with broad shoulders, "He claims to be Irish like us."

"My father was Irish, I'm claiming to be an American," Shawn said.

A third agent, a Mexican-American joined them, gave him a once over, and declared, "he's not Mexican, that's for sure!"

"No passport," said the red-headed agent, "no entry!"

He didn't have his driver's license; the agents who had picked him up in San Diego had kept it, claiming it was a fake. Even if he had his license, it would not have been enough. It used to be, when as a younger man he came down to Tijuana with his buddies for the cheap alcohol and occasional weed.

The agents shooed him out and he tried to remember the places he used to go to, all within walking distance from the crossing point, on one side or another of International Avenue, which ran along the border luring tourists who didn't want to go deep into the city – that was trouble and always ended up badly.

He found the Avenida Revolución, once a bustling destination for kids paying a \$1 a beer, now a depressed area with most businesses closed. He found a bar where a woman was dancing a top of a table surrounded by American college kids. They were a boisterous bunch, making crude remarks the woman did not understand or pretended not to. She shook her hips doing her salsa moves with an invisible partner, sometimes hugging herself and running her hands down her own torso and buttocks.

Shawn ordered a beer and as the mustached bartender opened it, he immediately regretted remembering he only had a \$10 and was going to get a pack of pesos in exchange. He was pleasantly surprised when the man gave him back \$9 in American currency.

"If she wasn't so damn ugly I'd fuck her," one of the students said, and they all burst into laughter.

"I'd fuck her anyway," another said.

Shawn would never know why he took this personally. Perhaps there was

something in her that reminded him of his sister, who was in the state prison at Chowchilla for killing her abusive husband. Shawn threw a bottle at the students, not aiming at anyone in particular as though all of them were equally insulting.

Almost instantly, he felt the blows raining on his face, his head, his torso. He was relieved when he was thrown out on the sidewalk. The beating could have gone on for much longer.

He looked back at the bar. The two Mexican bouncers, who had beaten him, were at the door ready to give him another beating if he tried to go back inside.

“Go home, Yankee!” one of them advised him.

The students watched him for a moment, then returned to the woman, all laughter and cheers.

Shawn pulled himself up and leaned against the wall, taking a deep breath. He limped for a couple of blocks, holding his bloody nose, under the glare of people who knew he was not one of them, despite his mother giving him her eyes, her accent, and trying to convince him that Mexico was forever motherland.

He stood near the border crossing, every so often using the pay phone to call his brother. Eventually, his brother picked up his call.

“Hermanito,” he said. “I’m in fucking Mexico again. Come take me home.”

# Whittier Boulevard, E.L.A.

Lucinda Crespin



She sits on the curb of Whittier Boulevard and Atlantic  
It could be any street corner in any neighborhood  
She watches the lowriders as they pass at 5 miles per hour  
Here come the show cars with their fancy paint jobs  
The Sons of Soul, Orpheus and the Latin Lords  
They stop in the center of the Boulevard  
One car club at a time, they begin to make their cars dance  
To the rhythm of oldies, disco, cumbias or mariachi music  
I wonder what they will be blasting today  
Hydraulics bounce the cars up and down, to the left and right  
Bam! Synchronized they drop their cars to the ground.  
I hear it before I see it, they sling profanity like rocks  
The peace, the show, the fun is slipping away into the darkness  
I watch as a dozen young men and girls quickly get out of their cars  
Crowbars, bats, and bottles flying through the air  
The beauty of the Capri is distorted  
The flames a patchwork of color with no form  
Windshield glass flying through the air  
3 young Chicanos are beating the disco king  
He tries to shield his face and tries to roll away  
There is nowhere to run he is caught between  
Their kicks and the tires of the bleeding Capri  
A loud thump of iron and wood as it hits a target  
It resonates like the bass of a stereo through the air  
A Chicano falls to the ground, his head is bleeding  
He rolls on the concrete holding his head  
His face hidden beneath the crimson  
“Beto! Beto! Are you alright?” He kneels by Beto’s side  
Tears in his eyes he says, “Come on ese, get up, you can do it bro”  
Beto’s hands relax as he takes his last breath, his brother kneeling at his side  
A flood of tears trickles down the crimson and red tears hit the ground  
El Chicano stands up with a determined look on his face  
He goes to his car, looks at windows broken, bashed with a bat

he reaches past the sliced leather into the glove compartment  
he pulls out a gun and looks around, blood, glass, crowbars  
He finds his target, "Hey Orpheus," he yells to the guy with the bat  
As the batboy turns, the shot rings out and the bullets fly  
His brother's killer falls to the ground and the crowd runs  
East, West, North, and South  
away from the bullets that continue to fly  
The sirens are blasting and drawing near  
The flashing lights are getting brighter  
The shooter falls on one knee, tears streaming down his face  
"I have to go Beto, I'll see you soon Bro"  
He looks back at his brother one last time  
he runs into the dark of night  
A flood of memories fills her mind, she remembers  
Her brother was shot and killed on Breed and First Street  
She whispers a prayer to God as she runs towards home  
Away from the memories that make her bleed  
Away from the violence and senseless death  
Away from the boulevard, this city, this life.

# Magic Lamp

Nicole Barrera



If I found a magic lamp I'd know  
what I'd ask for  
He'd come out in the most grandiose way  
Smoke and fireworks coming out from the lamp  
Maybe he's blue maybe he'll be cyan or like me  
and ask me

*What is it you seek my child?*

My eyes wide open in excitement  
I would ask to look more like my parents  
The bafflement on his face is clear so I elaborate to avoid confusion

I explain not entirely, just my skin color  
I'm tired of getting asked at school what my ethnicity is  
Hearing people say you *owe me money* to one another  
As if my ethnicity was a simple numbered color on a roulette table

Now that that's clarified I go into my second  
wish giving him no time to rest.  
I would ask him for a better tongue  
I can see how he could take this a variety of ways so I go on

I just want to properly speak Spanish I need  
to be able to roll my tongue  
Being blessed with the most possible R's  
I need to be able to use the voice of my ancestors  
not the one of the people who gamble on me  
I see him raise an eyebrow and say *Well? and the last?*

A lot of money so that I have the privilege to have both.

# The Best Time of the Day

Morning is the best time of the day. There is always inspiration in the air. When I wake up the sun hits my face in such a way, that if I took a picture of myself I could show the beauty of my plain brown eyes. I'm not a real photographer, but the morning always makes me feel like I could be.

I get ready in a matter of minutes, my clothes are the same every week. Monday through Thursday I have about four to five t-shirts that I cycle through, and then Friday is spirit day so I always wear our school colored t-shirt. Since it's Friday I don't have to worry about clothes today. Standing in front of my mirror I look at my wet hair and run my fingers through it. I remember how I had to beg my parents to get bangs. I was the only girl in school who didn't and the boys always called me five head. It wasn't until I cut my own hair in the 5th grade and did it so poorly that my parents were forced to take me to the salon.

Ever since I've taken very good care of my hair. Once I detangle my hair with my fingers *then* I switch to a brush. Dad walks out of his room which is just across the hall. He is fixing his collar as he heads downstairs, and his cologne wafts into my room making my head hurt. I fix my hair and leave it down as I clip a bow on the right side of my head and go downstairs.

"*Buenos días,*" my dad says to my grandma as he grabs a cup of coffee and a Concha.

"*Buenos días, Ignacio,*" my grandma says from the kitchen shuffling to the living room to take a seat. I come down the stairs. I look around the bottom floor and see my dad sitting at the table to my right, and to my left I make eye contact with my Grandma who is sitting down.

"*Buenos días abuela,*" I say as I make it down the stairs. She looks over and nods her head. I turn my head the other way and see my dad finishing his coffee with only crumbs on his plate, where the Concha used to be. He looks at me and waits for me to greet him first. I've learned my lesson from the last time I didn't say good morning to everyone. "*Buenos días,*" I mutter to my dad. He nods as he gets up to leave his dishes in the sink. I head over to my backpack, and the books inside make my biceps flex as I lift from the straps. I must have at least thirty pounds of books in there, or maybe I'm just weak.

The jingle from my dad's keys signal that we're about to head out. My dad has always been a punctual man. He doesn't like to be late to work, so if I wanted a ride to school I had to leave on his time. I've gotten used to it because it's been this way since middle school. Getting up early became routine and whenever I was late dad would get really mad, and when he gets mad at me he just ignores me. I hate it so much; because, he's very stubborn. My mom tells me that I'm just like him in personality, and I feel like that's an insult. We get along well, or at least I think we do.

I hear the jingle from the keys again as he walks in front of me. I snap back into reality and grab a sweater, since it looks like it might rain later. I can

smell the moisture in the air as he opens the door. He's at the threshold, and does the sign of the cross then mumbles a few words and steps out with his right foot forward.

I remember a few years ago when he was dropping me off at school, he told me this was the most important part of the day and I needed to make it routine in the morning. He said that I needed to do it every morning to be safe in the outside world. Back then I was very impressionable, so being the God fearing child I was I would mimic him perfectly. I always made sure he would see me do it correctly, waiting for him to turn around and lock the door as I outstretched my right leg.

Lately, however, the action became more habitual than purposeful. If there is a God out there, I'm sure he'd be okay if I put my left foot out instead of my right one first. I walk out with my left foot, passing my dad and heading towards the car. He unlocks the car door and I sit down with my backpack in between my legs. I see him walk like a man with a ruler glued to his back. He gets in through the driver's side.

I love days like today when the sun only came out to wake me up, but then gets covered by the clouds that look so plump. I always thought it was difficult to cool off but it's always easy to get warm, so winter was always my favorite season. Our drives to school are always a little awkward because we don't initiate conversations with each other. I'm still working on it, but today he caught me off guard. "Did you finish applying to the local university here?" His voice pierced my core. I still have not told him that I applied out of state. He didn't look at me, but kept his gaze forwards on the road even though we were at a red light.

"Well yeah," I said trying my best to get the next half out. I try my hardest to keep talking and just praying that the rest would come out. My hands are messing with the frayed strings hanging off my sweater, "but I also applied to others you know." I winced, that's not very Straightforward I think to myself.

"What other ones?" He is always so direct. Never giving me time to think my answers through. I make some up in my head but I really want to throw out New York.

"Well some other ones in California," I say as I look over at the radio that was playing music at a soft volume, acting as the white noise between my thoughts and my dad's reactions. He turns the volume all the way down to zero.

"Where in California? How far away? Be specific." His fingers go from the dial on the radio to the steering wheel again. Even though it's cold outside I can feel the heat emanating from me, and making the car warmer. My attention is on this frayed string, now wrapped around my finger, cutting off circulation. I pull my finger hard and hear the satisfying break of the string.

"I mean does it matter how far it is? Shouldn't it being a good school be good enough for you?" I look out my side of the window. Then I look at the string still wrapped around my finger.

"*Como que* does it matter?" His voice mocked mine as he repeated my

words. I could tell he was angry. He would do this all time, but I swear he only did it with me. “When I ask you a question you answer it.” He is done with my games. Not that I am doing it on purpose, but he is getting worried. Worried that I have aspirations outside of his.

I am still confused from his voice change, so I face forward and try to answer as clear as possible, so as not to upset him too much. “I did apply here but I also want to go to New York.” My voice was soft. If he didn’t mute the radio there would have been no way I would have been heard. There was a long pause. There was no white noise to help me feel more relaxed. The deafening silence makes my ears feel like I am in the middle of a flight, while my body shakes with turbulence that is threatening my safety.

“What do you mean? You don’t want to live with us anymore?” He spoke in a tone to match mine, soft and quiet. I actually never get to hear this one too often. It always catches me off guard. “Did we not give you everything?” He continued, raising his voice a bit more. I know I am throwing a wrench in his plan of living comfortably and me taking care of him and my mom. That’s just his traditional way of thinking, but I want to see what I’ve been missing.

“Me wanting to get a higher education somewhere else, doesn’t mean you guys have not given me everything.” I say this a little louder. I try not to yell, but I need to stand up for myself. “Besides, I want to pursue Photography. I think I can be really good at it.”

“Your brother didn’t leave us. He did everything right here.” He said as he started talking with his hand. His finger is pointing to the floor to emphasizing the ‘right here.’ “Since when did you want to do this Photography? That’s a waste. You’re too smart to be making such a dumb decision.” His words are jabs to my heart and soul. Every sentence that comes out of his mouth is another round of boxing I have to endure. At this point all I can do is wait for someone to ring the bell.

I hate being compared to my brother, he’s older by 9 years and we are definitely not the same person. “He wanted something different. He’s okay staying here, but I’m not.” This time I looked over at him. “I can do it.” I somehow manage to get this out. At this point I’m wondering if perhaps there is a God I can ask to help me make my dad understand my potential.

“I don’t want to talk about this anymore. If you choose to leave you won’t get any help from me.” He drops his volume back down. Lightning flashes in the distance, and after three seconds comes the crashing of thunder. The rain falls softly at first, then harder. I look away confused about what just happened, the feeling not yet hitting me. We arrive at the school’s drop off point. I am always here early so there is no one outside other than the security guard that stays outfront.

I look out my door and see the rain falling down hard, “I love you dad.” This is my final blow before I am saved by the bell. I open the door and get out, with my backpack and sweater in my hands. I close the door, not waiting to hear a response, and hear him drive off behind me.

I stand in the harsh rain and look down to see the frayed string on my finger. Still wrapped and clinging to my wet finger, and I remember everything that happened in the car. I now feel an overwhelming wave of emotion come over me, enveloping me, smothering me. I take the string and throw it on the ground with the force of a baseball pitcher trying to get a quick strike. I watch as it gets swept away by the rain. I watch it drift away, into the street, until I lose sight of it.

I am soaking wet. I feel heavy, yet I walk to a bench inside the school. I sit down and lean forward with my arms and sweater cushioning my head. I imagine someone taking my picture right now, and getting an award winning shot of a person that no longer knows what to do. I would be giving someone their morning dose of inspiration. They will realize that they have a knack for Photography. At least someone else can.

If mornings are the best time of the day, today might be the worst day of my life. The rain continues to fall, giving me a new white noise to focus on. My head is turned to the right, and the noise of the rain is lulling me to sleep. The rain hushes everyone as it guides the people inside. I watch them all pile in as I forget that I'm soaked and slowly close my eyes. Hopefully I can have another try at the morning, this time I'll put my right foot forward.

# Distant Souls

Esmeralda Gomez



Your language is foreign to me.

I can hear you speak but-  
I don't understand what you mean.

The music's loud so you grab my hand to show me.  
Step by step  
You lead me to a bedroom door.

I enter the room.  
Silence.

I can hear you speak but-  
I don't understand what you mean.

With a bottle of whiskey, in your hand  
You lock the door,  
I understand now...

But you'll never understand me.

I am not distant.

Like your drunk and sexually frustrated friends  
You're one of them,  
Lost in drugs and sex,  
You see no need in speaking.

I look away,  
Admiring New York's peaceful city lights  
With watery eyes.

You'll never understand me.

"You lost communication" I finally say,  
But your mind is in blank space.

I am not distant.

# Pavlov's Kitchen

Steven A. Hinkle



*after Denise Levertov*

The small kitchen is always bright. Across the stain of uneven patches,  
Red shades pain intimate eyes.  
Two black hands drag on a white face. They recently traded living spaces  
With their old mother goose.

Now the sun never sets  
Over the hollow-cored doorway.  
Dipped in bronze,  
It watches the back door  
For the chef at the back-burner  
As he beats the cock's children  
To a scramble.

The rooster crows out  
Of habit but not out of necessity.  
Drinking Wild Turkey,  
He turns toward tomorrow  
And watches the sun he couldn't raise.

Smoke recesses into the vent And the chef preps  
Interspecific genocide.  
His flame beams at the scent,

Rising and falling  
With the traveling heat.  
The eggs form a compromised State of agency.

The chef rings Pavlov's bell  
And summons me to eat. Famished, I feast  
On red and yellow children  
That are ketchup free.

# Washing Machine

Natalie Thompson



Our washing machine fell apart  
Leaving us to hand wash for weeks  
The screws fell out,  
The door stayed ajar.

My momma said this was  
A lesson in  
Appreciation,  
I took it as a lesson in  
Depreciation  
Because Capitalism sucks.

The fabric softener cost a fortune and  
Only advertises to women,  
And I'm no longer sure  
If I even need it.

So here I am washing  
My two loads,  
And I might as well be in a river,  
Because modern times is  
Meaningless  
Without the modern,  
And labor  
Seems to only involve a  
Her.

# Here Lies

We are the Women  
Buried deep down,  
Suffocating on the dirt  
Every time we open our mouths to chant  
*Catcalling isn't a complement*  
*I don't want to be touched*  
*No doesn't mean Yes*  
*I have worth*  
It goes forgotten, unlistened to just like us  
And our ancestors,  
Our mouths have become dried  
From the smothered desperation

We are the Women  
With arms quietly stitched up  
By our mothers who taught themselves  
To sew out of necessity  
Where fingers that weren't ours  
Branded us with possession  
Four small dirty blue prints burned into our wrist  
Where the decomposing hasn't touched,  
A reminder that this body doesn't  
Belong to me. Not ever.

We are the Women  
With our bodies forced into  
The pale pink burial dress  
And out of our black jeans of resistance,  
Our clothes used to be our armor  
But even that has been stripped away,  
Still we chant from our  
Unmarked graves  
*This body is mine*  
*What happened wasn't my fault*  
*I am more than a baby maker*  
*I won't change my mind*  
As the muffled male voices  
Read out the headstone above us  
"Daughter of...  
Once was a great wife"

None of this has been about you.  
This is about our pain  
And the sleepovers I wasn't allowed  
To go to because of creepy uncles and creepy fathers  
It's about us  
And how we learned to protect ourselves  
From two years old  
My first words were "Leave Me Alone"  
And stomped feet read as cute  
My final words were "Leave Me Alone"  
Ignored by the greasy sneer.

None of this has been about you  
And the times I had to suck it up  
To ask a friend to walk me to my car  
Because I was afraid.  
And now six feet under  
I finally feel safe.  
It's about how much you miss US  
Because no one else will do the  
Laundry.  
It's about my death and the Women  
With headlines instead of a life

# The Pastor's Wife

Andrea Duran



*Trigger warning: the following story includes graphic sexual and violent content.*

It was the second time it happened. The first time could have been a misunderstanding. Perhaps she led him on, perhaps it was a blip of insanity. She was unsure and blamed herself. But the second time, it was him. His behavior was nothing she ever expected, it was barbaric and brutal.

Mary sat in the polyester desk chair, responding to an email when he came up from behind. She felt a hard lump against her back as he placed one hand over her breasts and pulled her knee-length skirt up over her knees and forced his fingers underneath her cotton pink underwear. She wanted to scream, she wanted to pull his hands out, and run away. Shock paralyzed her entire body, she was frozen in a nightmare where she opened her mouth, and nothing came out. It felt as if a pocket-knife pierced through her body and stabbed her insides over and over again. She squeezed her eyes shut and heard a loud pop, it reminded her of the noise her ears would make when she would suction water out with her hand after a day of swimming in the pool. Except it was much more painful and it burned like hot vodka going down her throat.

He grabbed the back of the chair and fiercely swiveled her around, his eyes empty and black. His face softened when he noticed the blood trickling down her legs.

He stepped back. "Are you okay?" Mary looked at her legs, watching the blood run down the office blue carpet. "You're a virgin?"

"I'm 17," Mary wiped her legs with Kleenex and ran out of his office. She did not shed a tear until she was in her car with the doors locked and turned the radio volume up high. She hung her head over the steering wheel and wept. She could hear her soul snap and shatter into pieces, leaving her naked in a pool of her own shame as she sobbed against the rubber steering wheel.

Mary couldn't tell anyone. She'd only been his part-time assistant for six weeks. The assistant before her was there for a year without a complaint. Pastor Abel was 43 and the senior pastor for The Garden. He was highly respected in the community and in their church while she and her family were pitied.

When Mary's father abandoned her mother and siblings, The Garden stepped in. When Mary's mother lost her job and they were on the brink of eviction, The Garden stepped in. The Garden became their home and God became their father. When they became financially stable, Mary's mother provided everything with almost nothing, and held tremendous pride for it. Still, members of The Garden pitied Mary and her family. They were seen as the needy, broken, family.

Mary wiped her nose with the sleeve of her cardigan and stared down at the crumb-filled floor of her car. She could feel the warm blood puddle

underneath her. She needed to tell someone. If she didn't show up to work the next afternoon, her mother would ask questions, Human Resources would remind her she's still on a 90-day probation, and Pastor Abel might fabricate his own story. Although it was unlikely he would say anything at all. He couldn't risk his position at the church, he couldn't risk the stress upon his wife.

Pastor Abel's wife was five months pregnant and would visit the office Sunday afternoons, her hands hugging her basketball-shaped belly, followed by their foster daughter. The wife admitted the doctors advised against the pregnancy, but they've been wanting a child for years, and God finally answered their prayers, and provided a miracle. After her second miscarriage, she quit her job as a schoolteacher, and devoted her time to ovulation cycles, monthly attempts of conceiving, and homemaking. Their last successful attempt resulted in a stillborn, due to an infection in her placenta. Her body mistook the baby as the infection and forced him out too early. Traumatized by their losses, they accepted and raised a foster child until she conceived a fifth time. The doctors labeled her a high-risk pregnancy and diagnosed her with preeclampsia, two weeks before Mary's incidents.

Switchfoot, Mary's favorite Christian band, drowned out her cries. It burned like fire between her legs, her underwear now crunched with dried blood, and her face was stained with tears, black from mascara. She was a garbage can of damaged goods and shame. She was dirty gum under a shoe, rotting fruit in the kitchen, a degraded corpse in the morgue. She was half-used and thrown out like snot-filled Kleenex.

Mary wanted to tell everyone. She wanted every member of the church to believe her, she wanted the men to storm into his office and throw him out the second-story window, she wanted to see his blood blanket the sidewalk and fragments of his skull strewn across the blacktop.

And then she would ask, quite stupidly, just as he had, "*Are you okay?*"

Even if everyone believed Mary, it would be his wife who suffered. If Mary pressed charges, his wife would lose the foster daughter she's had for three years, they'd be forced to hire expensive lawyers who would clean out their bank accounts and take their home; his wife would live in the basement of some relative, divorced, broke, and alone. His wife, overwhelmed by it all, would lose her fifth baby. A baby girl they were going to name Esther after the character in the bible, a Jewish queen who stands up for her people.

Mary's heart became heavy with the harrowing realization that it was no longer just about her. She was now forced to choose between herself and the Pastor's wife. *She has a foster daughter and a baby girl due. But there were two incidents in one week, she reminded herself. It wasn't exactly rape. So, does it even count?*

And as she sat in the parking lot debating while tears streamed down her pale cheeks, she watched Pastor Abel walk across the lot with his arm over his niece, a small blonde girl who was no older than 12.

# Smile, You're Beautiful

Victoria F. Contreras



Rip the smile from my lips,  
then sew each end to your

cheekbones. A pulse of extra  
voltage. Do you need some?

Lay your head next to mine.  
Let the blood transfusions begin.

Whisper all of your pain.  
Let the ink of sorrow drip.

I will tell you to plant this  
seed of Joy. Love it. Water it with

memories. Watch it bloom. Your beam  
of light will feed in the darkness.

# Moment of Silence

Maria Chacon



Friday Morning. Do you consider me a mom? You consider me worthy of carrying life? When does a life become a life? Is it a week? Or three months? 100 years? Does life become valid when a heart starts beating? What if you're told this tiny heart never held a beat? Silence is the toughest thing to hear. There is nothing there. The absence of what you were hoping to hear. I'm sorry, they say to me, there's no heartbeat. Slight discomfort. Nausea. That positive test. That hope. That future ripped away in a blink. A pitiful empty feeling. My womb still full. My heart now empty. No more celebrations. We stupidly kept you a secret. We recommend surgery, they say. She's too big, they say. It'll be painful, they say. There's no point, they say, in suffering with no reward. These words cold on my skin. My eyes full of tears, my body full of with anger. I agreed, I was afraid of seeing you. Monday. The day it would happen. A whole weekend completely aware that there was no hope for you to grow. Friday Night. You couldn't wait two more days. The stinging of hot water. Contraction after contraction—a red pool filled with everything that once surrounded. I tried to hold you in as long as I could. I failed you. One last push. Then you. We imagined what it would feel like to hold you for the first time. We held you in our hands. The tiniest person we had ever seen. Fully formed. Fully whole. Fully loved. When does a life become a life? When does a life become a life? Is it a week? Or three months? 100 years? Does life become valid when a heart starts beating? What if you're told this tiny heart never held a beat? Silence is the toughest thing to hear. There is nothing there.

# Below the Surface

Vicki Mandell-King



– after an untitled piece by Naomi Richman, a 10th grader at Boulder High School

The kitten stares out above a spill on the kitchen floor.  
Unlike Narcissus, the kitten does not look down.

If he did, he would not see himself as he is,  
A kitten, or even a grown cat. He'd see Tiger.

I see this depiction not as growth and maturation,  
but the artist's dream of her own transforming.

This seeing may be no more than  
my own desire surfaced and mirrored back.

On the anniversary of my mother's death,  
I leaf through an album she made,

pasting in photos of wildlife  
– she loved animals – and labeling

lion, grizzly, antelope, cardinal, cobra  
in her instantly-recognizable script.

Passing by a storefront window, I glimpse  
an aging woman – white hair, lined face –

and must remember to strut  
– a gait once so natural – and break

a recent habit of hesitant step  
in fear of falling.

I do not recognize myself. Like Mother,  
I carry within me a younger,

more lovely image that sometimes is  
mirrored back in the eyes of the beguiled.

Turning the drawing around, Tiger stares out  
above brooding cloud.

If Tiger looked down, he'd see a sweet cub  
before ferocity became necessity.

# Cars (Tyisha and Me)

Peter Smith



*for Tyisha Miller*

At a car show in Pine Center,  
Dust settles on the Inland Empire of old,  
The Rat Fink crowd gathers in the sun, and  
Rehab patients watch behind their iron gate across the street.  
We had to leave early.

Tyisha and I drove the same car.  
When I came to town, her face was on every telephone pole  
And every newspaper, always above the fold.  
I can't forget her expression, or the expression I always assumed she had,  
When 12 bullets shrieked through her rear window.

But I remember Riverside the way only an exile would:  
With bitter expectation clawing its way through the mire of nostalgia,  
Victoria Avenue stretching on forever, and  
The orchards waving more slowly.

# Three Rolls-Royces

Richard Lee Zuras



The first time we saw a Rolls Royce  
We were hand-in-hand, remember?  
We walked Aspen, our first Siberian,  
In summer heat, down to the First Baptist  
Church, Charpentier Historic District,  
South of I-10 in deep, deep, Louisiana.

It was blue and white, or silver maybe,  
Shining like an oiled-up hard-on,  
Remember? I was teaching English  
So what choice did I have but to note  
The irony of a Rolls-Royce at a Baptist Church. You said:  
*My Uncle Jasper was a Baptist Preacher in Mississippi.*  
I wanted to sit on its hood and await the owner,  
Remember? But Aspen tugged at her leash,  
And it was hot, dead noon, Sunday.

The second time was in Presque Isle, Maine.  
Right down the road from the three-story ramshackle  
We rented. Aspen had died, replaced by Sasha.  
The keys were in the Rolls, nighttime, dealership closed,  
Like an unholy temptation. The price: two-thousand dollars.  
The grill intact, worth half that alone, the real wood  
Dash waiting to be oiled, its aromas buried under dust.

We might have bought that Rolls... I said:  
*Picture it: Everyone we know following us down  
The street like a Mardi Gras parade. Me in a black  
Top hat, you in a sash. What a sight we could be!*

The third time we were underground, submerged  
In a mall, In Washington, D.C., remember?  
Face deep in Asian noodles, some jack-ass  
Was behaving like a jack-ass, to a teenager  
Working the till at Urban Outfitters.

When Jack-ass left,  
    I followed him into the parking structure  
    The next street over.

I don't know why  
I followed him,  
What I expected  
I might do. When I came back  
    I never told you what happened:

Jack-ass was driving a black Rolls-Royce.  
When he passed me by, I caught a glimpse  
In a store window. For a moment it appeared  
I was driving. What I never told you was:  
    I wished I were him.

# The Great Tomato Wreck

My friend Tom used to haul 18-wheelers  
Out of roadside ditches near the Thames.

An expert in third axle recoveries  
Tom was a drinker: ale, black rum, red wine.

He drank and spoke of his apprentice years,  
About the first time he flipped a rig, solo.

A tomato truck, 40,000 pounds of juicy Romas  
Forced off the road mid-winter by a snowplow.

He spoke of the traffic jam, backed up around  
The Thames, curled off into the peal of side streets.

*All eyes were on me.* That always brought me  
To the time I parked in a snow-bank, cock-sure

My Jeep Wrangler's low-low-gear  
Could overcome anything, as advertised.

That young man laughed as I spewed snow,  
Hooked up a chain and yanked me

Out of the ditch, my front axle forever askew.  
Tom loved it, saw my ignorance as pleasure.

Said I must have looked like a kitten  
Yanked out of a litter box by the scruff.

We traded our stories as if they were new,  
The way you do with old friends.

When Tom passed away, I told the story  
At his wake. How Tom ran his finger

Along the sidewalls of the tomato trailer  
Feeling like a mole doctor for popped rivets.

I kept the Jeep story to myself. Later, I poured  
Half a glass of ale on my floor. This one's for Tom.

# Self Proclaimed Lunacy

Donna Dallas



See me run -- really run on the  
wheel the  
hamster wheel my legs are cut up bruised and  
I'm gaunt maybe I'm dead – a running corpse -- I  
cannot see anymore I just hear the wheel  
I complete the motions naturally since  
there is nothing to see – blank a big – nothing – me  
and nothing go together hand in hand  
we go together like the wheel under my bloody feet  
my head oozes from the rotary vibrations  
blood drips from my fingertips into my  
water bowl I try to  
stop but  
it's an addiction how can I not yearn for  
the wheel the nights slip  
from me as I run and run and years  
and tears and babies are boys are men and I'm still  
on the wheel but now I am the wheel and the wheel  
is me my bones have  
replaced the metal when I crack  
into pieces and finally disintegrate I pray there  
will still be an electric current left from  
my original dynamic  
core and you'll continue to hear it – the wheel.....  
the mother fuckin wheel

# The Circles of Infinity

Steven A. Hinkle



My mind wanders in circles like clockwork.  
The hands unwind, and the times do prosper.  
Although I'm inflamed with the pain of clerks  
And their fissures, the pressures do foster  
Hope. Their precious daughters' ensembles of  
Poetry and prose. I suppose the line  
Is only half the battle. Quotes of love  
Win the war more often than promised time.  
So, I keep eyes open for the reruns  
And the free-for-alls that call my mind home.  
Since those types are only right when they're wrung,  
I keep hands held high like each of their ropes.  
Some fight, some fall, some go with open arms.  
Some swing, some miss, some never do disarm.

# Diagnosed

Melisa Feller



Waiting in the doctor's office takes an eternity. It is cold, and I do not want to be there. I think back to when I requested a psychiatrist from my psychologist and how I regret doing it. My brain explodes into images of the doctor saying multiple disorders and I get sicker with each new "diagnosis." The doctor finally comes out and calls my name; I am extremely anxious as I walk behind him. I almost say, "There has been a mistake; I don't really need a psychiatrist. Surprise!" But my throat is closed too tightly for it to come out. Sitting in his office, I feel out of place and my thought process is stuck on *you shouldn't be here, you shouldn't be here*. He asks why I'm here to see him, and I start crying. It is uncontrollable; I do not say anything for the first couple of minutes because I am trying to stop crying. Afterwards, he asks me why I started crying. I tell him that I do not want to be here. He gives me a look and waits a beat. "How do you feel right now?" I think over it a bit, "Embarrassed, mostly. Anxious. I feel like I'm being lured into a trap." He asks me if I always feel like that: the answer is yes. He prods a little deeper with each question he asks until I'm crying again. He simply states that, "I believe you have bipolar NOS with severe anxiety."

I freeze in my chair and think back to when I was eleven years old and heading back from my first psychiatrist. My mother just staring out the windshield, not acknowledging me. I sat huddled in the corner of my seat not knowing what to do. When we got home, my mother asked me, "Why couldn't you be normal?"

Returning to myself, I realize I'm having a panic attack in my psychiatrist office.

My psychiatrist explains to me that Bipolar NOS means Bipolar Disorder Not Otherwise Specified. Bipolar NOS is where I experience being bipolar—with its manic and depressive episodes, but I do not fit into a special bipolar box. He gives me a set of pills. I notice that they are not the ones my first psychiatrist prescribed me and sends me on my way. I make another appointment with him and visit the pharmacy with embarrassment. I sit in my car and think about how I'm going to tell my parents. My mother's voice floats around in my head, echoing, "Why couldn't you be normal?"

I had slowly started to express myself more before this diagnosis. Now that I think about it, *could someone tell? Was I being overtly emotional? Was I really just this messed up little girl who couldn't control her emotions and was insane? Would I eventually get so bad I would have to be put into inpatient at the hospital?* Worse and worse scenarios keep rushing through my head. Somehow, I

arrive at my house.

I do not have any recollection of the drive home and that scares me more. If I cannot even remember driving home, does that mean I should be put into observation so I do not hurt anyone around me? The scenarios in my head progressively get worse and more unrealistic, but I cannot help but be afraid of them. "How'd everything go?" my father asks, scaring me out of my preposterous scenarios.

"Fine!" I say, not convincing myself, but convincing my father. I stride up the stairs and hide in my room. I glance at where I keep my razors. Suicide has and will always be an option to me. I take the razors out of their box and put them beside the prescriptions the psychiatrist gave me. For a while, I just stare at them. Stare and think about how I'm not normal. I am not a normal person. I have something wrong with me, not like my cousins that I am always compared to. They live great normal lives; they are more successful than me. *Is it because of this disease that I am unsuccessful? Is it because of this disease that my family likes my cousins more than me?*

I'm working myself up to another panic attack. I pick up one of the razors and press it to my skin, not slicing, just pressing. I stare at the blade pressing against my skin for a long time. I only stop when my mother calls me down for dinner. At dinner, my father once again asks how my doctor's appointment went. I answer as vaguely as I can get away with and scurry back up to my room.

I stare at the group of pills and razors again. I start to daydream. Daydream a world where I am a normal person, where I do not have anxiety and I certainly do not have bipolar disorder. It is then that I see that my daydream is not more than my actual life. In fact, it is my life how it is, maybe a little less shy and more outgoing, but it still is my life. The gears in my head start turning. *If my daydream is, essentially, no more different from my actual day-to-day life...* I glance at the razors and pills. I pick one up and swallow it down.

# The Adventures in Normality

Natalie Mora



One look at the house and I already wish I'm anywhere but here. Laundry is scattered all over the matted carpet in the living room and dirty dishes are playing a game of Jenga in the kitchen sink. It's impossible to be gone for more than a couple of days without the house becoming a site of utter catastrophe. I make a mental list of what I'll need by the end of the day: laundry detergent (preferably lavender-scented), Band-Aids, new dishes. I notice one of my mother's medication bottles on the floor and assume she needs a refill.

I begin by picking up all the clothes so I can throw them in for a wash, careful not to set off any of the traps masked under the protective layer of laundry; it's sometimes difficult to determine whether the traps are set for pests or for humans. After the traditional sweeping and dusting, I move to the kitchen. I always start the dishes last, a habit I formed through the trauma of my first job. I was in charge of cleaning the dishes of people celebrating a birthday or of families too lazy to cook for themselves. There was something about those families that made me instinctively curl my hands into tight fists and made my face twist the way it did when I had to stand in front of a restroom stall while on cleaning duty. I wanted to take a picture of their smiling faces, hang it in my living room, and label it, "The Lost Reality."

Before I can begin the dishes, my mother shuffles into the kitchen with a bottle of pills in one hand and an empty glass in the other.

"Cleaning dishes so early?" she says, leaving her glass next to the sink.

"It's actually already one o'clock, so... not that early," I say.

She places her pills in the cabinet above the stove. "Always have something smart to say, don't you? You get that from your fa—" Her words catch in her throat, and she instinctively glances at my father's picture on the fridge, absently scratching her arm and peeling off the scabs that are already there. She shakes his existence off her tongue and continues. "Look, just do me a favor and wash my cup. And make sure you get those giant orange stains off."

"Ma, those aren't stains. Those are the designs."

"Oh. Well, scrub them off, anyway. They're ugly. And make sure you clean those dishes right. You know how I like them," she says, walking back to her room.

"Whatever you say, Ma."

I'm already used to her ridiculous requests. Last week, she wanted me to paint our cow cookie jar all white. Her rationale was that it was unbecoming for any creature to have black spots on their skin. I didn't have any white paint, so I painted it yellow instead.

I found it shattered the next day.

As a creature of habit, I start with the plates, and I pick one up from a set that I bought recently. The way the gray border circles the muddy center reminds me of how a freshly dug grave would look after an April shower. It's a shame that I have to work on the dishes, since I'm actually fond of this set. I bring the dish over my head and smash it onto the floor, shattering it into six large pieces and many other tiny bits. I grab the glue and begin putting the pieces back together, forcing parts to fit like a toddler playing a puzzle. I push the dish-turned-mosaic off to the side and pick up the next plate, then the next, and the next. Small fragments of glass become embedded into my fingertips, staining a majority of the plates. I'll just have to tell my mother that I decided to paint the dishes again.

Once I complete the plates, I move on to the cups. Compared to plates or bowls, cups are trickier because they tend to be smashed into miniscule pieces, making the job of gluing it back together arduous. I decide to work on my mother's cup first. I know that I have to get the designs off, because I don't want to have to calm my mother down when she finds out I didn't do the dishes the way she likes them.

Better to indulge the beast rather than provoke it.

A sponge won't get rid of the designs on the glass, so I grab a knife and begin scratching off the ink. Each stroke leaves thin lines engraved into the glass, but I continue anyway since my mother won't care about the marks as long as it's clean.

I try to convince myself that when my mother sees that I did the dishes the way she likes them, and that her cup is stain-free, it will bring us closer to mending our relationship. I often fantasize about what would have happened if I had never moved out. When I left, it took a piece of my mother, and then when my father... well, it was the final blow.

All that matters to me now is her happiness. This is my punishment. This is my redemption.

The glass' screams refocus my attention to my task, and as I push the knife into the cup for one last stroke, the cup shatters into my hand. I let out a shriek and quickly throw my undamaged hand over my mouth, holding back the rest of my gasps of pain. Two inches of glass is lodged into the center of my palm, and I gently tug on it, testing just how rooted it is. I count to three, hold my breath, then finally pull it out and watch as the pool of crimson flows off my shaking hand and drip onto the remains of the cup in the sink. I quickly eye the broken pieces to see if I can salvage them enough to reconstruct, but I realize it's beyond reparation. My mother rushes in a few seconds later, darts her eyes between my hand and the broken glass, and says, "Were you able to get the stain off?"

# Adventures in Normalcy

Danielle Collado



She gets up  
Every  
Morning  
while the  
Sky is still  
as dark  
and as black as  
Her waterproof mascara—  
The same mascara she  
Puts on every morning  
To lengthen her eyelashes to  
A mile long.  
She puts on sparkly  
Eyeshadow that twinkles  
As bright as  
The stars  
In the galaxy,  
Which strategically matches her  
Overly-tight skinny jeans,  
Which she can barely put on,  
And tops it off  
With perfectly-winged  
Eyeliner  
So sharp,  
They can kill.  
She applies  
Foundation and concealer  
To cake up her face  
So that you  
Can't see the cherry-colored  
Acne scattered  
All around and  
Oozing out of  
Her once

Perfectly porcelain  
Skin.  
Then, she uses  
A curling iron  
Hot enough to  
Melt all of her  
Makeup right off  
So that she can curl  
Her straight, sleek and glistening  
chocolate mane  
into strands  
that are as curly  
as the way  
she likes her  
sweet-potato  
fries.  
She finishes it all  
Off with  
Ruby red  
Matte lipstick  
That masks her  
Otherwise thin,  
Pale, vampire-like  
Lips.  
She puts on  
Glossy, black  
Stilettoes that are tall  
enough to take  
Her to the moon,  
But are the same ones  
That blister and burn  
her feet as if she were walking  
straight into a catwalk of flames.  
After two long hours,  
She looks straight into the mirror  
While admiring her finished product  
And  
While staring at a woman she no longer recognizes, she  
Asks herself the same question that she would every day:  
*Am I pretty now?*

# I Need New Jeans

Cassius Epps



The fitted sheet dares me to move.

It's almost 11 o'clock, which means I've been depressed now for my entire fucking life.

My room is lit solely by a lamp passed down to me by my mother. On the desk next to my bed are fast food wrappers, a half-drunk cup of coffee, and a half-empty beer bottle from yesterday. The floor is littered with clothes, possibly dirty, possibly casualties in my crusade to find a black top for work. The faintest hint of rose absolute oil battles the tea tree oil on my scalp—my room smells of medicine and well-maintained gardens I never grew up in.

The move here had been hard. I am never in a good mood. Even adults, especially young ones, feel unseen and unheard. I, with all my voice, with all my strength, am unable to move from this bed, for fear that I might never be heard again.

So, I sit. I sit and I sit and I sit. I jerk off. I sit. I jerk off again, this time with straight porn. The next time I try to reclaim that feeling. That undefined ubiquity of youth. To know that it's gonna happen soon without fully realizing the anticipation of sex. Your friend will bring it up. He'll mention some sexual escapade he's extracted from the grapevine or he'll turn on his laptop, only to have forgotten to press that "X", and there it'll be. The shining reality that beneath it all, beneath identity, pure fuckery exists. It isn't about getting hard. Yes, you are hard. It isn't about that. It's about the excitement. The coy reality that is brotherhood. It's about desire with another person. That carnal undertone, that craving for release, that energy to be passed, it was in your blood. And it still is.

Soon after I run a towel over my hip, wipe away both my ejaculate and my desire to think about my lurking sexuality. I return to my position. I look toward the ceiling. A fly. No, not a fly. Just my eyes playing tricks again. Flies don't come here. My room is off limits to them. They respect that. Acid rises from my gut, making this the fourth time tonight I chew on Tums like stale Starburst. I should cry. I should cry right now and get it over with. Then I can move.

Tonight feels familiar. It feels like Leon. Like the smoke of his cigarette will reach my nostrils and trigger the calm of a never-satiated, never-initiated addiction if only I can be young enough again. If only I can stop being me. Being me, being this institution, it is... It just is. It hurts. But it doesn't hurt hurt. It just doesn't pay. And I work a fulltime job to be paid. Anything outside of that is just bullshit. But Leon worked. And so did Wardell. Yes, my grandfather and my father worked. Every day. They hated each other.



# The Ten-Thousandth Pipe of Opium

Frank Scozzari



The sled glided swiftly through the white silence, down alongside a frozen creek beneath a grove of dark furs. Low-hanging branches pulled and snapped against the top rail as the sled continued on a southerly path. Mala, the youngest of the dogs, yelped and cried in protest of the rapid pace. Gaga, the lead dog, ignored her. She mushed onward, leading the team up along a steep ravine through another grove of trees, nearly dragging the other dogs with her. She knew not of her path. She knew only of her instincts, which told her something dark was following her, and she wanted to find that place of living men where there would be food and safety. Their one passenger, Ed Collins, was merely along for the ride, boxed-up in a seven-foot-by-two-foot wooden crate.

Beneath a hazy gray sky, the sled came out into an opening. Both paw and rail trudged across a long inclining snow field. The harnesses stretched and creaked and yawned as the runners dug into the ice. White puffs of condensed air came from the dogs' mouths and noses.

It was the fourth ridge they had come to, and summiting it now, Gaga stopped and looked out, her nostrils flaring. Below was a river valley. A road wound downriver through the woods and a cable ferry stretched across some narrows. Further south, a wisp of smoke rose above the trees. Gaga let out a yelp and flattened her chest against the harness.

They descended through the thick forest, reaching the river, and traveled downstream where they encountered many obstacles. Trees had fallen along the riverbanks and there were large boulders and frozen inlets which they had to navigate. Eventually they reached a road. The sound of a running mill and a working crane got Gaga pulling harder. And familiar aromas of man, the smells of human cooking and diesel fumes, got all the dogs whining. The sled rattled over the icy asphalt surface of the road. Where the road widened it came to a small city of buildings constructed on the upslope of the mountain.

It was an usual sight, to say the least, for a group of mill-workers standing on a corner, to see a sled racing through the yard absent a wheelman carrying one's ever-after container. They exchanged bewildered expressions and let out after them.

“Whoa! Whoa! Stop!” cried out John Tilley, the resident dog-handler.

Gaga followed her nose in the direction of the mess hall and kennels.

John Tilley came up alongside her and grabbed the reins, and pulled back.

“Whoa, girl. Whoa!”

Gaga’s blue eyes flashed up at him.

“Whoa, girl. Stop!”

She stopped and came to a sitting position. He ran his hand over her head and spoke calmly now. “Whoa girl, what’s wrong?” He looped his hand in Gaga’s harness and loosened the buckle. “It’s okay, girl. You’re all right now.”

He shot a glance over the other dogs. They were all panting and had ice caked around their mouths and nostrils.

The other men caught up with them and gathered around the sled. The Foreman, a big man with a handlebar moustache, stood back with both hands on his hips, studying the sled and its strange cargo.

“What the hell, John?”

John Tilley glanced at the wooden box and shrugged. “What the hell is right.”

They checked the sled for papers and found none, nor did they find the normal supplies onboard. The sled had no marking as to its ownership, but one man seemed to recognize it.

“That’s Bill Clifford’s sled,” he said.

The Foreman instructed the men to take the sled to the garage and the dogs to the kennel and feed them. John Tilley unleashed Gaga.

“I think she’s dragged this thing far enough,” he said.

The Foreman, who still looked bewildered, pointed at the wooden box. “And that, bring that to my office. I’m going to need to call the sheriff and tell him what we got here.” As the men began to unstrap the wooden box, the Foreman spoke again. “On second thought, boys, better keep that thing in the shed. We don’t want it to defrost.”

The men nodded their heads. One of them went to the front of the team, grabbed hold of the reins, and led the dogs up the hill. John Tilley, who had already unhitched Gaga, led her to the kennel with a pat on his thigh.

“Come on, girl. I’ve got some good stuff for you.”

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Two days earlier, Bill Clifford and Willy White had found a perfect

place beneath some trees on the western slope of a mountain to settle for the night. It was flat and having been used as a camp before, had all the advantages of a pre-built camp. There was a nice stone-circle fire pit and some leftover firewood, large logs to sit on and nails driven into the trees to hang items from. The dogs were unleashed and fed and now the men sat around the campfire sipping coffee. The elder Bill Clifford sat on a tarp that was on the ground with his legs stretched out strategically toward the fire. His back was resting against a large log. He was bundled in a huge parka with a fur collar. The young Willy White was perched on a sawed-off log. He was likewise bundled in a heavy winter parka.

“Have you made many runs like this?” Willy asked.

“None.”

“It’s your first?”

“Of this type, yep.”

“It’s a bit strange.”

“Yes, it is.”

Willy looked over at the sled and the long wooden box strapped to it. “Why didn’t they just keep him, I mean on ice, until they could get a snow plow up from Dawson or Whitehorse?”

“The family didn’t want to wait,” Clifford replied. “They asked Ranger Bob to pull it on his snowmobile, but he declined. Said it would be too spooky. So they asked me if I’d take it. I didn’t have to think about it much. It’s the off-season, you know. Haven’t had any tourist gigs for a while now. So I took it. That’s about it.” He looked over at the sled too, at the long wooden box strapped to it. “I don’t mind dragging a dead guy around with me anyhow, even though he’s not much company. That’s why I asked you along.” He paused and nodded his head. “The way I look at it I’m doing his family a service. They’re wanting to bury him in Florida. I’m getting him back home in a timely manner so they can do that.” Clifford looked over at Willie. “I’m glad you could come along. I’m not spooked by dead guys or anything like that, but I prefer not traveling alone.” He looked over at the box again. “I mean, I prefer traveling with a living person.”

“I’m glad you asked,” Willy said. “Don’t mind it really. I needed the money.”

“We’ll be in Whitehorse by Wednesday, and he’ll be on a plane back home probably that same day.”

“That’s good.” Willie went to the fire, lifted the coffee pot, and poured another cup. “Want some?”

“Sure.”

Willy took the kettle over to Clifford and poured a stream until

Clifford pulled his cup back. “Whoa, leave some room for the good stuff.” Willy returned the kettle to the campfire and watched as Clifford pulled from his coat pocket the same bottle of whiskey he had pulled out earlier. He watched him top off his cup and raise the bottle in his direction.

“Want some more?”

“Sure.”

Willy took a quick sip of his coffee to make some room in his cup. Then he walked over to Clifford and let him top it off. Clifford capped the bottle and slid it back in his coat pocket. Willy went back to his perch, took a few sips, sat down, and set his cup on the stump beside him. The heat vapors rose into the frigid air. He pulled the fur collar of his parker up high around his neck and shook. “Burr. It’s fricking cold.” He took his smart phone out from his coat pocket, turned on the screen, and looked at it.

“No bar.”

“Not out here.”

Willy held the phone up and turned it facing Clifford. “I want to take a picture of you. You look cool sitting there with that gray beard and that ski cap, and that big fur collar, sipping whiskey.”

Clifford held his coffee cup high in toast-like fashion.

“You look like some kind of crazy-ass mountain man, some kind of a throwback from the past.”

“I am.”

Clifford cocked his head sideways and made a funny smile and Willy snapped a couple more pictures. Willy turned his phone on the sled and the wooden box, squared it, and captured the image. “I want to remember this trip. My friends won’t believe this shit.”

“It’s not that unusual. In the old days, it was the only way to get somebody back home to the lower states. It was a common thing years ago.” He raised his cup to the sled and wooden box. “To Ed Collins. Thanks, man. I needed the fifteen-hundred bucks.”

Willy raised his cup too. “Yeah. Thanks, man. I needed the money, too.”

Clifford’s eyes turned to the mouth of their tent, which was pitched between two large trees back from the campfire. “Can you see my satchel in there?”

Willy turned and looked into the open door. “Yeah.”

“Get it, and I’ll tell you more about Mr. Collins.”

Willy obliged, went to the tent, fetched the satchel, handed it to Clifford, and returned to his perch. Clifford pulled out a clear vinyl protective sleeve that contained some documents. He took off one glove

and pulled the papers out of the sleeve and angled them to the light. The face-sheet showed all the vitals.

“It says here... Edwin Phillip Collins, age 43... Poor bastard was ten years younger than me. He’s from Clearwater, Florida. He has a sister and two brothers. It says here, they’ve all been notified.”

“What the hell was he doing up here?”

“Don’t know.”

“How did he die?”

“Some kind of illness.” He looked over an autopsy report but didn’t recognize the medical terms. “I guess it had been with him for some time.” He read further down the face-sheet. “Says here, ‘no foul play.’ There’s a Coroner’s report enclosed.” He paged through the papers looking for the Coroner’s report but couldn’t find it. “Oh, Hell. It doesn’t matter, does it?” He spread the mouth of the vinyl sleeve with his fingers and slid the papers back inside. Then he tossed the sleeve into the snow beside him. “I say we give ol’ Edwin a toast.”

“Yeah, let’s do that.”

Clifford pulled his whiskey bottle from his pocket and filled Willy’s cup, which had been reduced to a quarter. He looked into his cup, slugged down the last of the coffee-whiskey mix, and filled it to the brim with straight whiskey. Then he raised his cup in the direction of the sled.

“To Edwin Phillip Collins, age 43, of Clearwater Florida, may yea rest in peace.”

Willy raised his cup too, and laughed. “If he’s going to Florida, at lease he’ll be warm.”

“That’s for sure.”

They both raised their cups a second time and drank healthily.

“And may yea enjoy this last ride through the Yukon wilderness,” said Clifford.

“Yeah.”

They both drank again.

“And may your happy ever-after be happy ever-after.”

“Yeah!” Willie laughed, and they both drank.

“And to Florida, a place I’d like to be now.”

“Yes, to Florida!”

“Never been but want to go.”

Again, they toasted and drank.

Then Clifford went silent. “Picture a warm sandy beach under palm trees.” He looked over at the wooden box. “I’m kinda jealous of him now.”

“Don’t be. Florida is something better done alive than dead.”

“Probably so. Never had a dead tourist before. I’ve had plenty live ones, but never a dead one.”

“To the dead tourist,” Willy said.

“Yes, to the dead tourist.”

Again their cups rose.

Clifford held a long reflective gaze at the box. “We should give Edwin a drink,” he finally blurted out. He looked over at Willy, who burst into laughter. “No, seriously. We shouldn’t be sitting here drinking without him. This is his last ride. We’re his only company. He’s our company. We’re sitting here drinking, excluding him. Wherever he’s been and whatever he’s done and wherever he’s going, he deserves a last drink. And he shouldn’t have to drink alone.” Clifford struggled to get up. His big belly was in his way so he rolled to his side, planted his hands in the snow and got up on all fours. He stumbled through the snow to the sled, stood over the wooden box, and unscrewed the cap of his whiskey bottle. Wobbling above it, he poured a healthy quantity onto the wood.

“There you go Edwin. Drink up.”

Through all of this, Willy was laughing wildly. Now he doubled over and fell off his perch. Clifford looked into his bottle of whiskey, saw a small amount left, and drank it, tilting his head way back. He screwed the cap back on and looked through the glass, confirming it was empty. “Peace to Edwin, a friend I never met.” He tossed the bottle down through the woods and it landed in the snow. He wobbled back to his place by the fire, lowered himself to his knees, and lay back on the tarp.

“Can’t let the party stop here,” he said.

He turned his head and looked at his satchel, which sat in the snow beside him. He lifted it onto his lap and began rummaging through it. Inside was a small leather pouch, which he took out and unzipped. From it, he pulled out a pipe and a paper baggy full of tobacco. He also took out two black 35mm film containers.

“This is some good stuff, from back in my Hippie days.”

“What is it?”

“Good stuff.”

“What is it, Peyote?”

“Better.”

He pinched a thumb of tobacco from the baggy and stuffed it into the pipe. Then he opened one of the film containers and sprinkled some of the grainy brown material into the top of the pipe. He packed it in with his thumb and licked his thumb. “Ah, yes. The taste of my youth.” He took a lighter from his pouch and lit it. The pipe glowed and illuminated his face,

making him look like some kind of orange, bearded wizard.

“Yeah, that’s my baby.” He held the pipe away from his face and looked at it appreciatively. Then he looked over to Willy. “Want to try some?” He held the pipe out toward Willy.

Willy got up from his perch, wobbling now too, and carefully negotiated the few steps over to where Clifford lay. He took the pipe, brought it to his lips, and inhaled deeply. He coughed and grabbed his throat. Clifford laughed.

“My God, what is it?”

“Good stuff, I tell you.”

Willy handed the pipe back.

“Take a seat and sit back and you’ll feel it coming on,” Clifford said.

“It burns like shit.”

“Take a seat, I tell you, while you can.”

Willy did so, and Clifford took several more puffs.

After a few moments, Willy wandered back over to Clifford, holding out a wobbling hand. Clifford handed Willy the pipe and Willy took a double inhale.

“This is crazy stuff.”

“This stuff is old,” Clifford said. “I must have taken it from my old stash. I’m not feeling it the way I should. You feeling it?”

“Kinda yes,” Willy said. “Kinda a little bit...like crazy.” His head was spinning, actually.

“Not me.”

Clifford took the pipe back and looked deeply into it, seemingly puzzled by its lack of potency. He knocked the pipe against the log to empty it and he looked into it again. The black hole stared back at him.

“Maybe I’ll try the other stuff?” he mumbled.

He repeated the process, taking a pinch of tobacco from the baggie, stuffing it in the pipe and adding in the grainy brown material from the second film canister. He used less tobacco and added more of the grainy substance this time, packing it deeply into the mouth of the pipe as one might pack a musket. He dashed in some of the ingredients from the first film container, as well.

“That should do it.”

He lit it up and took a puff.

“Now that’s my baby. That’s more like it.” He looked over at Willy. “Want some? This is a better mix.”

Willy didn’t answer at first. He was staring straight into the dark forest, in a catatonic daze.

“Hey! You want some?”

Willy got up, wobbling like a top, and stumbled over to Clifford. Clifford handed him the pipe and Willy took another hit. He handed the pipe back to Clifford and carefully negotiated his way back to his stump.

Clifford continued with the pipe. “Yeah, that’s my baby. Feel it in your toes yet? That’s where I feel it. I get this tingling feeling in my toes and my fingertips.” Willy didn’t reply and Clifford looked over at him. “You okay?”

Now Willy was staring into the fire, seemingly mesmerized by it. He saw something he didn’t believe he was seeing. He saw little elves dancing in the flames.

“Okay, then,” Clifford said. “If you won’t smoke with me, I know someone who will.”

Clifford took another long drag from the pipe and rolled to his side and then to his belly. He planted one hand in the snow and, realizing the pipe was still in his other hand, he lifted it to his mouth and inhaled again. Then he set the pipe in the snow, right-side up, pressed both hands against the ice, and rose to his knees. He picked up the pipe and stood up. He shook considerably, took a couple steps toward the sled, and fell in the snow. Crawling now, holding the pipe carefully, he inched his way alongside the rails. He reached up and grabbed hold of the top rail and pulled himself up. He wobbled there for a moment and tried to gain his equilibrium, but he never did. Then he inhaled from the pipe and blew out a plume of smoke over the surface of the wooden box. It curled and curved over the edge of the wood and dissipated. “There you go, ol’ buddy.”

Again he inhaled and let out a long plume of smoke, which engulfed the entire upper portion of the box. “Peace be with you, ol’ buddy.”

He looked back at Willy, who remained quietly, somehow still perched on his stump. He was blinking dreamingly at the flames.

Clifford returned to his resting place against the log, a journey that took several minutes. He inhaled more from the pipe, each time the embers glowing and illuminating his face. He looked over at Willy but could not see him now. Then he found him. He was on the ground on the opposite side of his perch in a fetal position.

“Dude, I think you had enough.”

An hour passed.

When Willy’s eyes finally opened, he saw only white crystals because his face was pressed into the snow. He lifted his head and tried to look around but could not see much. His head felt numb and was spinning.

Nor could he remember where he was or what had happened. He felt a panic inside, for he was shivering cold. He pulled himself up and looked into the fire, which had dwindled considerably. Inside the bright embers, he could still see elves dancing. He looked over at Clifford, who looked like he was asleep. He wasn't moving, and the pipe was lying on the snow at the end of his out-stretched arm.

“Hey, Clifford, we gotta go.”

But Clifford didn't move.

Willy crawled, slowly and purposely, over to Clifford and grabbed the big man's jacket lapel. “Hey, wake up,” he said, shaking him. “We gotta go, Clifford.”

Clifford didn't move.

He looked back at the fire, which had flamed up a little, and saw the dancing elves. “We gotta get the hell out of here.”

Willy now rose to his feet. He felt dizzy and saw sunspots. He took a long moment to balance himself. In the white starlight, he staggered over to the dogsled, which was now covered in frost, as were the dogs, who were all curled up and sleeping in the snow. He woke the dogs and began to affix them, not positioning them correctly, except for Gaga. The dogs, not accustomed to being affixed at such an early hour, wagged their tails nonetheless as he strapped them in.

“Hey, my beautiful lady,” he said to Gaga. She stood obedient, wagging her tail, ruefully, waiting to follow his commands. “How you doing, puppy-dog?” He wrapped his arms around her neck and hung on for a moment. “Come on Clifford. We've gotta get the hell out of here while we can.” His words were slurred and muffled, by both the cold and the drugs. He fell over in the snow, nearly taking Gaga with him. She pulled away and licked his cold face then resumed her sitting position at the front of the team, waiting for his order.

But his order never came.

The hours passed, and the cold deepened.

Willy remained keeled over in the snow, knees to his chest, his face pressed into the ice. His young, clean-shaven face was half in starlight; his one eye stared down the white slope; his eyelashes and brows were white with frost. His body temperature had dropped considerably, but he did not feel it. His body was as numb as his mind, in which he saw the elves in the fire. He thought how they must be warm and toasty in the fire. He wondered how they did not burn their feet. They were merry because they were warm, he thought, and they did not care if their feet were burned a little. It is better to be warm with burnt feet than to be cold. It is better to

die in a fire than to freeze to death.

He saw Clifford on a beach in Miami with the deceased Ed Collins, both lounging in beach chairs and sipping some kind of umbrella drink, a big yellow sun shone over them. And as he thought of this, dark branches laden with icicles wept over him and the white silence surrounded him.

# Marcus Got Caught Stealing Candy

Jordan Salsberry



“Ay boy, Come here.” I looked over to my friends Robert and Abdul, I gave them a look and they knew exactly what it meant. The “oh-shit-i-got-caught-what-now-please-help” look. But they couldn’t do nothing. I was caught.

“Watchu looking at them for?” I looked over at my father, half his body leaning out the doorway, just enough for me to be able to see one shoulder and his bald head. “Bring your ass oer here.”

I looked at my friends one last time, “So long, nice knowing ya.” I didn’t say that, but they heard it anyway. I stood up, started to walk over to my father, who had retreated back inside, out of view. When I got to the door it was slightly open, enough for me to be able to peek inside. I seen my dad’s silhouette, bent over putting his drink down on the living room’s coffee table. I blinked and then the door swung open, and it swung in a way only an angry parent could make it swing. A swing swift and decisive, the one that causes the air to kiss your face. And when the swing was complete, when that door opened, there he stood, still in his boxers with no shirt, and larger than usual.

He took a second before he started talking, smacking his lips together, his head bobbing up and down as he eyed me. I stood there looking at him, watched as he pushed his tongue under the bottom of his lip. Watched as the skin expanded as he moved his tongue left to right, back and forth, back and forth. Then he moved his hand, I flinched out of habit, but when I opened my eyes back up, when I lifted my head, I noticed all he was doing was holding his hand out. I stared at it confused, I looked at his face, his eyes spoke, and I listened. My pockets were heavier than before, so heavy it felt like my pants were falling. I reached into my snug pockets, grasped, then pulled. But my hands were trapped. Awkwardly I tugged one hand at a time, shoulders dipping up and down in an alternating sequence. I hadn’t realized how much I had actually took. I didn’t look at my father the entire time, but I felt it, his patience was thinning. So I planted my feet into the concrete, and I pulled as hard as I could. The candy overflowed, spilling out my hands and pockets. The bright colored plastic packaged treats rained against the grey concrete. Frantically, I rushed to my knees to retrieve them, rose back up, and gently placed them into my father’s hand.

“Where’d you get all this, huh?”

“I bought it.”

“What? Say it with your chest boy.”

“Bought it!”

“You telling me you bought all this motherfucking candy with that three dollars I gave you?” I didn’t say anything, I looked over to Robert and Abdul, their faces glued to the action, interested, worried. “What happened? Why you ain’t talking? Couple minutes ago I heard you talking all that shit in front of your little friends, why you not talking that shit now?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know? Who knows then, huh?” I shrugged. “You know what, I ain’t even gonna whoop ya. You take that shit back to the store, you give it to that asian motherfucker and tell him you stole it.” He pushed his fist, still filled with the candy into my chest and dropped it into my hands.

“But-”

“Uh uh, you heard what the fuck I said. Don’t make me say it again.”

He stood in the doorway, and he just looked at me until I started my walk. After about three steps I heard the door slam shut behind me. My friends had left, I don’t know when they left, but they were gone and I was alone. The 96+ store was only about ten houses down the street from my own, not even a five minute walk but in those few minutes I must’ve mumbled every insult I could think of about my father.

I walked past the acorn tree in front of Abdul’s house.

*Fucking dick...*

I passed the telephone pole, the one where the wires drooped uncomfortably low.

*...not like he’s never stole before...*

I reached Hobo’s house, he was outside working on his old beat up truck while oldies played on the radio.

*....doesn’t even have a real job...*

I got to the corner shopping center elevated by three long wide steps.

*...don’t know why she let him back in the house.*

When my foot hit that third step, I stopped and stared at my destination. My mumbled curses didn’t stop the inevitable. There the 96+ store stood. There I stood. The giant orange 96+ sign leered at me until it made me sick, so I averted my eyes to the store closest to me, a Mexican restaurant that had some of it’s windows boarded up. I had heard some days earlier that the restaurant was a drug front and someone shot their windows out as a warning, but I didn’t much about that. All I know is that my Mom never wanted near that place for too long. The second store closest to me was Sonia’s Beauty Salon, which is where most of the kids on my block got their haircut. Fortunately, Sonia’s windows were still in tact.

I turned my back to all the business establishments, hoping one of them would disappear if I ignored it long enough. Didn’t work. I sat on those steps while that damn store loomed behind my back. I tried to envision how everything would go down. But I couldn’t, couldn’t picture what I was going to say, because what do you say to someone you stole from. I think the worst part of it all was the fact that I didn’t even know why I stole the

candy in the first place. I mean I didn't even really want it. It was weird, I seen the cashier was busy talking to a customer, then the thought just popped into my head. I could just fill my pockets and he wouldn't even notice, so that's what I did. I filled my pockets, paid for my dad's beer, and he didn't notice shit, I walked right out. Then I went to flaunt the candy to my friends, showing them what I did. Their eyes were enamored. There was a way they looked at me, a way they never did before, it was like I had become more than them and their eyes told me that they recognized it, I was different, better. Maybe that's why I did it. To impress my friends. Maybe I did it because I knew I could get away with it. Maybe I did it for no reason at all. Maybe I did it because that's what I'm supposed to do. I sat on those steps all day, and I just waited. I waited until I got to know myself, until I became my cousins, until I became my uncles, my father, and then I waited some more.

# The Secret to Happiness

Natalie Mora



“You know what your problem is?” Emily asked, leaning on the bar while taking out a box of cigarettes. It took a couple of tries before she was able to get the lighter working and finally bring one to life. I waited patiently for her to tell me whatever complex code she thought she had cracked about me. “It’s those damn, uh, what do you call them again? Globes? Yeah, it’s those damn Globes of yours. It would be so much easier for you if you cut them off. You can do that, can’t you? You’re carrying shit you don’t have to.” My Globes were usually a hot topic in conversations I’ve had, or at least in the ones with people who were brave enough to ask about them rather than trying (and failing) to avoid staring at them. It was obvious why people were curious about me, even though I wasn’t a rare case. Instead of having one too many moles or a birthmark shaped like a dragon, I had what I called Globes growing off my body. They hung like sour plums off a tree but had the weight of anvils.

My first Globe appeared when I was in the fifth grade.

“Have you ever wondered why you were born in the first place?” a sixth-grade boy had asked me. He had a gap between his two front teeth that seemed to emit its own gravitational pull, forcibly drawing my eyes to it. I wanted to reach into that abyss and grab his tongue before he could say anything else. He had the tendency to say whatever came to his mind, and to this day I never knew if it was intentional or not.

The boy continued, “I would have asked myself why so many times if I was someone like you. And also, have you looked in the mirror at all? If I looked like you, I would have jumped...”

I didn’t get to hear what he said after that. Would he have jumped off the roof of his two-story house? Would he have gone to the front of the school and jumped off the jaded tree with holes in its chest that made it so easy to climb on? Or maybe he would have jumped into a pocket in the universe where people didn’t want to jump off high places for looking into mirrors. Instead of listening to the words of what I assumed to be a clever insult from a sixth-grade menace, I focused instead on the Globe that began to appear on my shoulder, and I saw the boy’s words swirling in the ball: Wondered why. Looked in mirror. Someone like you. I thought this event would be an anomaly, but as I got older, the different conversations I had

with people (depending on what they said to me) would create new Globes. In several cases, they would eventually disappear into whatever realm they appeared from, but there were occasions where a few would stay permanent. Some of them had more weight than others, but together, over time, they all weighed my shoulders down just the same.

Despite their weight, there was something bewitching about the Globes, and the words that ricocheted inside always reminded me of the blizzard inside a shaken snow globe; I liked to stare at the storms and wonder if God had ever intended for a person to be able to stand so close to disaster and remain unscathed. There were times where I couldn't help but feel like a character inside a snow globe: an unwilling participant sentenced to captivity, destined to be a spectacle while watching the chaos caused by the hands of impetuous human beings; and all this with a smile plastered on my face. I decided to bury thoughts like this away, because nothing good ever came from feeding off from such negative emotions.

I reassured Emily, "I'm perfectly fine with having them on me," pointing at my smile for emphasis "I don't feel a thing."

"Mm-hm. You know, I've seen people around the street with the same, well, condition as yours, and to me it looks as if they're in pain," she said.

"But hey, I guess it's not the same for you. Be careful though, because if you pretend you're fine, then it'll become your truth."

I felt a Globe form on my left shoulder, and as it dragged my skin down like a melting wax figurine, I watched her words dance around inside.

Lately, the Globes that have been appearing haven't been going away. I couldn't help but think that maybe she was right about getting rid of them. Would I really feel better by abandoning them? To be honest, it had never even crossed my mind to try. Was it really as simple as she was making it out to be?

"Don't get me wrong, I'm not trying to nag you or anything like that,"

Emily said. "It's just that I worry about you. How about I drop this topic for today," She threw her hands up in defeat and reached toward the ashtray to put out the cigarette, but decided against it. "So, how's work going?"

"Stressful, like always. I've got a deadline due in a couple of days and I have a serious case of writer's block." I began rubbing my temples at the thought of working on the article.

"You'll get through it. You always do. Everyone already knows how brilliant you are at your job, and we're all so excited to read what you'll write next. Don't disappoint!"

More weight on my left shoulder, and I looked down and saw the words swirling around: Brilliant. So excited. Don't disappoint.

“I hope I’ll see the day when you find yourself a partner and finally get married. And no, being married to your job doesn’t count. Don’t wait too long, or else life will be over before you know it,” she said. Partner. Get married. Don’t wait.

My shoulders felt heavier than usual, but before I could linger on the thought any longer, the increased weight stretched my skin too far on the back of my right shoulder, dropping a Globe to the floor along with a slab of skin and muscle. My pink, shy flesh was exposed to anyone who bothered to look.

Emily took a small step away from the mess I created on the floor. “That doesn’t look too good,” she said. “Are you alright?”

“I’m fine,” I managed to spit out. “Nothing I can’t handle.” I appreciated her concern, but I didn’t want to ruin our first night out in weeks by making her feel worried about me or making her feel uncomfortable. Sometimes I would catch her staring at me, and her face would distort the same way a person’s face would when staring at a wounded dog (or worse, at a stray dog). That was the last thing that I wanted, so at my reassurance, Emily kept talking, I kept listening and the Globes kept forming.

“You’ve got guts,” Emily continued, staring at my shoulders and then quickly drawing her eyes back up to mine. “My parents would have killed me if I became a writer. They wanted me to be a doctor or anything that makes good money”

Another. And another. I gritted my teeth in an attempt to fight against the pain of my muscles as they went into overdrive to hold the Globes up. I couldn’t quite grasp her voice as she asked me something about my parents and whether they’ve contacted me recently. On cue, three sprouted in response, filling both sides of my shoulders. My body was far past its limit, and I needed to excuse myself for the night to let some of them dissolve.

“I know I’m running my mouth here,” she said, “but what I really wanted to ask you is: Are you happy?”

The weight was unbearable for my body, and I heard the crack of bone and the tearing of flesh as my arms fell to the floor with a heavy thud, like a ship dropping an anchor.

The bartender walked over to us, not sure where to look. “Maybe we should call a doctor,” he said, pulling out his phone.

Emily put out her cigarette and answered, “Don’t be ridiculous. She told me she’s fine.”

The bartender took one last quick look at me, then headed to the other side of the counter to attend a waiting customer in desperate need of another drink.

# We're More Than a Political Statement

Natalie Thompson



I've said pain so many times  
It's become my name  
And the name of many others  
Who've been renamed  
"Too difficult" on their medical charts,  
Hopeless, not even worth the copay  
Stop answering their calls

We wither in our beds  
Make believe they're our graves  
And all this pain will end.  
soon

We were the ones who didn't believe in destiny  
Until the doctor said our rate of suicide  
Was upwards of 50%  
*(You better watch her closely  
One day she'll try)*  
Until our bodies were s h a t t e r e d  
And the DEA made it clear there was one  
Choice,  
And it doesn't start with M  
And end with -edicine.

Our Doctors are taking back the scripts  
While their medical degrees  
Become arrest warrants.  
Don't forget about us

Don't forget about us  
As we sit on the bottom step of the stairs  
Unable to get up at the ripe age of 22  
No longer sure who to pray to  
But my body is alive  
Pulsing in every part  
My hips feel out of place  
And my knees are falling off  
My body is dismembering itself  
Don't forget about us  
As I hide away  
Scared of my own anger

Don't forget all Those who've tried  
*Everything*  
Acupuncture, physical therapy,  
SSRIs dumped down my throat  
And NSAIDs burning a hole in my stomach  
Needles piercing through my kneecap  
The sweet burn of lidocaine

Truly everything,  
But tears are our only certainty  
Filled with hope-less, grey exam tables and  
Crinkling white paper,  
And bottomless nausea.  
We've been torn            apart  
And broken  
Down  
This life is hard  
And surviving is even harder.

Please  
Don't forget us in this mess  
We just want you to care,  
Friends, Family, Senators  
And Doctors.  
Anyone please help care  
For us too.  
We're more than a statistic  
My pain can't be measured  
Not 1 to 10 or  
47,000 people  
Don't Forget Us.

And all our brothers and sisters  
We lost to the pain  
A number I can't tell you  
Because it doesn't exist.  
Not worth studying  
All those lives  
Not lost because the medicine  
Please.  
Don't.  
Forget.  
Us.

# American Coda

Mahcuilli Calli Xochi-Quiahuitl



Coming through the door  
made of rusty eaves,  
a black widow's mushroom sore  
flirts with the seldom seen

Sun particles rejecting the floor  
as if its black lipstick is forever on her knees.

Damn,  
there's never enough stones to throw.

# The Wheel of Fortune

Zion Jones



I'd just made a phone call to the bank. Balancing a large bowl of popcorn in my hand, I walked into the other half of the apartment to talk to my mother. This half was full of her Marilyn Monroe memorabilia.

"The money is pending," I told my mother, "and will be in my account by tomorrow."

I laid upon the tarnished couch. It aged with us.

My mother was finishing applying her fresh red lipstick. She took pride in how quickly she'd finished and she then began tending to her short black hair. She wanted her hair to shine as brightly as her lips. She sighed in relief after hearing what I'd said, but she didn't want to take the chance to ruin her hard work.

"That's good," she finally said as we made eye contact through the mirror. "That lifts some of the stress off my shoulders. So, you going to pay me back for my half of the rent right?"

I had a feeling she was going to say that. It was only fair. I reassured her that I'd pay her back. But that only started to get me to think about all the bills I needed to pay for us to catch up after the rough patch we had last month. Just thinking about it depressed me, especially the thought of the endless cascade of upcoming bills. I thought of the electric bill being through roof. It was summer. We needed a new refrigerator. I had to pay for my mother's classes. Then the gas bill. Then the internet. And the rent. Not to mention my credit card bill. Books I needed for class. It's funny how it would take forever for the money to come, but it would leave in just half the time.

In a short time, my thoughts started to branch off. I began to think about how I didn't have the financial support of a wealthy parent.

So, I believed if I put everything in my studies it would pay off. But it wouldn't matter, especially when the time would come and I'd need a job. Employers like to scoff at people who put so many hours into school, especially if these people rely on the bus. It's as if I had other options. I wouldn't have been surprised if an employer looked at me as simply a name on a page who had as much reliability and work ethic equal to that of a child born with a perfect credit score. If I was lucky enough to be blessed with that high of a privilege I wouldn't be prostrating myself to work at their so called "student-accommodating business" establishment, which ironically had the nerve to boast on its fliers and website that it would "work around your schedule."

It didn't help when my mom asked, "When the money comes, baby, will

you pay to get my hair and nails done?”

“Maybe after I paid all the bills,” I replied.

“Why not?” she grunted. “You can’t just give me a yes? Why do I always have to jump through hoops with you for money?” She paused to calm herself. But then she acted as though she was bare-knuckle boxing me. “Fine,” she said. “Just leave me high and dry like everyone else. That’s alright though now I see how you are.”

I couldn’t believe she said this to me.

Never mind the fact that that I’m sure the money I was giving her was pure disposable income. And yet, I’m being selfish? We went back and forth. She tried to calm me down. I think she could sense my stress. We both wanted to avoid another verbal war.

This one didn’t end with profanity. This one ended with my mother reassuring me that, like always, we will make-do. I went along with it.

Now I couldn’t help but think back to when I was taking care of only myself. Back then, it was funny how I could give my mother money here and there with no problem. Now, again, I was under my mother’s thumb. I did prefer us together. I didn’t want her to be alone—she’d crumble in cold isolation. I was happy to feel this way for a moment, but I knew that in a few months, everything would go back to normal—fighting again and again. I just wanted all of my hard work to pay off.

Hopefully, one day, I’ll hold a diploma in my hands. A new cycle will begin.

If not, I’ll follow through on the promise that kept me motivated to work hard in this life.

Why would I want to feel like this all my life?

Why would I want to be setup to be a failure who couldn’t make something of their self?

After all, thanks to the blessing of the verbal support my mother gave me through the years I got myself into college. So, the biggest challenge is to make over fifty thousand afterwards. Otherwise, in the eyes of others, I’ve wasted my time.

# Another Verdict for the Suspected Genocidal Lady

Misael Osorio



It's a frantic desperation that compels our limbs to go  
it will remain indelible her name would be spelled in smoke  
inconceivable undertaking though there are no predictable horrors  
now to disturb your sleep having seen the bodies of our parents  
mauled by police dogs dragged through the streets of Prague.  
our heroes and our foes though we the actors of our history  
in bold strokes perhaps bound to fail because of catastrophic errors  
in our genes like for instance the fumbling of the nation's will.  
the boys couldn't look at you in that sense of wonder anymore  
but as that acidic foaming at the mouth in the clear signs of desire  
nauseating frantic dizzying or not braileric in its song of dots  
discovering how beauty has a corrupting quality of bluish poison  
and in any case every energy is wasted  
in the convulsing waves of laughter  
that mysticism that comes with age  
and we don't have to plan our holidays according to the seasons  
we could take a dancing trip  
if that were to happen we could even lose our fright  
we could tour the golden fields of Troy  
during the harvest of the wheat  
and clouds will roll in clusters  
and it will be like an exploration of our shared consciousness  
and it will be found  
that all experience can be created out of songs  
and so that is the reason this song is Gregorian  
and this piece is classical  
and this song has no name  
and this name has no numbers one  
writes of the trains  
and the forced marches just like that  
and the days of hunger and the days at sea and the fireworks  
and the triumphal entries and the noise of cannons  
confused with the noise of celebration

and the broken bottles and the sticky floors.  
in one moment, all the memories of rain which people tend to overlook  
or simply ignore because there is light and sound to hold our attention  
come rushing in like a roaring typhoon  
and a lady with her little dog waltzes in  
to do me a great mercy  
claiming to know the secret's in the black book  
of how to choose the sick the weak among our fellow wolves  
a well-meaning mother that is correct not like the others  
those rustic symbols of power in a set of graceful movements.  
if someone were to send her voice wrapped in cellophane  
and dry foliage i would dare not see her face because the pages would  
frighten me with their black and white rumble  
this is all i know: that it would be like learning a new language  
a small kindness after all that would be to have seen  
those horrors to have felt the hand of destiny  
pulling and pushing away because otherwise she could not  
do anything useful but we judge nonetheless  
what could she have done?  
this is the reason why we don't  
the events caught up with us and we are all touched  
by a monstrosity just like that casually.

# Driving Home

Donovan D. Dickerson



I imagine  
just me and the road  
the surroundings bring stress  
my car is my haven  
before I get home

Driving down University

horrible drivers trying  
to get on the freeway—

Who drew these solid lines in the road?  
Why don't people appreciate these solid lines?

Driving down University  
I don't think  
about the homeless who  
ask for money yet  
refuse a burger,  
I think about  
potholes in the road,  
how I avoid them all.

University turns into State  
I head down Highland  
I see the same squad car parked  
across from the local dispensary  
I wonder if today is the day.

Down Highland  
I see the same train  
I would love to hear  
when I was younger

Finally, I see you

# Carpe Omnia

Victoria Johnson



It was at noon when they sent Clayton to the chair. Labeled as a domestic terrorist, a draft dodger, a tyrant and a murderer. That's what they got him for, murder, but if there is one thing that Clayton isn't, it's a damn murderer. Yeah, he was a bit rough around the edges and would pop a guy in the mouth every once in a while, but he wouldn't kill anyone. That's why he refused to go to Nam; Clayton hated the war, and what it stood for. Now, here he was, strapped into that death trap. Those leather straps going all around his chest, his legs and hands locked in tight, with that metal cap on the top of his now shaven head. What a sight it was, and I, unfortunately, had one of the best seats in the house.

"It's a darn shame how we've gotten here," I said. "It wasn't supposed to be like this." I shook my head and looked around the room, as people began to take their seats.

Our viewing room was small compared to the execution chamber; it fit about twenty of us. I would say comfortably, but it wasn't; the whole thing was unpleasant as we sat on those hard-wooden chairs, which were placed so close together that you began to feel claustrophobic.

It was like when you take a family road trip, and you're crammed in the middle of the back seat, with nowhere to go, and the air conditioner just so happens to be broken. Pretty fitting considering that it was hot inside the room. One of the ladies behind me seemed like she was about to pass out from it all; those Alabama summers would get you, that's for sure.

"Hey," one of the guys sitting in front of me spoke up to one of the gentlemen right next to him. He couldn't have been any older than thirty, as he dressed in his Sunday's best of an old brown suit. "Can you believe that we're about to see a guy... you know," he looked at his friend then over at me, "get electrocuted, for murder, probably serve him best; I heard he gunned the guy down."

"That's what I heard too," his friend said. "Surprised he even made it this far. If it were up to me, he would've been taken care of sooner."

I gritted my teeth and held my tongue. The nerve of these guys; they didn't even know Clayton or what happened that night, and here they were, judging him. I wanted to tell 'em off, punch them in the face, yell or something, but what was the use? I would've ended up just like Clayton for acting out like that. That was just the reality that we lived in. The way they spoke was just so upsetting and what was really chilling, was the sparkle in their eyes.

"Oh well, at least we get to see a good show. Better than any movie," the

first man said.

He was about to watch a man die right in front of him, and he seemed excited. The fact that he took the word of someone else as face value bugged me; I would have told him what happened, but he wouldn't believe me, a person of color of all people, the same way the police didn't believe Clayton that night. Hell, it was the word of the cops why he's here in the first place.

Birmingham, Alabama  
1967

Make love, not war!

People began to shout as the streets began to fill with protestors of all shapes and sizes. Both white and colored. With signs held high, they screamed as loud as they could. It was a bit of a shock to see a white man standing side-by-side with a colored man, but not all of them were bad. Unfortunately, a lot were, which was why Clayton and I had to be careful crossing certain parts of town. Even though we were free, we weren't free or equal for that matter.

End the war in Vietnam!

Johnson was starting to push for the war; the only problem was not a lot of people were too thrilled about it. "Man, can you believe what they're doing to Ali? They said they're going to strip him of his title for not going to Nam," I shook my head. "It just ain't right." The whole idea of the war was something that I didn't care about. Growing up in the South, I felt that I had my own issues going on. If I looked at a white person the wrong way, there was a good chance that I would be hanging from a tree. Why would I want to sign up for a war somewhere else, when I got my own going on in my backyard?

"That's life for ya," Clayton said, running his hands through his afro. He took great pride in his hair; he said it was a part of who he was or something like that. "Ya damned if ya do, and ya damned if ya don't. I'm with him; I'm ain't going either. Just isn't our fight, getting justice and equality is, and we can't get that unless we have our voices heard." For a moment, he stared at the protestors, and a half smile crossed his face. With a slight nudge of his head, I began to follow him, as we walked along the sidewalk, watching them.

"They sure are determined, do you think it'll change anything?"

Clayton turned to me, and for a moment he was silent. "Every little bit helps," he admitted. "Carpe Omnia."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I wasn't as bright as Clayton. Ever since we were kids, he always had his head inside the books. Mama really couldn't understand it and would tease him, but Clayton had big dreams of going to some fancy college. He believed that he could change the world, and no one could tell him otherwise. So once Ma passed on, Clay dropped out of school. I felt terrible for him too, cause he was one of the smartest guys that I knew. The whole thing

didn't seem to bother him, or at least that's what Clayton let on anyway. After a while, he ended up joining the Panthers, and his whole mindset started to change.

"Seize it all," he looked around at the faces. "If we want change, we have to be that change. Look at Miss Parks, Ali, Dr. King, and Brotha X; they don't just stand around when they see a problem, they take every opportunity they get and do something about it."

"Sounds like a good way to get killed to me," I confessed.

"That's not the point. What side of history do you want to be on anyway, Harris? Because I want to do something impactful, something that will mean something."

"The right one, of course," I said. "I mean, it's alright to protest, and want change, hell, I want change, but let's do it peacefully like Dr. King says. Violence ain't the answer, look at Brotha X, and where it got him, do you want that to be you?" I was scared for my brother, even though he meant well, he would stop at nothing to get what he wanted.

"Harris, I'm gonna do whatever needs to be done,"

"Look, everything is just going on so fast." I tried to reason with him.

Clayton sighed, "If nothing is happening, we will say it's not going on fast enough, and if there is progress, some would say it shouldn't be happening. You can't please everyone, look, this is for the best, and a lot of people aren't gonna like it," he said, placing his hands in his pockets as he walked ahead of me.

As we continued to walk, the streets became a bit quieter as we were out of the earshot of the protestors. On different buildings, we saw flyers about the war or some signs indicating either or not coloreds were allowed. I think I hated that the most. It was a long walk home, as we had to pass some areas that were only meant for the white folks.

For a while, we walked in silence; we didn't bother anyone, and no one bothered us. That's just how we liked it, taking in the fresh air. I never would've thought this would have been the last time we would be able to enjoy the peace.

"Wanna take the short-cut or go the long way, Harris?" he asked, looking up at the stars.

"Doesn't really matter to me as long as we both make it." I answered.

"Guess you're right about that. It sure is a nice out. I don't think I've ever seen the stars shine so bright. Let's go the long way."

We lived on the other side of the tracks of Birmingham. For the most part it was an alright place to live. The people got along well, a real community, and if anyone needed anything, someone would be quick to help you out. Even with all of that, I wanted more, and I knew Clayton did too. This whole segregation thing, wasn't right. Often, we talked about being able to enter a place and not have to worry about not being allowed. Sometimes, I worried if that day would ever come.

As we crossed the tracks, something had caught Clayton's attention, "what's that over there?" he squinted his eyes.

"Over where?" I squinted as well, trying to make it out. "It's probably nothing, let's go."

“Hold on now,” Clayton raised an arm and began walking closer. “I think it’s a body.”

“Best leave it be then. We don’t want no trouble.” I tried to warn him, but he was gone. “Clay, Clayton, get back over here,” I whispered taking cover behind an old trailer.

Clayton at times could be so reckless, and I couldn’t stand it. Even though his heart was in the right place, he had this side of him, where he had to be right, and right in the center of everything. Protest, sit-ins, you name it. I always thought that one day it was going to catch up to him and boy did I wish I were wrong. A dirty cop with a gun pointed right at him.

In psychology, they talk about that fight or flight thing? Well, that night, I found out which one I was. As much as I wanted to be there for Clayton, I just couldn’t, so I ran. I ran for my life, and it is the one thing that I regret. When I had made it home, all I could do was fall to the floor and cry. Here he was my brother, the only family that I had left, and I just left him there to die practically. I couldn’t sleep cause every time I closed my eyes; I had this sick image of that cop pointing his gun at Clayton.

Even though Clayton knew that he was about to die, he had this sense of peace to him. I don’t know if he could see from behind that screen, but I sure could see him, and he was calm; they all were, the officers in the room with him, like this was normal. My brother was about to die, and everyone was just calm. I don’t know how, with those annoying fluorescent lights buzzing and shining down on everyone, but it didn’t seem to bother them the way it was bothering me. I could say that it was the lights, but in reality, I was nervous; nervous for Clayton, but mostly for myself.

I could feel my hands getting all clammy, the same way they do when you want to talk to that pretty girl for the first time; when your stomach begins to turn, and your heart starts racing, and you feel like you’re about to die, but you aren’t. Yeah, that’s how I feel, but I’m not dying, Clayton is, and all I can do is sit and watch, knowing that it was all my fault.

Taking a microphone in his hand, one of the guards walked over to Clayton, “Any final statements,” he asked.

“Carpe Omnia,” he said, staring directly ahead of him. That was his saying about everything. Seize it all. Don’t just make the best of the day, but every hour, every minute, every second of your life. If an opportunity presents itself, you take with no hesitation. That’s how he lived his life, and that’s how I want to live mine.

Another guard took a walk over to the telephone. I felt my gut beginning to turn, praying that there would be a last-minute pardon. Taking the phone and placing it into his ear, I felt my heart beginning to race.

“This is it,” the man next to me said, “Kill that murderer!” he shouted.

Shut up, I thought to myself, watching intently. I felt sweat falling from my brow, and a man right behind me, shake his leg. For some reason, he felt just as nervous as I was.

The guard wasn't on the phone for long. Nothing there, as he gave a small nod. "Clayton, I'm sorry!"

With a simple push of a button, the execution was being completed. His body was beginning to stiffen, blisters formed on his legs, as a small cloud of smoke radiated off him. The smell, well, for a while, it was almost sweet, but then it was just horrible as the hairs on his body were burning. It was a scent that I would never forget. It all didn't last long, the execution and all, but it was something that would stay with me forever.

As they were checking to make sure that Clayton was dead, something caught my eye, the man right behind me, was that same dirty cop. He didn't know it was me, but I sure knew it was him. My body began to tense, as a grin crossed his face.

"It ain't all that bad boy, at least it wasn't you, right?" he chuckled, rising to his feet alongside the guy right next to me. "That was quite the show, what you, say, John?"

"I kinda wish I had some popcorn, for it all, but man, he sure does stink. Oh well, one less coon," John shrugged, taking his leave with the cop and his friend.

For a while, I just sat in my chair in silence, watching them take Clayton's body away. All of it just wasn't right. He didn't deserve all this to happen to him, and it was all my fault. I should've stayed and tried to help. Hell, if I would've died, maybe I wouldn't have felt so damn guilty. Clayton was right, if I wanted change, I needed to be that change, and it all starts with trying to clear his name.

# Things That Get Left Behind

Sarah LaGioia



You're picking flowers for your mother when you meet him. The summer is late, and the flowers are few, and you go further into the woods than you're supposed to. Your father will be angry if he finds out, especially if he finds out you're talking to strangers.

"Can I have your name?" the man asks, and you're 10 when you deny him.

"You can't have it," you say slowly. "It's mine and I need it."

He blinks. His lips twitch and his eyes brighten, sharpen. "Then what will I call you?" You shrug and he props his chin on his hand, considering every freckle on your face. "Other people know it, don't they? You won't give it to me?"

"I didn't give it to them. They didn't ask. They all knew it before I did."

You pause because you're right: Ma and Da told everyone. You look at him and he's pretty—all pale, elegant limbs, eyes like silver, hair like moonlight. He is a dream thing. You've never seen anyone like him before. Even when you meet his brethren, you will never see anyone like him, not ever again.

"That doesn't seem fair," he says, "Them giving your things away like they own them. Don't you think so?"

You frown because you've never thought about it that way before, and now that it's been brought to your attention, you'll never stop noticing it and it will bother you forever. Then you feel stupid, because Ma and Da told everyone. You realize: "You're a faerie. You are, aren't you? You would know my name, otherwise. You're a faerie. Why do you want my name?"

The man seems endlessly amused. "All friends were strangers first."

"I guess. It's my name, though. No one else in town has the same one, Ma and Da made sure of it."

"You think you're very clever, don't you," he drawls, and you don't answer him because it isn't a question. The faerie's stare is transfixing. You adjust your hold on the flowers you're strangling. When his mouth curves into a smile, you can breathe again. "Another time, perhaps. Will you come find me again? I can wait. I have ages." You find yourself smiling back.

Later that night, you tell your mother about the friend you made in the woods, and she's terrified. She grabs your face and stares at it. She looks at you so hard for so long that you start to get scared. "Who are you?" she demands. "Who are you?"

"I'm me, Ma. I'm Eoin."

Her nostrils flare. Her grip tightens. When you touch the back of her

hand, she flinches and lets you go. “No more flowers,” she hisses at you.

You don’t understand. She loves flowers. You’re a good boy, though, and you don’t bring any more flowers for her, not even when she dies. Your father calls you a monster.

That’s not the first time you were given a beating, but it’s the first time he calls you that.

You’re 15 when you start hiding in the woods. You had almost convinced yourself that meeting him was a dream, but the faerie is there and he hasn’t forgotten you. He’s even prettier than you remember and you’re mortified by the way your body stirs and takes sharp, heated interest whenever you so much as look at him. The faerie doesn’t get angry, though. When he laughs, it isn’t mean. He calls you pet, and there are worse things to be called. You’re ashamed of how much you like it. He says it’s nothing to be ashamed of, and you have to believe him because the fae can’t lie, only dance around the truth. When you meet his fae friends, they are jealous. You’re flattered by it. For once, you feel good. He wants you to come away with him.

You’re 16 when you run into the woods. You’re crying because you aren’t the kind of son your father wants. He would rather have no son than a son who likes other boys and you’re terrified.

“What’s the matter?” the faerie asks.

“Eoin,” you say. “My name is Eoin.”

He blinks at you, and acts like he doesn’t notice what power you’ve just given him by giving him your name. “Aye,” he says, “so it is.”

“He’s going to kill me,” you tell him. You’re shaking. “My father. He’ll kill me.”

“No. You’ll leave before that. You can come away with me, just as you are.”

You want to but you tell him you can’t, not yet, and he looks so disappointed you feel ashamed of yourself.

You’re 17 the last time he hurts you, and it starts with a foot to the face.

When you tell your father you are leaving, you are so tense that your muscles pinch and quiver. He caught you while you were trying to get your boots on. Your voice is brittle. What you’re saying gets stuck in your throat like fish bones because fear is something to choke on. You’ve finally found the strength to run away, but you always seem to get the bad end of the wishbone.

“Eoin.”

The last time he tells you that you aren’t going anywhere, he’s in the doorway to make sure of it. He’s not much bigger than you are, but he fills the doorway anyway. The farmhouse has been in the family for generations, and generations of the family haunt this place—no one leaves. You know that when the wind howls, it’s the ghosts howling; when the house groans, it’s them groaning. You live in a place that’s cold and dark. Before you started going into the woods every chance you got, you would turn on every light in the house when

father was away, and sometimes that just made it worse because the shadows became more real, less vague.

There are windows in this house that let light in but won't let you out. If you had just broken one, even if you cut yourself, even if the act makes you bleed, your father wouldn't have expected it. Probably, you could have got away without the foot to the face and all the kicks that followed. If you had just wrapped some rags around your arm and punched your way through a windowpane, this wouldn't be happening. What did you care for the windowpane, anyway? You aren't coming back—your faerie told you to come as you are, that he would take care of you, that he'd wait, that you didn't have to worry. You had given him your name and names are powerful things. The faerie could have made you come away with him, but he didn't have to. The faerie never has to make you do anything because what he wants from you is what you want to give him. When you tell your father you are leaving, he stops you.

You hear the crunch of your nose breaking before you feel the blinding pain that follows. Your head snaps back and you stagger and crash into the chair that's behind you. It skitters away as the floorboards break your fall. Your bones—all sharp, starved angles of them—hit first. The pain vibrates up through them and comes out of your mouth in what might have been a whimper. The cry bubbles out of you instead.

The floorboards rattle. There's a table too heavy for your father to throw, if you can get under it before he can get on top of you.

You can't get under it, so he kicks you some more. His foot's in your stomach. Then it's on your shoulder, and then on the small of your back. The toe of a boot finds the meat of your thigh. When his foot slams into your chest, your ribs curl around your lungs the way you curl your arms around your body, and you lie there, not breathing. "You don't think I know what you're up to? You don't think I know where you're going? Who you're seeing?"

He's wrong. He doesn't know. You aren't trying to elope Declan, who didn't run off in the first place, but is lying dead in a shallow grave because his father caught him kissing another boy—a boy who isn't you. You hope the other boy got away, but you know Declan didn't because, when you went looking for him, you found the turned earth on his family's plot and you know that he's under it. If you die here, your father will probably bury you in your family's field.

Your breath returns in chokes and gasps, coughs and wheezes. The table's just there, and if your nails catch enough on the coarse fibers of the rug, you can still haul yourself under that table. You make it because he lets you, and it's just like hiding under your bed but with less dust and fewer spiders. You stare at your father's boots for a while. He doesn't say anything else to or about you. Eventually, he walks away and you hear him pick up the chair you knocked over and set it upright. There's the familiar slosh of liquor in a glass and you breathe out slow. Your father's meaner when he's sober. The sofa protests with a screech of springs when your father sits on it to watch you not get up.

Your face throbs with the beat of your pulse and when you breathe it's

through your mouth. When you close and open up your fists, close and open them, the skin sticks a little. Your hair will matt and your shirt is stained. The rug is ruined for sure.

You watch your hands tremble as they dry. What if you make it out alive, but the faerie isn't waiting anymore? What if he's there, but he leaves you behind anyway because your blood is on the wrong side of your skin? This isn't how you're supposed to be. There's blood in your mouth; you swallow, and all you taste is iron.

"Eoin. Stupid boy," your father says eventually, and his words slur. "You little bastard queer. I shouldn't have to do this."

"I'm sorry," you whisper. Your head hurts.

"The hell is wrong with you?"

Nothing. Everything. The sofa creaks and your heart races and doesn't stop racing even though your father didn't stand up after all. He could stand up. He could come over and drag you out if he feels like it. "I'm sorry, Da."

"Sorry," your father says. "What are you sorry for? Didn't ask to be born, did you? You sure ask to hurt, though. You sure do."

Let me go, you think.

Your father breathes out slow. "You sure ask for it."

Your father drinks until he passes out. You wait until the snoring starts before you crawl from your hiding place. It hasn't been this bad before. He must have known you were serious.

Your boots are too close to him. You leave them behind.

When you reach the woods, the earth is cool beneath your feet, the leaves scattered upon it dew-damp. Every once in a while, there's a rock jabbing into your sole, but your feet are hardly the most bruised part of your body. Your hands are still sticky. Twigs scratch your face and catch at your clothes, but if your father couldn't stop you, neither can branches. You hobble along, holding your ribs. Your body's unsure which parts it needs to favor, which areas need more guarding. Your heartbeat drowns out the sound of night creatures. You're going to be alright. You find your way by moonlight. Your faerie is exactly where he said he'd be waiting for you. When you hold out your hand it's even grislier than you thought it would be but he doesn't recoil from it.

"Fascinating," the faerie exhales. "I think I will never understand you people."

Your face is every color but what it should be. "I'm not like them."

His eyes flash in the night. "Now, Eoin," he tells you, "that's not fair. If I'm not allowed to lie, neither are you." It's the only warning you'll get.

It could be a trick, but you're only human. "I have tried not to be like them," you settle on. Your voice is hoarse. "I've tried. I try."

The faerie hums. His shifting feet disturb the grass, and no matter how you remind yourself that the movement is a human sign of discomfort, and that he is not human, the mere suggestion that he will forsake you—leave you—is too much.

He has never given you his name. You can't make him do anything that he doesn't want to do. "Please," you say. "Please."

"Eoin. I did promise," he reminds you, sounding almost affronted. "Have I ever lied to you, pet?" His grin arrives slowly, too wide and knowing and sharp. Beautiful things can be dangerous. Beautiful things can be deadly. People don't play with the fae for a reason. You should be afraid. You should have been afraid from the very beginning. You're not. You've been afraid of other monsters, and all of them have been human.

# The Road to Tenure is Paved

Theodore C. Van Alst, Jr.



There really is nothing finer than watching an angel on fire fall through the sky. It's even better if it's in slow motion. That's a power you want to ask for when you get to the gate at Dis. No one usually does, so the wasps and hornets will grant it to you, if begrudgingly so. That's what Virgil says, at any rate, even if he is pretty drunk when he does. Man. That guy is such a lush.

I squat on top of a utility pole in the alley off Milwaukee Avenue near North and Damen in Chicago, searching the thunder-darkened sky for that cherubic miracle, my balls gently resting on the static wire hoping for an accompanying lightning storm, smoking cigarettes and drinking a St. Ides 40. I've got headphones in, listening to my "Angelic" playlist. I've got the night off from teaching Haranguing and Distraction 101 to 200 uninterested freshman demons at the shitty commuter school I'm stuck at for now. At first, they tell me I'm going to have to teach in Aramaic, which I'm only moderately fluent in, but I go around the department chair and bitch to the Dean. An eighth and a bottle of Fireball later and she's exaggerating the Doctor in my name (I go by Dr. Droga but everyone just calls me Lido, to my supreme annoyance), telling me I can teach in English. To top it off she gives me a teaching assistant. Of course, since we're at Acheron River Community College, Dean Celestine makes sure my TA is a fucking Yattering. He's so stupid I have to ask him after the third class how he finds his way to our room without a map. He just laughs and tells me he forgot the book. Again.

I have a Ph.D. in Daemonium Studiis, but so do about ten thousand of us howling, screeching Gen Xers. Going onto school after hitting the Inferno seemed like a good idea at the time, but these fucking Baby Boomers hang on like Christians clinging to the shoreline at the Lake of Fire. There're just no open positions at the moment, or so we're told over and over again. The Greatest Generation cats shake their heads at us, roll their orange-lit eyes up and to the side pffft-style, and commiserate with us over their kids who are just terrible, and possessed of no sense of duty, obligation, or grace. They tell us how much they regret all the things they've done for them, the perfect world they left for them, the ideal lives they've pissed away. We really should ask Lucifer for an all-staff to address this shit before it gets out of hand. Thinking about that possibility, along with my spotty CV, my bed in Phlegethon, and the upcoming tenure-track position in Comp Lit, I resolve to make that moment count. I think on it until my nails half-moon bloodpools into my palms. I breathe down through my nose and frown at my own stupid rage.

Bored now, and helplessly sliding into my ADD (Satan has laughingly decided you'll retain your most troubling human trait during check-in, just so you know) I turn my lime-green eye inward, the other one blood-red and holding fast to that vision of God's descending soldier, flames blue at the core while orange and red whip high into the horizon. I use it to watch a mortal doing coke off a knife in a stall. He's local! I pull up my pants and flash over to the grimy men's room just down the alley at a bar called Dreamerz two blocks away. My metal studded hoof with the circle A kicks in the rust-scarred hollow metal door to the shitter as I sulfur and brimstone into the john.

The space in his face

from his top lip to his lower eyelid

lines maroon for a split second and then opens wide as the thin edge of the blade travels over to his nose and buries itself in the pearly cartilage.

My headphone cords still swing in the breeze of my entrance while human blood spatters my red and black plaid flannel pants. Melanie singing "Lay Down" is about the only thing that gives me pause, makes the lumpen coal-ash of my remnant heart skip a beat, and reconsider all my foul deeds. I listen to her chorus fade out 70's style. When it's over, and A\$AP Rocky and Rod Stewart kick in to spend their time, drinking wine. I remember I'm just an adjunct for now, but I smile. Big.

Anon, if the devil on your shoulder has a tiny devil on his shoulder, I'm that devil. As soon as I get tenure.

# Loved By Dragons

Donald Khairullah



we talk about love  
platonic and romantic  
as the end all, be all

we ignore  
horror and subtlety  
of a love more draconic

it steals and carves  
like a greedy collector  
us, the broken and hopeful

and holds us too close  
and holds us too dear  
and holds us too tight

enough to tear and bruise  
crumbling treasures  
gold and glittery

until we slip through  
the grasp of claws  
those wretched dragons

escaped from their hoards  
and no longer trinkets  
there is care and love

a terrifying thought  
there is no hoard  
just our two coins

still grooved, still carved  
by talons and teeth  
still broken, still hopeful

# Measure Once, Cut Twice

Heikki Huotari



The gist of it comes within fifteen human feet of me then changes course, then changes horses, then the prisoner selected is a function of the luminosity and shape of faith, the cross-communications of some random hazards, rabbits from the past. A minor character, a carpenter, a pencil in his lips, misfits an odd shaped element of dry wall. Taking comfort out of context, guess who's Doppler shifting now. Of helium balloons you'll need eleven, not one needle, not one hammer, not one hat, but pasteurized, homogenized, and gravity,                   and                   as                   exact.

# The Tangent Keeps the Faith

The octopuses' adjectives are sharpening the octopuses' prose and in this aromatic automatic renaissance the octopuses' thoughts are those of electricity and magnetism. Every vowel is now pronounced and incandescent lights are missing filaments and there's no bait they wouldn't take and from the Battle of Atlanta cyclorama seven feet of sky have somehow disappeared. When every consequence is disavowed there is no need to isolate an overtone and no more selling to the bible belt and I'll be gainfully employed.

# Eyes

Miguel Hernandez



The darkest eyes  
are the most  
magnificent

Brown  
like soiled land

Obsidian that pierces a soul  
endless, dark abyss  
cave with no ending

Grabbing you  
engulfing your soul  
an ocean

Strong, morning's  
dark roast coffee

Tough, raw  
as a leather belt

# “United”

The bullet wounded  
Him-,  
wounded us

Cracked the wall we built-  
Crippled hope

As tall as we stand, we  
Are merely a little rock-  
Dented rock

In a land stuck  
In abyss-

Atrocious Land

All of this opposition  
Bur still no effect-

Covered voice

Big Brother will not listen-

Unimportant death

# It's Like a Box

Shelby-Layne Tillotson



It's like a box.

Containing no latch, no hinges- no seams of which to pry apart,  
with a consistent, resonant, thud.thud.thud. inside.

And the more you try to search for an opening,  
the more violently the pulse continues,  
until the entire parcel shakes from the chaotic trajectory of its inner culprit.

That's what it's like.

But you are both the box and its components.

# I Knew You Would Be Trouble

I knew you would be trouble.

From the moment your statuesque shape filled my doorway,  
demasculinizing its frame with your  
towering figure.

It was that look in your eyes,  
as if you had found something you  
didn't know you had lost.

A display of pleasant surprise.

Paired with your mild smile and becalming embrace, my  
masochistic heart was doomed from the beginning.

I should have known that it would end.

You are a bargaining man, by nature; it would have been wise  
to recognize that you might bargain for  
something worth more than your offer.

For like an abandoned castle,  
the walls of my love constitute more than a street-side view.

They conceal creations from ages past,  
harboring a display of classic design and antiques values.

With a library of history left unread, the volumes  
of my soul offer insight to anyone with hands  
gentle enough to turn through their dry-leaf pages.

The war-torn grounds surrounding my firm foundations  
added luster to my composition,  
but nothing prepared you for what was waiting inside -  
an untouched dwelling of relinquished dreams.

Though you tread lightly, your energy rippled  
through the pipes of my heart like a  
church organ in a silent room,  
the raw intensity of your motions  
impressing concrete tracks in the dirt stained floors of my very being.  
Pursuing solace, you came and went,  
leaving my treasures to weather with the wind  
that beckoned and ushered you forth.

# Wounded

Denise Kollock



My heart, why do I need that? See...  
I'm used to these wounds  
digging deeper into my flesh  
bloody Mary red bursting-  
bursting out, creating a river of tears. These tears  
running down my canvas.  
This blood, gliding slowly down my body  
causing another catastrophe,  
this calamity of suffering.

It's fine.

no, seriously. It's really not fine,  
my heart is worn out  
stitching is taking its toll  
these bandages are getting weaker.  
If repatched to be broken again, then  
what's the point? What  
is the point of even loving  
because, in the long run, I am just  
damaging myself even further.  
Is there ever a  
point?

# Death With a Flower

McKenna Williams



You will always be the one who almost killed me

You with your sweet lies and false promises

You lured me into your silent darkness

Your charm easily hypnotizing

Presented with a flower, symbolism of love

I gave myself to you willingly.

Your insidious nature is revealed quickly

Your disguise falls away to reveal your true form

Grim reaper

Caught in your trap as you scrape and tear at my flesh

I shriek and cry

Digging my nails into the earth

Dragging myself towards safety

Your grip becomes stronger, suffocating

My wearied body thrashes and writhes

Chunks of me in your claws

A final shove away from you liberates me

I wail loud from the wounds you have inflicted  
The agony is too much to bear  
Cold creeping in,  
Refusing immobilization,  
Compelled to get as far away as possible  
Leaving behind the bits and pieces you tore from me  
the abandoned pieces you now hold captive in your morbid home  
residing in a crypt lifeless and haunting  
Pieces of my heart lie in your tomb poisoned and rotting  
The stolen portion of my soul now a lonely apparition,  
Wondering the graveyard wretched and angry.  
Seasons pass, Scars remain  
A Reminder of my encounter and a warning to the reckless.



# Drawing after Midnight

David Carlson



There is no mind of winter,  
but the small hours hold quiet  
up before me like a goad.

Fists of blank paper open  
to pears and a jar, a bodegón  
whose focal point is bare

space, halving a counter.  
By this light, we eat and  
make,  
perfect rendering of urge.

# Sleep Study



Lay out the body.

Breathing is a squall.

Tubes drafting  
make the diaphragm still.

Tallied in blue light  
the lungs fill.

The womb-brain yields,  
begins a new collaboration.

I am a metropolis  
awaiting liberation.

The mother, the machine,  
  
where she has always been.

# “what”

Natalie McCard



if a person is a place  
can you return  
to them, yourself, each other

*from where*

if we renew ourselves  
are we meeting again  
is our memory dissipated?

*from when*

are you returning  
or are you coming  
for the first time

*to here?*

if this is new,  
is this new?  
is it an antecedent to our anecdote?

## Simon Perchik



\*

To not hear her leaving  
and though this snapshot is wrinkled  
it's carried off in a shirt pocket

that never closes, stays with you  
by reaching out as eyes  
waiting for tears and emptiness

–you remember who filled the camera  
except there was sunlight –a shadow  
must say something, must want

to be lifted, brought back, caressed  
the way a well is dug for the dead  
who want only water and each other

–you try, pull the corners closer  
over and over folded till you are facing  
the ground, the dry grass, her.



\*

To the dirt that no longer moves  
you offer a mask the way a flower  
over and over is readied for mornings

where time begins again as stars  
sensing honey and more darkness  
-by evening your death

will be used to footsteps one by one  
broken off a great loneliness  
returning row by row as the small stones

cut out for the mouth and eyes  
to sweeten it, ask  
where you are going by yourself.



\*

Though there's no sea nearby  
this sidewalk smell from sand  
no longer struggling –you point

where the crack will come  
when you take your hand away  
letting it lie in the street

–what drips from your fingertip  
is one wound bathing another  
with evenings and shores

covered with the inhuman cries  
from small shells still in pain  
scattered and not moving



# Author Biographies



ANTHONY ALAS holds a B.A. in Film. His stories have been featured in Azahares Literary Magazine & Inlandia Magazine's (upcoming) Immigrant's Anthology. He is currently pursuing a Master's in English at CSUSB.

NICOLE BARRERA is a senior at CSUSB. She has been writing stories and poetry since she was in Middle school but her passion for it has not dwindled if anything, her time here has cemented the idea in her mind that she is a writer.

MARLO BROOKS is a senior majoring in English at CSUSB.

DAVID J. CARLSON is department chair of the English department at CSUSB, where he researches and publishes mostly in the area of Native American/ Indigenous studies. Dr. Carlson has taught American Literature, poetry, science fiction, and critical theory. He is a co-editor of Transmotion, an online journal of indigenous studies, hosted by the University of Kent.

MARIA CHACON is a Liberal Arts Alumna of CSUSB, although Maria did not chose to major in English Maria has always had a passion for reading and writing.

DANIELLE COLLADO current third-year undergraduate student at CSUSB. She loves everything about writing stories and poetry, and it's what Danielle loves to do during their spare time.

VICTORIA F. CONTRERAS is a student at CSUSB and a prose/fiction writer.

EMILEE CORRAL is a student at CSUSB. Emilee is an LGBTQ Chicana who loves to read and write poetry. Emilee hope's to explore poetry in all of its forms and to not limit to one specific style.

LUCINDA CRESPIN is an undergraduate student at CSU San Bernardino.

DONNA DALLAS studied Creative Writing and Philosophy at NYU's Gallatin School and was lucky enough to study under William Packard, founder and editor of the New York Quarterly.

MARK DE LA REE is a poet, but only in the sense that he writes poems.

DONOVAN D. DICKERSON is a senior at CSUSB whose major is English in the Creative Writing track. Donovan usually writes fiction short stories but having taken many classes on poetry has gained the confidence to submit some of his poems.

ANDREA DURAN has two Associate in Arts degrees in English, a Bachelor's Degree in Creative Writing and in Psychology in progress. Published in The Baseline Magazine, Cosmopolitan, and twice in The Chaffey Review. Andrea's goal is to become a clinical psychologist and publish creative writing for young adults regarding mental health and social issues using her own history and experience.

CASSIUS EPPS is a senior at CSUSB and a year-long editor for Pacific Review. He is currently developing a literary blog that features original and solicited work in various genres.

MELISA FELLER is a student of CSUSB, double majoring in English-Linguistics Track and Sociology and minoring in Gender and Sexuality Studies. Melisa was diagnosed bipolar disorder when she was 20 and it led her to write about mental illness and death in more of her works.

ESMERALDA GOMEZ is second year student attending CSUSB. She's been writing poetry for many years but had a love and hate relationship with it. In the beginning she struggled and continues to, but she hopes she has improved from her experience, new found inspiration, and encouragement.

DAVID GUZMAN is an English: Creative Writing Alumnus of CSUSB.

MIGUEL HERNANDEZ is a third-year student at CSUSB, an English Creative Writing major graduating Spring 2019 with a BA. He is an aspiring poet who is attempting to publish a poetry book currently in the works by 2019.

STEVEN A. HINKLE is a senior majoring in English at CSUSB. His Poem “Out of Reality” appeared in *Collected Whispers* when he was 17. At 19, he hand-wrote the poem book *Somewhere Between Here and Now* for his first love.

NANA HOWTON, originally from Brazil, holds an MFA from Columbia University and received an honorable mention from the 2009 *Astraea* Foundation. Nana is the recipient of a scholarship from 2010 Skidmore Summer Writers Conference. Nana’s fiction has appeared in multiple publishing groups including Fiction Fix, where Nana won a Reader’s Circle Award and nominations to the Pushcart Prize and American Best Short Stories.

HEIKKI HUOTARI is a retired professor of mathematics. His poems appear in several journals, most recently in *Diagram* and *Puerto del Sol*. Heikki is also the winner of the 2016 *Gambling the Aisle* chapbook contest.

VICTORIA JOHNSON is an alumna of CSUSB.

ZION JONES is a student at CSUSB.

DONALD KHAIRULLAH is a student of CSUSB. Interdisciplinary loudmouth and survivor of dragons; Here with Biology, Applied Physics, English: Creative Writing. Likes learning rules, grammatical or otherwise, but only because want to know how and when to break them.

DENISE KOLLOCK is a CSUSB student majoring in English with a concentration in Creative Writing and minoring in Gender & Sexuality Studies. Denise is part of the University Dance Company on campus which performs every February with a showcase.

SARAH LAGIOIA is a Southern California native who enjoys reading, writing, and traveling—none of which she has enough time for.

VICKI MANDELL-KING has been writing poetry most of her life, even during a 30-year career in law. Vicki’s poems have appeared in numerous respected journals. Two of her published collections are *TENACITY OF LACE* and *SHRINKING INTO INFINITE SKY*.

NATALIE MCCARD is a third-year student at CSUSB, although this is her first semester at the university after having completed her first two years at a community college.

NATALIE MORA is a Junior at CSUSB and is on the road to receiving her B.A. and Teaching Credential in English Literature. This is her first publication.

MISAEEL OSORIO is a student at CSUSB.

BENJAMIN OYLER is a third year English major (Creative Writing/Linguistics). Benjamin has a large array of influences in his works, including but not limited to Dylan Thomas, Mark Twain, and Edgar Allan Poe. He hopes to one day become a published author and a political advisor.

SIMON PERCHIK is an American poet whom the Library Journal has described as, “the most widely published unknown poet in America.” Perchik worked as an attorney before retiring in 1980.

KENT ROGERS is a member of the CSUSB English Department faculty. He has been published in several journals, including twice in *The Pacific Review*. He has also participated in faculty readings, was awarded a fellowship to the Julia and David White Artist’s Colony, and was represented by Sobel Weber Associates.

JORDAN SALSBERY, inspired by an incident in his real-life, wrote “Marcus Gets Caught Stealing Candy,” showcasing the consequences that his character, Marcus, faces when he steals candy and is confronted by his father.

NOEMY SEGURA is a senior at CSUSB majoring in English Creative Writing. Her ambition is to one day expose her writing in a book collection of short stories.

PETER SMITH grew up in Southern California; now works for a community college in North Carolina and writes about California. Peter has published one poem, as well as a few articles on subjects related to disability, trauma, and/or race.

CRYSTAL SOLANO is a proud first-generation college student at CSUSB. Crystal is a member of the University Honors Program and in her second year as a research assistant in a social psychology lab that focuses on stigma and discrimination. Crystal plans to graduate in spring 2019 and apply to graduate schools for occupational therapy.

NATALIE THOMPSON is an intersectional feminist and writer residing in Corona with her family, and is working on her BA in English Literature. Natalie is interested in disability studies as a disabled poet.

SHELBY-LAYNE TILLOTSON is a senior majoring in Human and Organizational Communications at CSUSB, with a minor in English Studies.

THEODORE C. VAN ALST, JR. is Associate Professor and Director of Indigenous Nations Studies at Portland State University. He is co-editor and Creative Editor for Transmotion, an online journal of postmodern indigenous studies. His short story collection about growing up in Chicago, Sacred Smokes, has recently been published.

MCKENNA WILLIAMS is an English Creative Writing major in her senior year at CSUSB. She is currently working on a collection of poems and a novel.

MAHCUILLI CALLI XOCHI-QUIAHUITL is an undergraduate student at CSUSB.

RICHARD LEE ZURAS has published poems in Confrontation, South Dakota Review, Jabberwock Review, Innisfree, and Red Rock Review. He has held writing conference scholarships at Wesleyan and Bread Loaf. he teaches poetry writing at the University of Maine at Presque Isle where he lives with family.