

WESTWIND



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A letter from our editors:

On February 27th, 2023, the *New Yorker* published an article by Nathan Heller titled “The End of the English Major,” which confronted the rapid decline of humanities enrollment in American colleges. The next day, our staff gathered in our dusty meeting room with the broken desk in the seventh row and finished reviewing submissions for this journal.

Though we are not all English majors (though, to be fair, most of us are), we are all students who find joy in the search for something that shines. This is, to us, the primary value in studying and sharing art. Some may say we’re in it for the money, power, and glory (The digital-only literary arts journal publishing scene is cutthroat! Cue the *Succession* theme!); some may say we’re in it for the resume boost (Because entry-level publishing jobs are oh-so-lucrative); and some will probably say we’re snowflakes pushing the liberal agenda (It’s not not true). But truthfully, we love the hunt—the feeling of finding something that startles you, haunts you, and affects, whether you’re conscious of it or not, how you live out some period of your life.

The responses to Heller’s article consisted of a lot of eye-rolls, not least because of how often this death-of-the-humanities narrative has rolled into the media, failed to pan out, and slunk back out of frame. Pursuing a degree in the humanities is certainly a luxury or a risk, depending on a student’s background. But it is our belief that, as long as there are people who love to create and comment on art—who we confidently claim will exist until we’re all eviscerated in a nuclear winter—there are people who will choose to study these practices at the undergraduate and graduate level. And from our contributors to our staff members, this journal is proof those people want to make their presence known. We hope you enjoy what they have to offer.

With love,

Katherine King and Jade Lacy
Managing editors

Contents

Contributors, 70

Poetry

Kaya Napachoti
Saturday Lunches, 5

Ilea Farrall
Frame, 6

Jade Lacy
I-5, 7
Why?, 8

Shreya Dodballapur
My mother’s ring, 9

Maria Gray
Rattle, 11

Jannat Alam
Red Letters, 12

Kendra Maye Christian
Knots and Teeth, 15

Wiley Waggoner
The Pinnacle of Silence, 16
There are No Miracle People, 18

Fiction

Nikki Wolin
Jerome, 20

Kurt Gassman
Where the Bats Go, 25

Dominic Viti
Exit Strategy, 32

London March
Maggie , 34

E. Nightingale
The Bone Fields , 39

Maggie Nerz Iribarne
The Surprise, 45

David Egan
Reject Me, 47

Creative nonfiction

Elise Shiota Schofield
i dont trust white women, 55

Art

Elisa Espinoza
ebb and flow., 60

Susan Plann & Ariel Iacci
Excerpt from *Burning up the Strait:*
A Graphic Novel in the Making, 62

Selena Perez
It Eats, 67

Jade Ichimura
Uh Oh, 68

James Reeder
Capistrano, 69

A letter from the poetry board:

This winter of 2023 was particularly challenging. It seems that in stereotypically sunny LA, there were more rainy days than sunny. The temptation to lock oneself indoors with the heater turned up high was constant, and succumbing to the urge was nearly as pertinent. Thus, much time was left for pondering, for meditating—for writing poetry. Many of these poets reflect on those melancholic themes often associated with the winter season: loss and parting. They explore the complexities of relationships with a strong narrative voice, ranging from their relationships with family to religion and beyond. These poems are intimate, immersing the reader in the intricacies of the speaker's most delicate emotions.

That said, these poems also hold a promise—a proposition of hope and uncertainty. As Albert Camus wrote: "In the depth of winter, I finally learned that there was in me an invincible summer." Certainly, these poems embody the strength that comes from knowing that one can persevere through their winters. Some seem to have already identified their streak of sunshine, their moment of bliss already in sight (looking at you, "Why?").

It was an absolute pleasure to immerse ourselves in these poems this Winter quarter. We sincerely thank our contributors for their earnest vulnerability and our staff for their humble attentiveness. And, as always, this journal's continuance would not be possible without Professor Reed Wilson and all our readers. We are immensely grateful for your own unparalleled contribution.

Kylee Kropf and Lauren Kogelman
Executive Poetry Editors

you're getting fat
you want see me at 2? lunch kha?
all we do together is eat
drive to San Gabriel
& sit across from one another
in silence except to ask
what we should order
punctuated with
you look skinny now, make sure you eat
before 6pm, kha? and drink lemon water
every morning. are you walking?
i walk around, every morning,
to the park.
what do you *want*
to eat?
we order food, fill
the table with plates
i want to try everything
but tell myself not to eat
too much of it
in front of you at least
still you say
you eat too much
like you're mom
why is service so slow?
บริการไม่ดี
MSG มากเกินไป
น้ำมันเก่า
no one knows, hears
the complaints
until you switch back
to me, remind me
รักคุณ
love you too
don't forget
stop eating
rice

We're looking at God
as a Picasso painting.
It's supposed to be God all right,
but why does He look like that?

His eyes bulge in strange places,
His nose is a weird right angle,
eyebrows aligned where they shouldn't be,
at least, to me.

Maybe I'll turn to you,
and you'll be nodding.
That's exactly how I pictured him.

And just like that, we're stuck between
the grotesque and the divine.

I wouldn't paint God like that, I'd say.
Michelangelo's was fine.

But it's better this way, you might reply.
Everything is laid bare, all facets.
Besides, there's something relatable about how
his mouth is stuck in the middle of his face.

But there shouldn't be any flaws, I'd interject.
And because I like Renaissance art,
and you like cubism,
we'd see two different Gods.

Then, we'd move on to
Salvador Dali's rendition,
and our faces would slant askance.

That's not what God looks like.

How many times have I driven this highway,
two lanes cradled between dozing
mounds of hillside sinking into darkness
that blankets the countryside at night,
reflectors plinking to life under the glow
of my headlights, me and all the cars
strung along the road like Christmas lights
blinking and shivering in their frosted shells,
how many times have I slipped through
the land like the point of a needle
stitching together the two poles of my life,
dreaming of what waits for me four five six
hours away—sinking my nose into the white
down-soft blanket of my kitten’s fur
or piling onto my roommate’s bed
to share holiday stories—how many hours
has it taken for the two lanes to become
their own world, where north and south
embrace each other in a tangle
that never stops pointing towards home.

Why?

after the sculpture Why? by Richard Hunt

It's definitely a dildo—
three-prongs feeling upwards
and anterior bumps for clitoral stimulation.
The sculptor got cocky, even shaped
the front protrusion into the
pursed-lip kiss of an
unsheathed penis head,
gave the metal a vein
to pump its molten cum
through the arched-up face,
yearning eternally for release.

It has to be a dildo—
why else would the tendrils
curl into the sky searching
for a g-spot? Why else would
the penis gleam its shiny head?
Why else would the cool metal feel
like damp skin brushed with night
from the open window spilling
sex into the air? Why else would the curves
be ribbed for her pleasure? Why else would a man
put his hands on metal and beg it to be supple? This
phallic god is not flesh, not mutable, not penal, but
stoic—a dildo on a nightstand reaching its fingers up
to praise the endless night, singing its penetrating song.

My mother's ring

Sometimes I get cold
and say horrible things.

My mother tells me
hot tea will cool my temper.
So I pour myself a cup, leave it half-
drunk, and let it grow flowers instead.

I shower with my necklace on.
A red reflection within glass:
my best friends from high school dance
in different cities, dressed in each other's clothes.

They're turning
my necklace into a talisman.
I wash the memory away.

But the water stays still,
as it did with the tea.

Too sweet. Drenched in honey,
a tickled tongue remains cold and hungry,
seeking a temporary fix.

Sick from the sticky taste
of permanence.
I still feel unclean.

My mother calls.
"Are you going to leave me now?"

Her ring
of sterling silver, left
to adorn dandelion hands.
They have questions too.

How to hold hunger,
 knowing only warm water.
How to hold still when hanging up the phone,
 letting sand slip through fingers into glass.
How to hold on,
 leaving at last.



Illustration by Lily Speakman

*“Did it please you, your son risen at the end like a question?”
Leila Chatti, “Questions Directed Toward the Idea of Mary”*

Your shadow crashes into mine,
leaving no mark. The clouds weep all day,
then all week. In spite of it all, we have not yet

come undone. My bed is warm. The heat
is yours. I have made such an exquisite corpse
of myself, recumbent and in retrograde, and

you, lover-if-you-let-me, you floor me.
For three years I have not slept. Apple skin
between my teeth, a murderer

despite myself. But now
it’s all you. You, boxing up the tragedy,
sliding it beneath the bed. Your body a bag

of frozen fruit, pressed against the bruise
like a conch shell to my ear. Your shadow
a tourniquet across my abdomen. You,

living sideways with me
in the evenings, your name risen at the end
like Jesus, or a question. How

the shrewd snake of desire
uncoils inside my ribs, makes music, lifts
her lethal rattle—

I AM NOT IN THE RIGHT MIND TO DO GOOD THINGS. THE LITTLE GIRL IS DRIVING THE CAR. GIN SHOOTERS CRUSHED UNDER THE BRAKE PEDAL. SHE KNEW THE BLOOD TOO SOON. THERE'S NO ONE BEHIND YOU. I AM THINKING THE WRONG THOUGHTS. COULD HAVE DONE BETTER, COULD HAVE WAITED, COULD HAVE GONE WITH HIM. GASH IT OPEN. TEAR IT APART. PERITONEAL EXCAVATION, SCRAPING SALVATION. THERE'S ROMANCE IN BRUISED KNUCKLES. "THE YOUNG MAN HAD KILLED HIMSELF, BUT SHE DID NOT PITY HIM." YOU TASTED LOVE AND SPAT IT UP LIKE A CHILD. THROW YOUR TANTRUM, BREAK YOUR TOYS, GOD TOLD ME HE WON'T SAVE YOU. DOESN'T MATTER WHERE YOU WENT, YOU'RE ALREADY GONE. YOU'VE DONE IT, & WILL CONTINUE TO DO IT. WHEN WILL YOU LEARN TO SIT WITH YOURSELF?

***YOU'RE A FUCKED LITTLE THING. YOU
START THINGS YOU NEVER FINISH. LEAVE
BEFORE YOU CAN LOVE. AIM LOW & GET
HIGH. HAPPINESS CAN BE HOTRAILED. 44
TO THE FOOT BUT STILL WHINING ABOUT
THE LIMP. MIND'S A MESS BUT THE ROOM
IS CLEAN. IT'S NOT A PROBLEM IF YOU
DON'T SLAM IT. FUCK THE WORLD, FUCK
YOUR GIRL, FUCK YOUR MOM. YOU FEEL
TOO SHIT TO NOT BE SPECIAL. HOUND
DOG EYES AND TREMBLING HANDS.
FINGERPRINT BRUISES AND A SCARRED
BACK. SHE'S GOT 'BITE ME' WRITTEN ON
HER LEFT THIGH. RUBBING YOUR GUMS
WHEN SHE'S MAKING YOUR TEETH ITCH.
WON'T SAVE YOU BUT AT LEAST LET HER
TRY. THERE'S NO POINT BECAUSE YOU
HAVEN'T MADE ONE. GAMBLING MAN BUT
YOU WON'T BET ON HOPE. HELP YOURSELF
AND CASH OUT. WHAT'S WRONG WITH
YOU?***

**NEVER FORGET THAT YOU ARE BEING
WATCHED. DESECRATION. AN EYE IN THE
KEYHOLE. I AM AN ACTOR IN MY OWN
MEMORIES. I WALK HOME WITH MY HEAD
A FOOT ABOVE MY SHOULDERS. "I WILL
PUNISH HIM AND ESCAPE FROM
EVERYONE AND MYSELF." AND YOU WILL
BE PURCHASED IN PARTS. CUT UP AND
CUT DOWN. BUTCHERED AND PACKED IN
BROWN PAPER AND STRING. A THIGH, A
NIPPLE, A PUERILE KISS—RIPPED AND
RUBBED RAW. THERE IS NOTHING LEFT. I
AM NOT WHOLE. I AM MERELY A HOLE.
THE CORPSE OF A GIRL WALKS IN A
WOMAN. MAGGOTS ON THE MIND.
BLOATED, CORPULENT FLESH. PRETTY
AND PATHETIC. ROTTED BEFORE RIPE.
BRUISED ON THE VINE. FETID CARRION
WITH VULTURES CIRCLING. UNREAL AND
UNSTABLE. CAN YOU EVEN CALL
YOURSELF A PERSON?**

Knots and Teeth

My mother combed my hair at the sink
She was never gentle with the knots
She gripped my scalp and pulled the teeth through
Holding me upright whenever I was yanked back

I comb my hair at the sink too
There is no one to hold me if I am yanked
So I am careful with the knots and teeth
It still feels as if I have been plucked at the root.

Forgive us our trespasses,
wobbling on hands and knees
among red flowers
and broken glass.

The setting sun penetrated
a heavy, sedative atmosphere.
Here, in Death Valley,
the light framed my face
in a halo and I could taste
hot salt hanging in the headwinds.

There was something in the desert,
a mirage at a hundred degrees.
Some pinnacle of silence
toward which our car endlessly
veered in desiccating heat.
We took a scenic route between cliff faces
who loathed our speed
as beings of stasis.

During one of those cherished moments
when time stood still,
in a Denny's off the interstate,
she beat the claw machine.
While I cheered, our companion sneered.
Understand that such moments inform
the choices a jealous man makes.
We returned to the road,
veering toward the pinnacle of silence.

Now I've arrived,
and the only thing I can think about while lying in the ditch
beside them, crucified
by the headlights of our car,
is the burning Santa Ana.
Have you heard about the Santa Ana winds?
Murders rise when they blow.
It's the positive ions
or the heat that makes you mad.

Seemingly without fail,
the heat makes you mad.
Just ask Meursault in jail.

In the car, we were mad,
mad with lust, mad with fear,
a man who screamed, a man who steered
as the double yellow line
swept under our black Ford
like the setting sun's light
bowing to a soft summer night.

There are No Miracle People

There are no miracle people
stripping the haze
from that decadent dusk,
transmuting lead gray skies
through alchemical states
known only to the initiates,
and illuminating the gold nuggets
enlaced in those black satin drapes.

The universe is not vexed
by our attempts to perceive
some general truth behind
our conscious congeries.

Consider this superorganism
on which we stand;
how could enlightenment
fill its alluvial appetite
when our inevitable decay
is what it demands? But

eppur si muove! We are
intrepid explorers searching
for truth. Gilgamesh learned
of the miracle of mortality—
the engine of morality.

There are no miracle people
because no single star
is a miracle compared
to its trillion strong family
drifting in cosmic twilight.

A letter from the fiction board:

Winter quarter has come to an end, and this one was peculiarly gloomy. Usually by the last few weeks, we begin to catch a glimpse of spring, but in March, many Angelenos found themselves startled by a big storm. Some of us shuffled into our weekly meetings a little drenched or with wind-nipped noses, but the rain never stopped our staff from gathering to review the last batch of submissions for our journal.

This round of review was as unpredictable as the weather (thank you climate change), but amidst the whirlwind of stories, our staff was able to pick out a handful that truly shine. From an unpublished piece that was lost during the COVID years ("Where the Bats Go") to flash fiction stories that leave you dazed and confused as to how something so small can be so powerful, this quarter's journal is full of eccentric pieces that will make you wonder what we'll surprise you with next (perhaps "The Surprise" by Maggie Nerz Iribane). So join us on this literary adventure where we will find ourselves pondering life and death, love and loss, and everything in between, and perhaps we will emerge from our journey a little different than we were yesterday.

As always, thank you for indulging us. Thank you for trusting us to take hold of your hand and pull you into a new world that's found within these pages. We hope you enjoy, and happy reading.

Louise Kim and Jules Shinbrot
Executive Fiction Editors

In the end, Hazel saw Jerome a total of eleven times. She had to admit that this was a good number, a solid number. After all, she knew plenty of kids who had met their potential foster parents only once.

It was always a bad feeling getting *failed potentials*, as the kids in the foster home called them. Failed potentials left and never came back, usually after one interview, sometimes after two. They always left sheepishly, vague smiles on their faces, eyes averted on their way out. Digging through purses and twisting watches and clearing their throats, egging each other on with little smiles and nods. Because they were always couples.

Failed potentials always referred to ghosts of engagements. They lingered in the doorstep even as they performed a joint act of mutual deceit.

“We’ll be back soon!”

“We’re so happy to meet you.”

Hello or goodbye, Hazel knew how to spot a bald-faced lie when she saw one.

She’d had her share of failed potentials.

The first thing Hazel noticed about Jerome was that he was alone. He was so tall that he had to stoop to enter the art room and his short, blondish hair stuck up around his ears as if by static. He looked at peace with the chaos, accepting the smeared walls and grubby tables as a matter of course. Hazel waited for a lady to follow, as there inevitably would be, but the only person behind him was Miss Vicki.

So, a single man looking to foster. Miss Vicki shut the door behind her, and the room came to a halt. Emma froze, crayons in hand. Joaquin dropped his glue stick. And beside her, Abby sat stock-still, although her chest rose and fell at an alarming rate. Abby had been the last to receive a failed potential.

Hazel carried on with her paper doll chain. This stranger couldn’t make her stop working. This stranger couldn’t make her do anything. The sound of her scissors gave a satisfying snip snip as she gave the dolls a haircut.

But then Miss Vicki was saying, “Hazel,” and she knew she had to go.

Hazel hadn’t spoken in a long time. It had been a few years, but not even Hazel could remember exactly how long it had been. Miss Vicki had made a big deal

about it at first, taking her to a slew of doctors whose main treatment was making her draw things. “We’ll get you right again,” Miss Vicki had said, and so Hazel was ordered to draw what made her happy. What made her sad. What she dreamt about. Her soul.

Eventually Miss Vicki stopped trying. There had been too many sessions with too little progress. She gave herself permission to quit; dealing with Hazel was just too hard.

Hazel’s silence didn’t prove a problem with the other kids, though. If she wanted something, she’d point. She pointed at pencils, paper, saltshakers, even personal possessions. It got to the point where sometimes all she had to do was look. Abby and Joaquin were pretty good at reading her eye language.

Potentials were a different story, of course. Most of them didn’t like sitting next to a silent kid for an hour. It was unnerving.

Jerome was different.

—

Jerome did not try to speak, or at least, he didn’t speak expecting an answer. After an initial “hello,” he sat next to Hazel and picked up a pair of scissors. He snipped. He cut. He hacked. Hazel watched out of the corner of her eye as the clippings grew more and more detailed, as the mountain of cuttings grew and grew. At the end of the day, Jerome had an elaborate snake chain that he attached to a stick and waltzed around the room.

Jerome’s exit was equally nondescript. He simply swept up all the paper pieces, laid the snake on the table, and said, “I’ll be back tomorrow.”

There was a clamor over the snake once he left. “Give it to Hazel, it’s hers,” Abby argued, but Hazel let Joaquin have it. After all, it was really Jerome’s.

—

Jerome came back often, every day at first, and then a few times a week once they got “comfortable.” “Doesn’t he have a job?” Abby wondered. “Maybe he’s unemployed.”

Hazel shrugged. She didn’t know what he did, nor did she care. Jerome was Jerome was Harold and Cynthia was Theresa and Ivan was Quentin and Maxine and all those who came before. Jerome couldn’t be anything but himself, which was as an adult and a failed potential in the making. His name was inconsequential.

—

On the fifth visit, after Jerome had made so many paper octopi and boats and dragons and spiders that even Joaquin couldn’t keep them all and had allowed some of them to decorate the art room, Jerome beckoned Hazel outside. He was holding a plastic bag, and he sat on one swing while she took the other.

He tore open two cardboard boxes. “Orange or grape?”

Jerome was
Jerome was
Harold and
Cynthia was
Theresa and Ivan
was Quentin and
Maxine and all
those who came
before.

Popsicles. Hazel stared at them.

"I've always liked these," Jerome said. "They come with the little jokes, see?"

When they finished the popsicles, he read his off.

"How many apples grow on a tree?"

He was silent for a bit, so she could think.

"The answer's 'all of them.'"

Hazel did not laugh.

"Well," Jerome said. "They can't all be winners."

That night, Hazel mulled over his words while clutching a paper crane. It was the first craft of his she'd decided to keep for herself.

They can't all be winners...

She hadn't had a winner, at least not yet. But somewhere along the line, she had started thinking of Jerome as a real potential, a potential who might actually mean what he said, keep every promise the others had broken.

She ran her finger along the edge of the wing, sometimes slow, sometimes so fast she risked cutting herself. If Jerome graduated from a potential to an actual, there would be more hellos and goodbyes, see you tomorrow's and good night's, more and more until she got sick of them. But she wouldn't get sick of them and she'd never get sick of them and he couldn't get sick of them because then they'd be family and family meant that you stuck together, paper dolls in a chain, because you were made from the same stuff and you chose to hang on.

For the first time, she realized that just as the visitors had been potential parents to her, she had been a potential child to them. She was *Jerome's* potential.

Had Jerome had failed potentials before? Was she just the most recent in a long line of other children?

Well, she decided, I just have to be the last.

"What does your joke say?" It was the eleventh visit. After learning that Hazel liked orange, Jerome had continued with the popsicles.

Hazel knew that Jerome wasn't really expecting an answer, that he was waiting for her to hand over the stick so that he could read it out loud like every time before. In fact, his hand was already reaching out, unbidden.

But today she felt different. She jerked the stick away and looked at him; really looked at him. His watery eyes were clear but unfathomable, and his hair stuck up around his ears like always. *If we become family*, she thought, *I'll have to tell him about that.*

Jerome looked at her with a quizzical smile.

She opened her mouth. She could imagine the words tumbling down her throat, bursting into the open air, to be accepted or dismissed or ignored; she didn't know and she couldn't know until she tried. But she wanted to try. She wanted to try with him.

But then Miss Vicki was calling him from the doorway.

"Jerome? We can have that talk now."

He got up sheepishly. "I'll be back in a sec."

Hazel waited, tapping the stick against her knee in a dull tattoo. Her heart was still pounding from the close call. The unsaid words seemed to have retreated down her throat and sought refuge in her chest. Her heart ached.

Five minutes passed. Then ten.

After fifteen, Hazel went inside and stood outside Miss Vicki's office.

She was still trying to decide whether to say the joke out loud or not when she heard his voice.



Illustration by Lily Speakman

"I just don't think we're a good match. She hasn't said a word to me since we first met, and she doesn't seem very vocal. I thought that it'd get better with time, but maybe it's like you said. She's just too damaged."

There was a brief silence as Miss Vicki murmured something. After a moment, he responded in the negative.

"It's been three months. Don't you think it's time we end this?"

As they discussed the best way to break it to her, Hazel retreated down the hallway. At the corner, she finally read the back of her popsicle.

What do you call an alligator wearing Crocs?

A traitor.

The next day, Miss Vicki informed her that Jerome was no longer her prospective foster father.

—

Hazel did not go wild with grief. She was not beside herself. For all intents and purposes, she took the news in good faith and allowed both her and Jerome to continue on that elusive search for the "right match."

Thinking back on it to herself, Hazel had to admit that eleven was a good number, a solid number. It was more than a lot of other kids got.

But even so, she would have liked a twelfth.

We sat on the porch watching the sunset. It was late summer, and the nights were getting cooler every day.

"Where do all those bats come from?"

They were out, flapping their leather wings and chirping as they hunted.

"Caves I guess," I pointed at the hills, "up there maybe."

We watched them for a while until it got too dark, and then we just listened.

"Let's be done," I said.

"With what?"

"This place. I don't know about you but I'm feeling ready to quit."

It wasn't quite true, but Angie had been on my back for the last couple years to sell the ranch and move down south, and I was slowly getting used to the idea.

"Are you joking with me, Tom?" She tried to hide her excitement beneath a suspicious glare.

"No ma'am. I've just about had it with these cattle. Let's sell the ranch and move down to St. George."

I'd miss the place. I'd spent nearly my whole adult life working that ranch, but Angie was right. It was time to move on.

She hugged me tightly, and that was that.

I should have sold it years before. I don't know, maybe if I had things wouldn't have gotten as bad as they did. Sitting next to Angie right then things were ok, good even, and it seemed crazy to think how close we'd come to splitting up.

It started with Milli.

I was finally going to box all her things up and put them in the attic. Angie didn't react well when I told her what I meant to do. Hell, she was furious. We had our last big fight, the one where she stormed out of the house and went to stay with her sister up in the city. It's unreal when I think about it now, how angry we both were. At that moment, right after she slammed the door on her way out, I honestly think I hated her. I said something I'd never even thought before; I didn't say it to her face, but once the doorframe stopped shaking, I called my wife a bitch.

I know I can't take it back. It wouldn't be fair even if I could, because I meant it, I really did. Angie clung to our daughter's old things like if she loved them hard enough it would bring her back. She spent every day wallowing, sitting on the bed in our daughter's room, quietly refusing to leave when I tried to get her to come out. I tried to understand, to be patient with her. But after a while, even though I hated myself for it, I just found it pathetic.

Maybe it was selfish, but I couldn't take it anymore. The morning after she left I began to pack up Milli's room.

The first thing I put away was her hairbrush. It was pink with grooves worn into the wood; the paint faded where her fingers had held it. My father had carved it for her and put in the horsehair bristles himself. Milli had loved it, and setting it down in the bottom of the box was maybe the hardest thing I've ever done.

There was her CD player, a present I gave her for her thirteenth birthday and regretted almost right away. It seemed that she had no idea the volume knob went down as well as up, and every day for four years she tested the mettle of those speakers. As I stacked her CD's, I read dozens of unfamiliar band names, wishing I'd gotten to know more about my daughter's favorite music. I couldn't say which was her favorite, or what each one even sounded like.

I rifled through plaid shirts ripped at the elbows, worn jeans ripped at the knees, and T-shirts of some of the same bands as her CDs. One of them, black and ripped sleeveless at the shoulders, had a picture of a grinning demon surrounded by harsh orange flames. I thought it was kinda cool. Angie did not. I'll never forget the look on her face when she saw it for the first time, or the way she had to whisper for two days after shouting herself hoarse in the fight that followed.

Their arguments were fierce but short, like summer thunderheads rolling down off the mountains: miserable while they lasted, but leaving everything clean and fresh in their wake. I'd smile to myself every time Angie wondered aloud where Milli got her attitude from. They were so alike, stubborn and passionate. They'd butt heads harder than two mountain goats, but twenty minutes later you'd think they were best friends instead of mother and daughter. I suppose they had been.

Despite what Angie referred to as her "skater streak," there was no stamping out the cowgirl in Milli. I laughed to see her in the saddle dressed like she did, with torn jeans, baggy shirt and all, but Milli was as at home on horseback as she was on her own two feet. In the spring, as soon as it was warm enough, she'd get up early, saddle Reggie, and spend the whole day out exploring, sometimes not coming back till after dark. Until one day, she didn't come back at all.

I carried the last box up to the attic, and stacked it on top of the others. I took a moment to look at the precarious cardboard tower that held all that was left of my daughter, then turned around and went downstairs.

I know I can't
take it back. It
wouldn't be fair
even if I could,
because I meant
it, I really did.

After a week or so at her sister's, Angie came home and we both apologized. We still almost didn't make it. We'd look at that empty room and see different things, and neither of us could understand what it was the other one saw. But when it came down to it, I still loved her, and she still loved me. We turned the bedroom into a guest room, put up new furniture, and repainted the walls.

As the years passed, Angie and I kept healing, working to bridge the gap that Milli's disappearance had left between us. I went up to the attic every now and then and went through the things I'd put there. Sometimes Angie came with me, but that afternoon in early June not long before the move, I was alone when I heard her calling me from downstairs.

"Tom," she said, "phone, hon."

"Alright, I'll get it up here, one sec."

I climbed down the ladder, went down the hall into our bedroom and picked up the phone.

"Hello?"

"Tom, it's Mitch."

Mitch, our foreman, pretty much ran the place at that point.

"Hey Mitch, what's the bad news?"

"How do you know it's bad?"

"Can hear it in your voice. How bad is it?"

"Well the barn didn't catch fire or nothing, but we just got the herd corralled and we're missing one."

"Which one?"

"One of 'em. I ain't sure which."

"They all look alike, don't they?"

"That they do, Tom."

I smiled. Mitch was a damned good foreman, but he had a lousy sense of humor. We hired him on a few years after Milli had gone missing. We never really talked to him about it. He knew we'd lost our daughter, but just how or to what he was never sure, and he never asked.

"I'll be right out. Probably she stopped off to have a calf."

I went downstairs and found Angie waiting by the door with a sandwich and a bottle of Gatorade.

"Guess you'll have to take lunch to go."

"Guess so," I took the sandwich and stuffed half of it in my mouth in one go, then tried to kiss Angie on the lips.

She laughed and turned away, "Yuck. Swallow your food, Tom!"

I did and took a swig from the Gatorade to wash it down.

"Cow's missing. We'll go see if we can't find her."

"Aren't you glad you won't have to deal with this anymore?" Angie asked.

"Yes ma'am," I nodded, but it wasn't the truth. The closer we got to the sale, the more I realized how much I was going to miss the place.

I kissed Angie, this time without sandwich in my mouth, and promised to be home soon.

I met up with Mitch out at the stables. He'd already saddled up Boxer for me.

"Ready?" he asked.

"As I'll ever be." I swung up into the saddle, though not as easily as I used to.

We rode out to where the herd had been grazing. The spring sun was warm, the breeze was cool, and the valley was vibrant green beneath the charcoal thunderheads that loomed over the grey, snow-capped mountains. Mitch was good to ride with, quiet by nature, and he never forced any small talk. I thought about Milli. It had been almost eight years since she disappeared.

I'd seen her that morning, going out to saddle Reggie. I'd waved and she'd waved back and called something out to me that I couldn't make out. So, I just waved again, and she'd gone into the stables. I've always wondered what she said, and what might have gone differently if I'd heard it.

What if she'd said, "Hey Dad, want to come riding with me?" Then I'd have been with her, and whatever it was that had happened maybe wouldn't have happened. But I'd gone back inside to take care of something that had seemed important in the moment. I didn't even see which way she went.

That was the most frustrating thing about it. The not knowing. If we'd have found her body we'd have some kind of peace, but we never did. By the time we got around to looking it was almost dark. It had rained, and there was no sign, no tracks on the ground. For the next three days we searched the whole property a dozen times over. Every time we started a new sweep I'd wrack my brain, trying desperately to think of some nook, some space I might have overlooked, but it was no use. We could only guess what had happened.

If she'd got bit by a rattler she would have started home, and we'd at least have found her body and horse. If she'd tried to cross the river and gotten swept away and drowned, she'd have turned up down by the dam. We even checked the canyons to see if she'd fallen down a chute or rockslide, but we still didn't find her.

Maybe she just up and took off. That's what I'd always hoped for, even though it hurt to think she'd do such a thing. Still, a kid couldn't just run off without a trace like that, horse and everything. She hadn't taken any supplies or camping gear.

That was the most
frustrating thing
about it. The
not knowing. If
we'd have found
her body we'd
have some kind
of peace, but we
never did.

So, unless she'd buried her horse and started hitching down to Mexico, she probably hadn't run away.

I prayed every day that she hadn't been snatched up by someone. That's what the authorities said had probably happened. The thought of it made me sick, and I didn't like to dwell on it. She knew better than to trust a stranger, and certainly nobody from town would do such a thing. I refused to believe that someone she knew and trusted had lured her off and hurt her or worse.

But there was no trace of her. We never found a single clue.

Mitch brought us up to the field where the herd had spent the day grazing. It was at the very edge of our property, and a barbed wire fence ran along the far side. The afternoon was getting on and the sun was at our backs, over halfway down to the horizon.

"Think she got through the fence?" Mitch asked, pointing to the other side of the field.

"Don't know why she'd try," I shrugged, "Still, I guess it bears looking."

On the other side of the fence was a shallow ravine with a wash at the bottom that nearly overflowed with spring runoff this time of year.

"Maybe she was thirsty."

"Maybe."

We crossed the field at a walk looking around for the missing cow. We were halfway to the fence when Mitch suddenly reared up and hollered, "Woah!" His horse bucked some and rose up on its hind legs before settling down.

"What's the matter?" I called over.

"Hell, Tom, you'd better come look at this."

"It ain't a rattler is it?"

"No, it sure ain't."

"What is it?"

"It's a hole."

And that it was. I rode up next to where Mitch sat, followed his gaze down to the ground, and there it was. It was big, rectangular, maybe eight feet long by six across. The grass grew right up to the edges which were lined with broken and rotting planks. The hole laid in a small depression in the field, so that if you were any further away than where our horses stood, you'd miss it.

We were looking at an old mineshaft. I knew there were thousands of them across the state, and plenty of them down where we were. Still, I'd never known we had one on our land.

"Think she fell in?"

I thought that yes, she had. I got down off my horse and walked slowly to the edge.

"Fetch me down a flashlight, would you?"

Mitch dug one out of his saddle bag and passed it down to me. I shone the beam into the black hole. It went a ways and then faded.

"See the bottom?"

I shook my head.

Mitch dismounted and squatted beside me. He dug a rock loose from the earth and dropped it in. It was some time before we heard it hit bottom. It was that sound that did it for me, and suddenly it was hard to stand.

"Well I guess we know what happened to her." Mitch started to dig loose another rock, but I stopped him.

"I guess so."

The world slowed. I felt dizzy, like I'd been spinning in circles for years and had just now stopped to try walking a straight line.

"Reckon a drop like that would kill her?"

"Yeah. Unless maybe something underneath her broke her fall."

"Like what?"

"A horse maybe."

"A horse? You alright Tom? You sound kind of funny."

I wasn't sure how I sounded, but Mitch sounded miles away. I just stared at that hole.

"Just give me a second."

How long had this been here? A hundred years? A hundred and fifty? How long since they'd stripped everything they wanted from inside and boarded it up? I'd owned this land for almost thirty years myself, and I'd never seen it. I only came out to this field once or twice a year, and when I did, I just sat on my horse watching the herd graze.

I scooted towards the edge and lay flat on my stomach.

"Christ Tom, what are you doing?"

I reached in as far as I could with the flashlight and squinted into the black. No bottom in sight. I think I'd started crying, because I was shaking, and the flashlight slipped out of my fingers and fell down the dark shaft.

It spun end over end, and I saw flashes of grey craggy walls as it fell. Walls that hadn't ever felt the touch of sunlight, walls that led down to the deep part of the planet where eyeless beasts ate each other in the blackness and where nobody knew them. Down there they lived in endless caverns carved out inch by inch over the endless years by the steady drip of water. Then it hit the bottom and went dark with the echo of breaking glass. I felt Mitch pull me up and shake me gently.

"Tom, come on, let's go. If she fell in there there's nothing for it. Let's just go on back."

He was right. I took a last look at the cavern and shakily climbed into the saddle.

The sun was half hid by the edge of the earth and sinking fast when we got back. Mitch offered to put up Boxer in the stable so I could get home. I walked up to the house and Angie was waiting on the porch. She smiled at me. It was the smile of knowing that soon we'd be somewhere far away from this place, a hopeful smile that comes from knowing that you get to start over.

"Hi hon, did you find her?"

"Nope." I sat down and leaned against her.

We watched the sun sink over the hills. A cloud of bats rose against the blood red sky, wheeling, snatching insects from the twilight.

My father once told me a story about him jumping out of a burning building. He was working late when an electrical fire spread to the fourteenth floor—really the thirteenth floor, changed for good luck—trapping him alone in the office.

I can't remember him ever describing the smoke, but he always was a calm and logical man who thought on his feet, so I imagine him staying low to the ground, taking in what oxygen he could in the tent of his shirt while he called for help.

But the phone line was out, he said, I do remember that, and that the fire started below, making the stairs and elevator out of the question, so my father opened the window and caught one last breath of clean air before the draft pulled the flames across the carpet, cornering him against the back wall. The heat shut his eyes for him, and when they shut he saw red. It lasted no more than a second, just long enough to hear the ceiling collapse and lights crash to broken glass. It was the sound of an alarm that nobody heard.

And then it happened. My father climbed out the window. He didn't think about it. It's alright to do something scary without thinking, he said. Not when thinking is burning you. Not when it's your only way out.



For years, I couldn't pass a building without picturing my father clinging to the side of it. The only thing separating him from a hundred foot drop was a pair of size tens on a five inch sill, wicks for laces. It wasn't until his suicide that I realized the story wasn't true. My father was simply trying to explain his life before taking it.

Make no mistake, there is a terror in falling from a great height. The fear is constant. But it's nothing compared to the flames.

The high school gymnasium smell is pungent—sweat mixed with smuggled alcohol, too much cologne, and cheap floral perfume. A blanket of hot muggy air settles on my skin as I stand in the doorway of the building, near the line of dressed-up kids that are waiting for the uncomfortably warm water fountain outside. I scratch the back of my head awkwardly and sigh as a couple stops holding hands to walk past me. I find my way to an empty space at the wall, settling next to a black leather bag with a pair of sparkly high heels peeking out from underneath. I start to scan the room for who it might belong to, but my eyes meet Maggie’s and I forget all about it.

She’s standing near the punch table in a black tux that looks like it was made specifically for her. Her aura makes me forget about all the heartbreak and just melt like lava. Her short brown hair is curled and framing her face like the perfect picture. Her blue eyes are glittering spots amid a fog of black eyeshadow, like explosions of supernovas in deep space. My heart seems to thump louder than the shitty music and all the voices in the room.

I can’t stop myself from walking towards her, weaving through couples and friends. I mutter apologies to the people I accidentally brush against. I stare at the floor for a long time, but when I look up again I realize that she never looked away from me.

One of her hands is wrapped around a red plastic cup, which she takes a sip from before she speaks. “I’m shocked, Cal.”

I swallow hard. “Why?”

She doesn’t say anything. She just stares at me with an unreadable expression that makes my stomach twist. I say, “I’m shocked, too.” She doesn’t act like she wants to know why.

“You never wear makeup,” I added after a while.

She scoffs. “I’m full of surprises, then.” She raises her eyebrow in the most menacing way possible. “Just like you!” Faux sweetness. I might throw up.

My gaze drifts back to the sea of students, all dancing and crashing into each other like waves. I feel like a ship going down.

I speak as softly as I can. “I’m sorry, Maggie.”

“No, you’re not. You can’t even look at me.” I turn to face her and she shakes her head, cutting me off before I can reply. “I bet you don’t even want to stand next to me, do you? I bet you don’t.” Another sip. “You better stay away from the fag, right? Wouldn’t want anyone to see you.”

I want to tell her that she was wrong. I tried to speak with my eyes but I don't think that she gets the message because she flips me off and walks away.

Wouldn't want anyone to see you. Her words haunt me all the way to the bathroom sink. I ran the icy water over my hands, which I didn't realize were shaking until just now. Pathetic. I turn off the sink and cradle the back of my neck with clammy palms. My life feels like a bad dream. I want a pinch or the freezing water to wake me up. A slap in the face. A cut. Anything.

I rest my hands against the graffitied mirror. Hearts with random initials in them frame my face. I wonder how many of them are broken up, if any of them are still in love or ever were. I wonder if any of the hearts contain people like me and Maggie. If any of the hearts contain people like me and Ty.

Wouldn't want anyone to see you.

I don't even want to see me. I want every mirror I'll ever encounter again to be opaque. I tug down at my long blue dress sleeves that are starting to rise up, wishing that I could hide my face in the dress too. Footsteps fill the hallway to the bathroom, melding with the sound of a slow song. I duck into a stall to avoid both. Two girls plant themselves in front of the mirrors, rifling through their bags and speaking in hushed voices.

One of them groans in utter exasperation. It must be a fantastic inconvenience. "I forgot my lipstick. Can I use yours?"

"Yeah, sure." More shuffling sounds. "Here. But don't go overboard. I know how you are."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It just means don't make yourself look like a clown."

"Wow, okay. Fuck you."

"Okay, chill out. You just overline your lips a little too much sometimes. Sorry. For the record, though, nobody would even notice if you did. We all know who everyone's looking at tonight." They both start laughing. My stomach sinks.

"Can you believe that tux? I mean Jesus. What a joke."

"I can't even believe she had the balls to do that."

"Do you think she wishes she had balls? Like . . .?"

"Oh my God, ew." More laughter. "Do all dykes want that?"

I make my hands into fists, knowing that I won't hit anyone with them. This way it's almost like I'm doing something. I imagine busting open the stall door and grabbing one of them by her stiff, product-doused hair and sticking her face in the toilet like a bully in a movie. I get so caught up in my violent fantasy that by the time I snap out of it, they're already gone.

Once a faster song begins to play, I step out of the bathroom and back into the suffocating gym air, back to the classic smell of youth that makes me want to gag. As I wipe the sweat from my forehead, I feel a hand on my arm.

I don't even want
to see me. I want
every mirror I'll
ever encounter
again to be
opaque.

"Callie," Ty says. His blond hair is gelled back in an obviously meticulous way, not a stray strand in sight. He even has a handkerchief to match his tie. I know that he looks handsome. All the girls here would think so. "I've been looking for you." I try to smile, and he's not Maggie so he buys it. He beams. "Wanna dance?"

"Let's do it." He takes my hand and I look down. Our hands don't fit like two hands are supposed to fit together.

He takes me to the dance floor and the night begins to swirl away as if down a drain. Song after song, touch after touch. Ty dances freely, he's oblivious to the thoughts ringing in my ears again and again. He doesn't know the way I feel about our hands.

"I love being with you," he whispers into my ear as he holds me. "I feel like I've known you for so long, Callie."

"Me too," I say, but all I know is that it's easy to lie to him

The worst of all the music is the slow songs, and I was stupid to think that I'd escaped them. A slow beat starts playing, one that I can feel throughout my entire body. Ty smiles at me, this horrible, loving smile, and I give him one back.

We do not dance steadily. I am shaky and uncomfortable and nearly trip over his big shoes. I can feel his hands trying to travel from my waist. I can't bear looking at him so I press my head against his chest and stare at a dim corner of the room. But I don't know if looking there is worse than looking at him because I can see a ghost of Maggie there—the old Maggie, who was back before I ruined things, back when she used to wear her hair in a ponytail and smile.

She had limped all the way to that corner of the gym, right up to the little radio that our coach always played when we had to exercise inside all day because of the rain. But this was a sunny day and the whole team was outside practicing, except for us two. Maggie had fallen down out there and asked the coach to let me come to the nurse's office with her. Maggie told me that she had just needed to grab the bag she had left in the gym, and then we could go to the office. She bent down next to the radio and started fiddling with its dials.

"That doesn't look like a bag," I said.

She paused, squinting at me and then at the radio before gasping loudly. "By Jove! This must be wizardry! Someone has transformed my bag and all my schoolwork into a radio!"

She watched me try to fight a smile, then watched me fail. She smiled back.

"What are you doing?" I asked. "Don't you need to see the nurse?"

She adjusted the collar of her beat-up gym shirt as if it was a necktie and stood up. Music filled the room quietly, the little metal box whispering a song that I had never heard before but loved immediately. She began to slowly walk towards me, without the limp. "I think this song would make flowers bloom," she said faintly.

It felt like I had to pry my eyes away from hers to look at her leg, even for just a moment. "You lied," I said. "Your leg is just fine."

She looked offended. "You thought I'd really fall down in kickball, Cal? I'm not clumsy." She shook her head. "I'm not like you," she teased. A goofy grin began spreading across her face again, and I felt my skin suddenly warm like when clouds move away from their place in front of the sun.

"Oh, shut up." I pushed her gently. My hands felt like they were glowing, like they had absorbed some light from touching her.

"Only if you shut up too, okay?" She winked before she held out her hands to me.

I looked at her in disbelief and felt my hands start to tremble, but I placed them in hers anyway. And they fit perfectly. She put them around her neck; hers went around my waist. She pulled me towards her, closer than we had ever been before. We danced so slowly, as if we were trying to prevent time from ever moving past this moment. She kissed me before the song ended, and her lips were even softer than I had imagined. It was the first kiss of many; all of the rest were like this, with nobody else there. Hidden behind buildings. In the dead of night. Behind closed bedroom doors, but not locked doors, because the click of a lock was too suspicious for me. Not for her.

There was so much lingering after practice in this room. So many kisses in corners when we were left alone. She would walk into the gym next to me every day, right beside our teammates who thought that they knew us. I wouldn't hold her hand, but I'd walk as close as I could. I wonder if she knows that. It was as close as I could with her.

With Maggie, the whole world slowed down. Whenever she would look at me with her shimmering blue eyes, there would be a warmth that would grow in my chest. She would always find some way to tease me on my little quirks during practice. Maggie had a mystery about her that intrigued me. She was always passionate to me and that's why it hurts me even more so when everyone found out about her.

When they found out about her, I closed my eyes to try and escape the image of her all alone in practice. Everyday I try to forget the way that she looked at me, desperately wanting me to just be there, close to her —but I was afraid to even seem like her friend. I cling harder to Ty, feeling dizzy. When I open my eyes, I see her again, this time standing in the doorway. Present day her, the girl with the tux and the sad look in her eyes that cuts me up.

She still wants me to show up; I can see it in her face. She still loves me, even though she doesn't want to and definitely shouldn't. I don't feel like I deserve it. Despite all the heartbreak I have caused, she still loves me.

I know what she wants me to do: pull away from Ty and come to her. Right there, to the doorway so we could walk out of this place together. She wouldn't even expect me to kiss her.

"I'm so sorry," I mouth.

I wouldn't hold
her hand, but I'd
walk as close as I
could. I wonder if
she knows that.
It was as close as I
could with her.

She melts into the doorway, watching me sway with him. My eyes well up and I blink the tears away. She’s the only one who sees them, tears for her and no one else.

The song is nearly over when she turns away and walks out of the building. The night that absorbs her is black and endless. I do not follow her, but I can almost feel the air on my skin too.

The bone fields sit in the middle of the country, amongst the deserts and the canyons, where the days are hot and the nights are frigid. The bone fields stretch for miles, and once they were plentiful, but over the years the bones have been stolen, leached from their resting places. Is it really a grave if the bodies are left out in the open? If the graves are not for something one can recognize?

Skulls the sizes of watersheds, rib cages as large as a house. How grand a skeleton. What could have possibly been the beast to slay them? Or was there none, and one day, a great titan sat in the desert to admire a unique sunset, and never got up again. Perhaps there is something powerful in the sands, something that could lull a giant into death.

Or maybe it is a simple truth of the world, that there is something grand, and then, just like that, it is gone, and life goes on.

My sister loves the bone fields. Each night, she sleeps to videos about them, scientists using words too big for her brain to lull herself to sleep. I lay there beside her on the bed, fingers tangled in the sheets until I hear her breaths deepen and I reach over her small body to turn the video off. She never gets to the end.

I decide to take her to the bone fields on a whim. Her mother is away, somewhere, with the vague promise of returning eventually, and our father is here, but not, only ever looking at us with a strange film over his eyes. My mother? She has always been gone. Better to leave on our own accord, before we are left again.

We drive, or rather, I drive, and she sits in the passenger's side and we sing each other's songs. The AC is broken, and has been for years. The landscape we pass is all dried out trees and barren fields. The earth is scorched, and it has been for a while. It is all my sister knows, though I can vaguely recall green springs, downpours of water from the sky that lasted for days, weeks, and then it fell away, shortening and shortening until there was no water from the sky. There is no green, not here, just the yellow rolling hills, the jagged desert. No matter, there is beauty in this barrenness. Life goes on.

Just like the rains, we were not always this way. There was a time, oh, how many years ago, when the AC worked, and we had our own beds, and our own lives. Something happens when a second child is born, a splitting, a severance. There is an extra mouth to feed, more money to spend, there is what is possible before the second child, and what is possible after the second child, and they

are seldom the same. And since my sister came so long after me, our parents were already tired, already old. She was folded into me, like an extra limb.

Even far from home, we are still attached, like conjoined twins. At a gas station somewhere in the desert, when the sun is small and pale behind a thick layer of smog, a lady asks me, "She yours?" Her lips are cracked from the dryness, so are mine. Her breath wheezes like someone who spends a regular amount of time smoking.

"My sister," I tell her, as the little girl flits from candy aisle to candy aisle, perusing the options like this is all she could have ever wanted. She is still mine, but that's not what the lady is asking me.

"Huh," the lady says when my sister pushes a bundle of lollipops onto the counter next to my bottle of water. "She looks like an Asian version of you. One of your parents has strong genes."

My sister and I look at each other for a second, she is young, but even children recognize patterns. I pay the lady and thank her and we walk out as wind blows dust across the empty road.

"Why are you not an American version of me?" She asks me as she climbs inside the old car.

"I don't know. Why don't you ask them?"

She laughs. She has asked this before. I start the car, and it sputters and rumbles as the engine turns back on. We keep driving. We find a radio station we like and keep singing.

The car I drive is my mother's car, a relic, a grave, something left over from a life I will never remember. When I was my sister's age, I would climb inside and rifle for signs of a life, old receipts, old clothes, always, always old. We drive into the night and my sister's eyes droop, and the radio stations don't play anything but religious music out here where the drought is the worst and all people have is faith.

We stop at a motel on the road, there are nothing but vacancies, at night, we play the video on the bone fields on the small screen of my phone. She doesn't make it to the end, neither do I. We both fall asleep to the drone of the voices. Knowledge of the bone fields. The skeletons in the sands, how they keep getting stolen. Where do they go? It doesn't matter. Life goes on.

We walk around the dusty street before getting back in the car the next morning. I need to charge my phone. The town, if it has a name, has been swallowed too by the heat, and the desert, but the town does not know this yet. Piles of sand line the edges of the street, clouds of dust swirl in a tunnel down the main street when the winds shift.

We buy a new set of pencils at a general store, and I push a display turnstile of postcards, listening to how the sand creaks in the rusted metal. I don't buy much else, we get breakfast and both order from the kids menu. Gas is expensive enough.

We both fall
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The skeletons in
the sands, how
they keep getting
stolen.

We will reach the bone fields soon. At least, that’s what I say to appease her as she stretches out in the backseat, her pencils on the floor, her skinny limbs strewn across the cracked leather.

“How soon?” She asks.

“Why don’t you get up here and drive?” I retort, but then grubby hands are clawing at me from behind, and she squirms her way in between the seats. No one’s on the road, so I let her worm her way into my lap and put her hands under mine on the steering wheel. I rest my chin on the top of her head, her hair is still ever-soft. She has my hair, turning into thick waves past her chin, a soft brown, the color of the bark of the old tree in front of our house. Our eyes the same color. But she has her mother’s round face, and large eyes, so wide, so curious, too curious.

“There is so much out there in the world,” her mother once said to me. “Don’t you think?” My sister was on her lap, bouncing up and down, her fingers tangled in her mouth. “I think I want to go to the sea. The air is so clear there, and it’s nice and cool.”

“She’ll love the sea,” I agreed, but her mother looked confused.

“Oh no, she’ll stay with your dad. Babies don’t even understand travel. Better for her to stay here for now. We’ll go on many trips when she’s older.” My sister reached out to her mother’s black straight hair, to pull, wrap her small hands around the strands. Her eyes so wide, just like her mother’s. Life goes on.

At night, in another small motel room, neither of us sleep. Our minds are too awake. I braid her unruly hair back into two braids, which she likes better than just the one.

“I miss Māma,” she says quietly.

“She misses you too,” I tell her, even though I’m never sure it’s true. I keep braiding her hair, turning the strands together. “I miss my mom too.” Which isn’t true either. It’s hard to miss something you never knew, who never knew you.

“You have a mom?” She asks me, bewildered.

I laugh, because this is what she always does. Forgets. I wonder when it will start to grate on me, this forgetting. When it no longer is childlike and is just cruel. “Yes.”

“Can I meet her?”

“No, she’s gone. I can’t meet her either.”

“Oh.”

She goes quiet, and I pull a hair tie from my wrist and wrap it around the ends of the second braid. “All done,” I tell her. She climbs into my lap.

We will reach
the bone fields
soon. At least,
that’s what I say
to appease her as
she stretches out
in the backseat,
her pencils on the
floor, her skinny
limbs strewn
across the cracked
leather.

"Can we watch my video?"

I stretch to turn out the lights, we get under the covers. The sheets smell like starch, and our bodies smell like cheap soap.

As it plays, I whisper into her hair, "we'll be at the bone fields tomorrow. Are you excited?"

But she is already asleep. Life goes on.

—

We drive to the bone fields in the morning, and stop for gas just once. Another lady comments on our familiarity. Where's the dad from? She asks. Twenty minutes down the road, I lie. My sister laughs when we go outside. This is a game to her.

"Dad's not here, dad's back home," my sister says in a sing-song voice as the door shuts.

"That he is," I confirm, starting the engine.

We get out onto the highway again, each of us staring out the windshield. She asks me, "Do you think he's worried we're gone?"

"Oh, I'm sure," I tell her, but I don't look away from the windshield. It's hard to look at her when I lie.

We keep driving.

—

The bone fields are protected by metal fences, topped with barbed wire. We have to park outside, and walk. I can feel the rocks through the thin soles of my feet. She holds my hand as a security guard ushers us through the gate. She

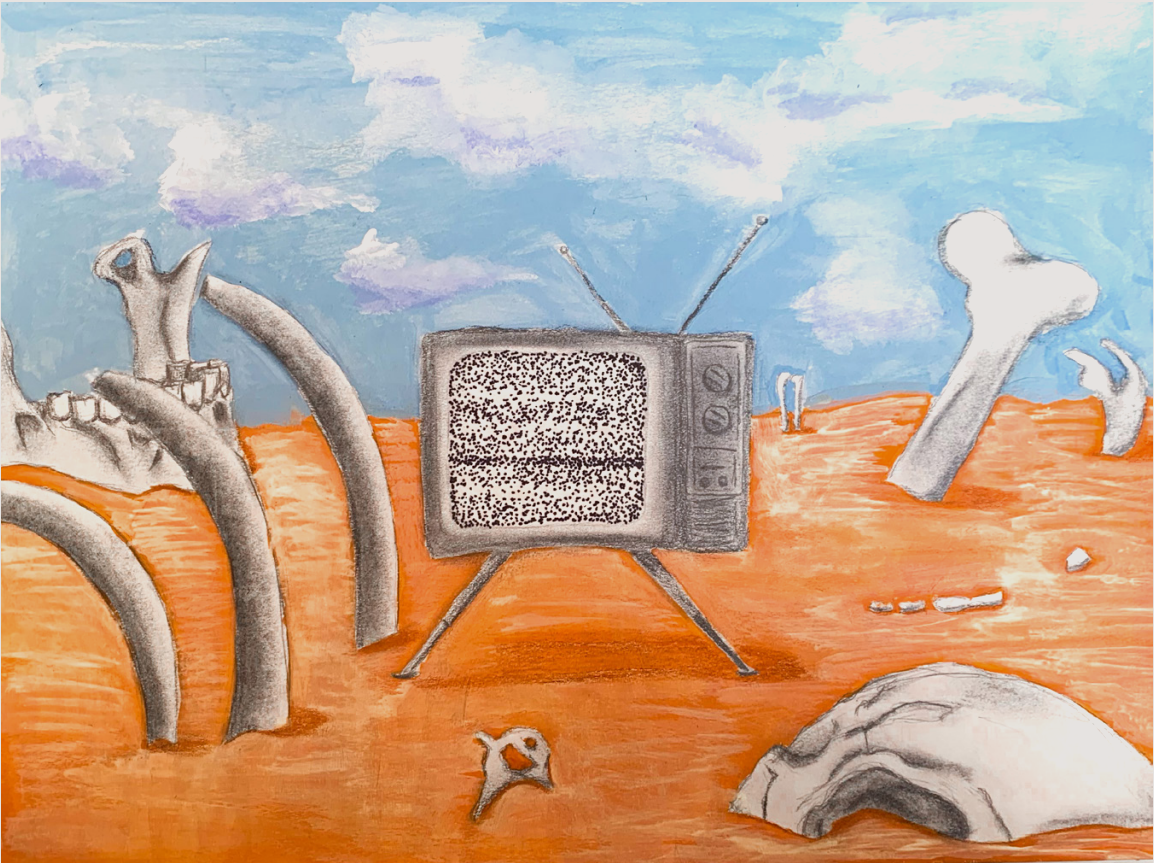


Illustration by Jillian Cantu

doesn't start talking until he's far behind us, until everyone else but us are gone. We walk through the thin barrier, and then, we step outside.

The sun seems harsher somehow, the sand is a salty white, but when I look up, I see why the sand is stained this way. We walk a ways down the beaten path, watched by men with snipers in large towers.

The bones are larger than my sister, larger than me, larger than the bones of whales and dinosaurs. They're thick and long. The ribs stick out from the sand like ivory towers, stretch to the sky, curve into each other. Its spine is made from the earth itself, covered in grains long shifted over. There are signs not to touch it, but still, my sister reaches out a hand, and then traces her hand upward until she can't touch the bones anymore, but still she traces her hand in an arc over the ribcage. Then she pulls her shirt up, and marvels, trailing her fingers around her own ribs. She looks up to the skeleton with wide eyes.

I expect her to ask me if she will get that big, if she drinks enough milk and eats all her eggs. It's a question I would've asked. But she doesn't.

She takes my hand without me reaching for it, letting her shirt fall back down. "How did they die?"

"No one knows," I tell her. "Meteor, probably, like the dinosaurs."

"They would've been taller than the clouds, that's what the video says," she says firmly. "They would've stopped the meteor."

I smile. "You can't stop a meteor, it's a meteor. You can't stop everything, no matter how big you are."

Her grip on my hands gets tighter, her lips press together like she's bitten off more than she can chew. Then she grips tight to my legs and buries her face in my stomach. I pull her up into my arms, she wraps her legs tight around my torso. I keep staring at the bones, look further down, and see the fractured skull, broken in, shattered. So reminiscent of humanity.

I stroke my sister's hair. I don't say anything, I just look, I just watch. I see how far the remaining skeletons stretch out around the space, how the bones have dissolved from time and weather, how they turn to the grains of stone I stand on.

"I don't want you to turn into bones," my sister tells me, her tears wet on my neck. "Jiě jie," she moans. "Promise me you won't go."

I look from the bones, from the desert fields around us, I pull her head back, press my forehead into hers, make her eyes look just at mine. She's still crying, tears running down her cheeks. "Where would I go, Mèi mei?" She knows my pronunciation is bad, and it earns a smile. "Where would I go that you would not follow?"

She's still crying, latching onto my back, chin on my shoulder as we walk down the path. The sun is setting, and the fields are meant to close but maybe they let us stay out of pity, maybe they know that there is nowhere for us to run, so we walk amongst the bones. We get to the top of the highest hill, and we look down

The ribs stick out
from the sand
like ivory towers,
stretch to the sky,
curve into each
other.

at the skulls, the ribs, the kneecaps, bent and cracked bones littered across the fields, too entrenched in the stone below to be stolen. The sun sets, turning it all to red and purples and then— to soft and dark blues cloaking all of us.

My sister puts her head to the side, still on my shoulder, her tight grip has slackened. My arms are tired. She is tired.

“Are you done?” I ask her.

“I don’t want to leave,” she says quietly. “I like them. They are sad.”

“We can come back,” I tell her. “They will always be here.”

She concedes. I let her fall from my arms, and walk through the fields to the barrier, and then through the guards to the parking lot. The car rumbles to life. She falls asleep in the backseat, sprawled out in the night heat. The bones shrink to nothing behind us, but they are there. Always there.

Life goes on.

Rebecca had not thought of surprises when she packed her bag. Her splayed-open suitcase lay hungry on the bed, accepting her most comfortable clothes: brown leather sandals, tee shirts, flowy floral skirts. She envisioned vacation Rebecca to be opposite of Pennsylvania Rebecca. Vacation Rebecca would be relaxed, unworried.

At work, she daydreamed of Will’s hand on her waist or at the back of her slightly sweaty neck. She pictured him tugging off her clothes, carrying her naked to bed. She would often lose her place while reading at story hour, stare at bookshelves instead of searching for the specific title she needed, and frequently retreat to the bathroom to splash cold water on her flushed face.

This was Will’s idea, a trip to celebrate their one year dating anniversary. Rebecca had never been anywhere, besides Philadelphia, the Jersey shore. Her parents withheld, she knew, their resistance. She’d only told them the bad things about Will, none of the good things. It was her fault that her parents did not like Will.

“It’s okay if he’s cheap, but not mean cheap,” her mother said after Rebecca shared a slight concern about Will’s stinginess.

“No, he’s never *mean*,” Rebecca lied.

Once at the airport, on the plane, in the taxi, things were not as smooth as Rebecca fantasized. Will had a migraine, a problem which could cause any number of altercations. He snapped at the luggage carousel, angry that Rebecca had missed his bag. He criticized her for over-tipping the bellhop at the hotel.

“I was a waitress once,” Rebecca muttered.

While Will slept off his headache, Rebecca went to the bar, scribbled a pro and con list on a napkin. She padded the pros with small things he did in the beginning, like when he spontaneously bought a bouquet of carnations at the supermarket when they stopped in for a six pack. That gesture withered at the other memories, like when he refused to pay for dinner, knowing she’d forgotten her wallet. Or when he left her in the train station alone at midnight. What about the time he asked her if she was embarrassed by her morning bed head? But each time he would apologize, tell her how much he loved her, beg her to forgive him, and each time she would acquiesce. Rebecca put down her pen, covering her eyes with both hands.

“Becca?” Will appeared beside her, stunning in a suit and tie. “Why are you crying?”

“I-I-I’m just so happy to be here,” she said.

“Good, because I’m about to make you happier,” he said, kneeling down on one knee. The other customers in the bar immediately shifted, creating a space around the couple. Rebecca, perched on her barstool, her heart pounding in her chest, beheld Will, whose upturned face shone in the manufactured light.

Rebecca rose from bed, this time leaving Will sleeping off his hangover. She thought of calling her parents to tell them their news, but decided later would be better, maybe at dinner, after a few drinks. She approached the closet, unenthusiastically surveyed the skirts lined up on the rack.

The ring Will gave her the night before sat unwieldy, out of proportion on her slender finger. The band constricted, grasped. She attempted to twist it off, but it refused her tugs and pulls.

Half-dressed, Rebecca sat on the bed. She told herself how beautiful, how special it was for Will to propose in this way, without giving the slightest hint, a total surprise. She imagined the story she would repeat to all her friends, coworkers, her parents. The band was too tight, but she knew it could easily be fixed, and nothing was ever perfect, anyway.

An ironic thought occurred to Wade. Insofar as his lifelong goal, preoccupation, and destiny has been getting into a top-tier college, the first real “challenge, setback, or failure” he’s experienced—the sort of obstacle Common App essay prompt #2 asks you to recount—is this rejection letter from Brown University. He walked upstairs, closed the office door, logged into his email on the family iMac, and read the disappointing news.

He applied to Brown “early decision” back in November, which was binding but had a higher acceptance rate than “regular decision.” Generally, the higher a college’s acceptance rate, the less Wade wanted to go there. He wanted to attend a selective and therefore prestigious school. He wanted to attend the highest-ranked school on U.S. News and World Report he could get into. He wanted to be selected. Of all the Ivy League schools, Wade thought he had the best shot at getting into Brown. It’s one of the lowest ranked Ivys, and he thought the school might extend their trademark liberal open-mindedness to his own application. Maybe they might even be open to him.

“My ED Setback,” Wade wrote in 12-point Times New Roman. He centered it at the top of a blank Google Doc and realized that in addition to “early decision,” ED could also stand for “erectile dysfunction” or “eating disorder.” But the real irony was that now, as he started writing a new personal statement for the rest of the colleges on his list—applications which were due in two weeks time—he could finally write about a major failure: his rejection from a different university than theirs. Brown was a “dream school” for him, a category distinct from “target schools” and “safety schools.”

It was prompt #2 Wade felt he needed to write. The rest of his application reeked of privilege: straight white male from a Pasadena private school who played water polo and, besides working as a lifeguard in the summertime, interned at a law office whose firm name uncoincidentally shared his surname. This was as it stood, at least. Things could change before New Years, when the regular decision applications were due. He could experience a challenge, setback, or failure. He could break out of his sheltered upbringing. He could suffer.

He would try to become a more interesting, mature person or if nothing else, he knew who to text to put his straightness into question. Over the summer, Wade started spending more time with his friend David from the water polo team, the first kid in their grade to come out as gay. They would get breakfast at this diner in Eagle Rock and head to a park, Barnsdall or Everett, to look at the city and smoke spliffs and talk about life. David wanted to study English and said he would be grateful to attend any university he got into, but his dream school was Kenyon, which had one of the best creative writing departments in the country.

He believed in literature—in artistic symbols, not status symbols. By the end of August, sitting on the grass beside David, Wade began to question his sexuality. Maybe if he made the leap into physical territory with his friend, Wade could write his Common App essay on being gay in the heteronormative environment of a private school.

And he took a 23andMe genetics test at the start of winter break. The impetus for this 23andMe would have been his dad’s coworker Paul’s testimonial—Paul’s daughter took the test and found she was 11% Cherokee and checked the “American Indian or Alaska Native” box and got into Yale—had Paul not told the story so shamelessly. Wade ordered it after his friend Dean said he was leaving for a students of color diversity fly-in program to tour Dartmouth.

“Diversity?” Wade asked. “Because you’re British?”

“No,” Dean said. “My grandpa was Nigerian. Hold on.” Dean looked through photos on his phone until he pulled up a fuzzy picture of an old black man. “My dad’s dad. The rest of my family are British whites, but that’s him. My grandpa.”

“Colonization?”

“Yeah.”

Wade thought it couldn’t hurt to discover his origins, whether or not it helped him get into college. He’d heard stories of far shadier measures: D1 soccer recruits with photoshop who’d never kicked a ball in their life; sexual favors for work-study interviewers in Swarthmore’s arboretum; immigration attorneys trading Chinese immigrants legal representation for a 1580 on their kid’s SAT. Wade didn’t want to lie or cheat, but he recognized there were parts of himself that, if he could change, he would have a better shot at getting into college. Yes, he would will himself to change. And it wasn’t just his identity. He knew that if he could experience a real challenge, setback, or failure in the next two weeks, he would have a compelling story to write for his Common App personal statement. He could suffer. Yes, he would will himself to suffer. He could get into an Ivy League school and go “back east.” It had been his father’s dream.

The father in the sunlight: “You’ll go back east.” The grass is visible through the office’s octagonal window. Wade is the boy who kneels in the grass, pinches the roots of weeds and pulls. The father watches his kid hunched over the soil that lines the edges of the yard. “Harvard, Yale. You’ll meet your wife. You’re only seven, eight—how old are you?” Pretending he didn’t know the age of his sons (Wade and Wade’s little brother Quinn) was one of the father’s fondest jokes. He knew his sons’ ages; they were the meaning of his life. “But one day you’ll be big, eighteen years old, and you won’t have sunny winters like this. Get in there by the root. You want to pull in one fell swoop. Look how sunny it is. It’s December. What the heck?” Wade looks up at the cloudless sky holding one of the green sprouts that invaded his father’s tulips. He squints performatively, recognizing the weather. “If you keep up this great weeding—”

Maybe if he
made the leap into
physical territory
with his friend,
Wade could write
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App essay on
being gay in the
heteronormative
environment of a
private school.

Back east—for whom is it back? Back to what time? The east coast is where all the oldest, most prestigious universities are, but beyond that Wade wondered, slouching in the desk chair, whether his father’s dream could speak to their family having been in LA for two generations. America is a story of western expansion, conquering the continent, until you reach California where there’s no more destiny to manifest. Maybe Wade’s father wanted some reverse manifest destiny, to send his son back to where the American experiment began.

And Wade wouldn’t mind the rain and snow. He checked the weather compulsively, hoping daily for drizzle in the forecast. 30% chance of rain, it said, when Wade Googled “weather.” Through the window by the bookshelf clouds gathered in the early evening sky. Wade replaced “My ED Setback,” with “Personal Statement,” and then wrote, “The biggest obstacle I’ve ever encountered was” before coming up short. He watched the text cursor blink with urgency. Failing the test in Calculus AB? Breaking his arm playing flag football in middle school? Frustrated, Wade picked up his phone and refreshed Instagram and his email, before going to Snapchat and opening a selfie David sent in the main hall of the Pasadena Central Library. Just two days earlier, they grabbed dinner and spent the night drinking beers in David’s garage. That night, Wade knew the ED admission decisions would be arriving soon and expressed his anxieties about it for much of the conversation.

“But there’s no reason to stress about it,” David said, lying on a sunbleached floral couch, palming a water polo ball. The team signed and gifted a ball to every senior at the end of the fall season. He passed the ball to Wade. “It’s out of your control.”

“You’re right,” said Wade, pacing, catching the ball in his right hand. “I shouldn’t stress about it. Telling me not to stress about it has relieved all of my anxieties. It’s a miracle!” He passed the ball to David.

“You’re a smart, hard working person,” David said, resting the ball in his lap and sipping his beer. “Any college would be lucky to have you.”

“I wish I had some sort of deformity,” Wade said. “I wish I was an orphan like Oliver Twist, or that my mother strapped me to her back to flee a war-torn country.”

“I love you, but you don’t know what you’re talking about,” David said, a direct quote from *Moonrise Kingdom*. Wade caught the reference, and yet he liked how “I love you” sounded in David’s mouth, directed at him that night in the garage. Something invisible activated a motion-sensored light in the backyard, illuminating the driveway and adjacent grass.

Wade replied to David’s Snapchat with a selfie. Then he went to his contacts and called him. David picked up in two rings.

“Hello?”

“Hey,” Wade said. “They rejected me.”

“Damn. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. But David, I need help with something.”

“What’s that?”

"I need to rewrite my Common App essay."

"Why?"

"I need to come across as a less privileged person."

"..."

"I have nothing to write about."

"Nothing to write about?"

"I've never lived through anything. I've never experienced any real struggles in my life."

"Why don't you write about something you're grateful for?" David asked.

"Something I'm grateful for?" Wade repeated.

"I believe in you, Wade. I have to go, but maybe I'll see you tonight?"

Wade said goodbye and went on the Common App website to reread the failed essay he wrote for his application to Brown. The first sentence read, "Alejandro Iñárritu's *The Revenant* was a life changing movie for two people: Leonardo DiCaprio, and myself." He started with a personal anecdote about his love of Leonardo DiCaprio movies, saying how Leo deserved the Oscar for *The Revenant* but that it was long overdue. Then he said how the movie impacted him with its depiction of the harsh arctic landscape, a world of extreme, unlivable conditions that could become our reality if climate change continued at its current rate.

He applied to Brown for Environmental Science. He'd always been good in STEM, getting perfect and near perfect scores on the ACT's science and math sections, although his English and Reading scores were markedly lower, and his overall score was a 32 out of 36—97th percentile of all test takers, but lower than the 33-36 average for top colleges. He knew this perfectly well. His father was always saying if he got a 33 or higher, he'd be "golden." While Wade's 3.9 GPA was within the range for top-tier colleges, his 32 on the ACT, at which he peaked on practice tests and the real thing, set him at a disadvantage. His upper-middle class score of 32 gave the unsavory impression that he was a student of middling intelligence, able to noodle up the ladder only with expensive tutoring and a lot of time on his hands. David was never able to convince Wade otherwise—that many students would be thrilled to score a 32.

Wade was not exceptional, but he was a deep, introspective kid, and after drawing the connection between the arctic climate in *The Revenant* and his personal academic interests—how he grew up hearing of wildfires and droughts but never solutions, and how he wants to apply his passion for science to a career mitigating climate change—Wade transitioned into a description of how the film affected him emotionally.

"Watching *The Revenant*," he wrote, "I struggled with feelings of hopelessness, and while I heard on one side a call to arms, I heard on the other a resignation. All my life, I've dealt with bouts of depression, and as a kid I would think that if there was a button to press that would kill me, instantly and painlessly, I would surely press it. Watching DiCaprio's character trekking through the tundra, I

could not help thinking that if I was in that position, I would probably just kill myself. This is the state of my generation: battered into pessimism by the idea that there are no alternatives to the way our world is now. But we need alternatives. By the end of the film, when DiCaprio's character actually faces the death I would've yearned for all along, I came to the conclusion that we must choose life, this life, and Earth, for it's all we have."

When Wade's college counselor Mrs. Price read the essay, she said: "You're getting at a real personal narrative here. Have you discussed your suicidal ideation with your parents?"

"Not explicitly," Wade said. "In real emotional moments, usually while I'm fighting with one of them, I'll say I'm depressed and I need to go to therapy. But my dad just says, 'He's not depressed! He's just not!' and that's usually the end of it. Then my mom comes around and says I don't need a therapist because she's there if I ever have anything I need to talk about. She says she's been on antidepressant medication at times in her life and that that's an option for me too. Usually the conversation just fizzles away from there."

"And what do you fight about with your parents?" Mrs. Price asked.

College counselors are equal parts shrink, literary editor, bureaucrat.

"Well my dad won't let me get my driver's license, for one, because his brother was killed by a drunk driver when he was sixteen. The brother."

"I see. Maybe that's something to write about."

Wade considered it. He knew during the whole process that an essay about a challenge, setback, or failure would improve his chances and could set him apart from other students like him. But ultimately Wade came to the conclusion that as much as he might wish it was, the story of his uncle was not his trauma. It was not his suffering to claim. An intrusive thought occurred to Wade: it's a shame, because it would have made for a really great essay.

Wade showed David his *Revenant* essay on a Saturday morning in the fall. They sat at a diner drinking coffee. Wade passed David his phone with the Google Doc pulled up. David read the essay, sipping his coffee at intervals.

"You're totally wrong, though," David said when he finished reading.

"About what?" Wade asked.

"*The Revenant*. That it's a pessimistic film." David handed back the phone.

"What do you mean?"

"You don't mention why DiCaprio's character 'treks through the tundra,'" David said. Wade looked out the window at a hipster in the parking lot. "His character Hugh Glass was seeking revenge on that guy Fitzgerald who killed his son. Fitzgerald stabbed his son Hawk to death. Glass saw it happen in front of him."

"Do you realize how cold it must have been?" Wade argued. "The tundra."

"So Glass goes to the ends of the earth to mete out justice," David continued. "He does it for Hawk. He finds meaning in his suffering. Even mauled by a bear, freezing to death, it's Hawk who gives him strength. That Pawnee guy also

helps out. But do you know what the Pawnee says to Glass while they warm themselves by the fire?"

"What does he say?"

"Revenge is in the Creator's hands."

"..."

"So when Glass is about to kill Fitzgerald at the end, he stops himself. Glass pushes Fitzgerald downstream to a band of Natives. It's an act of mercy. He doesn't kill Fitzgerald with his own hands."

Wade sipped his coffee looking at David as the waitress arrived with their food. The boys said thank you and began to eat, David dripping Tabasco on his scrambled eggs.

"I hear what you're saying," Wade said. "But you don't think Glass knew that the band of Natives would kill Fitzgerald themselves? I think the chief scalped him in the end."

"The world isn't always unfair," David said.

After that morning, Wade thought about David's Revenant spiel constantly, although he didn't make any changes to the essay. He felt it would be disingenuous to use David's interpretation that the film is a testament to humans' capacity for survival and mercy. Wade felt that David possessed some worldview or belief structure that allowed him to view the film this way, and that because he, Wade, lacked this worldview or belief structure, he couldn't even begin to articulate David's point of view. Besides, David's spiel discredited Wade's whole argument in the essay—that *The Revenant* filled him with anxiety about future climate crises. What Wade needed to do was to tie these strings together: his depression, the climate crisis, *The Revenant*, and his academic goals and interests.

At a meeting with Mrs. Price, while brainstorming ways to tie Wade's interest in Environmental Science to his personal identity, Wade's mom brought up the question of his mixed-heritage, coming from European Christians on his dad's side and Russian Jews on hers. Wade sat between his parents at the chairs before Mrs. Price's desk as his mom started explaining how she grew up in Palos Verdes and was one of the only Jewish girls at her high school in the 1980s. The other LA girls were tan and skinny and had blonde hair, and as her insecurities and self-loathing festered, she was diagnosed with anorexia at seventeen and bulimia at eighteen and also, in an attempt to become tan, she sat out in the sun obsessively—"This sun which is getting hotter and hotter every year"—so often that she developed skin cancer as a result.

"I didn't know that," Wade said.

It wasn't uncommon for the college application process at Wade's high school to be a stimulus for unearthing secret family traumas. The college essay is the first and last time many Americans try to communicate who they are, where they come from, and who they want to be—to tell their story.

"My point is," said his mom, still on the same page that the reason they were there was to get Wade into an Ivy League school, "is that maybe you can talk

about the connection between the climate and other issues like ethnicity and class."

"That's interesting," Mrs. Price said. "Although do you think that might be a stretch?"

"I also wonder," Wade's dad said, "if you're tying sun exposure to skin color, a greater issue might not be white people wanting to be darker, tanner, but the ways in which dark-skinned people have been historically oppressed. You don't want to frame it as if you think that being of a lighter skin pigment is worthy of sympathy."

As the adults discussed the matter, Wade just became consumed with feelings of sympathy for his mom. He imagined her as a little girl who didn't like herself and who wanted so badly to change in order to feel beautiful. But disliking oneself to one's core is such a universal experience, he thought, that it really wouldn't make for an interesting college essay at all.

But disliking oneself to one's core is such a universal experience, he thought, that it really wouldn't make for an interesting college essay at all.

Wade closed the Google Chrome window and leaned back, exhaling, running his fingers through his hair. Years of chlorine stuck together waxy blonde segments. Maybe this is all I'll ever be, he thought, looking at the clock by the window by the bookcase: a west coast kid, stupid and status-obsessed and unsuffering under bleached skies. In that moment, he wanted to change into his Speedo and dive, laughing and friendly, into the pool with his teammates. It was just after six p.m. and the maple tree outside glowed golden.

Wade stood up from the chair and walked over to the window. Boys in a driveway across the street played basketball below the row of clouds. He turned to the bookshelf and looked at the spines. They were his father's—books from his years studying Russian Literature at Stanford—and his grandfather's, who got his PhD in Education from UCLA and apparently had an interest in Modern poetry. There was a framed photograph on a shelf of Wade's father's brother who died when he was sixteen, and Wade wondered what sort of person he would be if he was alive today, and then Wade walked to the bar cart with its bottles of whiskey.

Uncorking a bottle and smelling the whiskey, Wade wondered how quickly he might be able to develop an alcohol problem. He mulled around the office. His parents were sitting on the couch watching cooking shows, drinking vodka tonics, eating takeout from a nearby Thai place—their Friday night tradition. Wade poured himself a glass of whiskey, drank it, poured another, drank it, then he poured a third and brought it back to the computer. As it slowly dusked, the computer gave the room its only light.

Wade went on YouTube and searched "holocaust documentary" as a way to get into a somber state of mind. He clicked one and as the video played, images of concentration camps reflecting on his face, Wade began to forget about the college essay. He felt queasy, although he was unsure whether it was because of the whiskey or the Holocaust. Wade got up and walked over to the bar cart as an audio recording of people cheering at a Nazi rally played and Wade almost

tripped on an extension cord before making it to grab the bottle and bring it to the desk. Shooting a glance to his left he saw the window filled with pink light. He walked over to the window as an advertisement for Swiffer Sweeper began to play. As he put his face to the cold glass, he felt his iPhone ringing in his pocket. It was David.

"David," said Wade, the Swiffer ad singing behind him. "Are you seeing this sunset?"

"Huh?"

"Look outside."

"Oh," David said. "Wow."

"David, what if I drove to your place right now?"

"Yeah, I was just calling to see if you wanted to—"

"Hey, I think I'm in love with you."

The sun had exploded on the clouds. Pink and orange filled the sky. The boys stared upwards with their basketball, and for a brief moment, Wade felt that his desire to get into college was so inconsequential, so banal, when compared to the beauty and sublimity of nature.

"What?"

"I think I've fallen in love with you."

"I don't know what to say."

The Earth sailed around the sun. We're sailing, Wade thought, what mystery!

"I just thought I should tell you."

"I love you, too. I mean, as a friend of course."

As the world outside sank below the sun's color, Wade wondered if, in his life, he would live through love and tragedy far more terrifying and more meaningful than he ever imagined.

"You're not in love with me."

"Not like that."

With the setting sun and the whiskey and Holocaust turning in his stomach, the photograph of his dead uncle on the bookshelf, it occurred to Wade that he did not know very much at all.

A letter from the creative nonfiction board:

We only have one piece for this issue, but I am very proud to have Elise Shiota Schofield's "i don't trust white women" representing CNF for our Winter 2023 journal. This piece is provocative and absorbing, and speaks to first-hand experiences of complicity, mixedness, and betrayal. With her cutting language and ability to transport readers into her own experience, Elise Shiota Schofield wrote a piece that feels highly personal and simultaneously, most definitely, much bigger than herself.

I really love this piece, which encases the power of creative nonfiction as a genre, and I strongly encourage everyone to check it out!

I also want to thank the members of our committee for contributing to our thoughtful, fun, and insightful meetings for this issue of the journal. I am so grateful to have the space for reading and talking about Creative Nonfiction.

Enjoy!

Ruby Yassen
Executive Creative Nonfiction Editor

i know what you're thinking. *schofield*. you're half-white.

but i think that's why i am terrified of white women. i've been afforded access to the inside circles of whiteness where boredom is satiated with shit-talking and passive-aggression. where you play the waiting game of insidious and premeditated actions against the ones you call friends. where not doing anything will get you far in life.

in my junior year of high school i was met with this reality:

As I walk up Center St. in Downtown Berkeley, heading to Sliver with my (white) "best friend" she warns me, "I have something to tell you that happened over the weekend while you were gone. It's really bad."

I had spent the labor day weekend away with my family, resenting them for pulling me away from my new friend circle that I spent the summer with. Looking back, this pent-up resentment stemmed from the fear that I would be swiftly replaced and forgotten in the span of three days. This was my first day back and I was determined to reestablish myself back into the friend group. As we sit down with our vegetarian sourdough-crust pizza slices, she takes a deep, startling breath.

"We were all at a kickback Saturday night and Almita saw a weird meme on Resse's phone that he was laughing at. After she asked what the meme was, he immediately pulled his phone away and said nothing. Almita grabbed the phone from him and... it was really bad, Elise."

"What was it?"

Silence.

"*What was it?*"

"It's like... really bad, Elise."

"What is it?!" I yelled into the restaurant crowded from the influx of high school students.

"Shhhh! We can't be caught with it."

"What the fuck is *it*, Amelia?"

"One of the boys created an Instagram account over the summer..."

"Do you have screenshots?"

She hesitated before pulling her phone out.

"You can't tell anyone about this."

"I won't," I lied.

She pulls her phone out and lo and behold, in the 'liberal protective' bubble of Berkeley, CA, I was witnessing the most degrading and most outwardly blatant racist Instagram account. "@l_hate_jews_" read the account name and the n-word. Seeing the word in its entirety: bolded, hard R, all caps.

"Who... who made this?" I asked as I swiped through the screenshots.

"You're not gonna like this, but um... Harry."

harry. the boy i lost my virginity to.

My heart drops to the pit of my stomach. My blood is beyond boiling, my face begins to burn, and I begin to chew the inside of my lip. The room feels like it's closing in as I swipe through the countless screenshots of naked Black children sitting in buckets eating watermelon, Oprah and Martin Luther King Jr. being compared to monkeys, swastikas, and a Slap-A-Jap poster with laughing emojis as the caption.

"What the fuck?" was all I could muster.

This is the type of shit you witness in movies or hear on the news. Not in Berkeley, much less someone I was friends with. I sent the screenshots to myself before I was interrupted.

"Why are you sending those to yourself?"

"What do you mean?" I asserted.

Amelia's face turned bright red as she snatched her phone back.

"Elise, you can't tell anyone about this."

"Why?" I demanded. "Are you trying to protect them? Who follows the account? Why are just telling me this *now*?"

I grab my untouched pizza and throw it into the trash. I feel like throwing up. Amelia, my "best friend" since middle school, treating me like I was a ticking time bomb. A wave of paranoia washed over me. Was this lunch planned?

I decided not to go back to campus for the rest of the day. I sat on the ledge across the street from the gate where my friends and I would usually meet after school and waited.

And waited.

Shaking with rage, I rehearse everything in my head. The bell goes off and thousands of students rush out, but I am unusually calm. I watch from the ledge as my friends slowly huddle together, laughing as if nothing had happened. My anger overrides any nerves and I beeline toward them. My face is hot and red. My breath became shorter and shorter. I'm preparing for the scene to begin.

"Give me a fucking reason to not report any of you because I am this close to walking into the office right now and showing them everything. *And I mean everything.*"

I steadily hold my phone to their faces, the Instagram account on full display. The girls severed away from me. Suddenly, I am surrounded by all the boys.

"It's 20-fucking-18, so what is this? Is this funny to you? Being racist is fun for you? Is everyone on this fucking account? How long have ya'll followed the account? How long has it been up?"

"Elise, let's not do this here."

"I don't give a fuck. Give me a reason why I shouldn't report each and every one of you. "

Every boy gives a generic defensive comment that all sound along the lines of:

"Come on Elise, you know I'm not racist. You know me!"

My poise dissipates. I scream at them with deep disgust as they nervously try to calm me down. My entire body is violently shaking, my legs are completely numb, and my mouth feels like it's moving a mile a minute. But why does it feel like I'm alone here? Why are the girls just standing there?

I realize at this moment that I'm the only girl of color standing in a sea of white girls. This blazing and undeniable pain was only mine. I looked around. No one was standing beside me. No one cared like I did.

My head is pounding. My eyes brim with water. I feel like I'm drowning alone with all eyes on me. Not one person, not one friend saving me as I continue to fight back for a breath of air.

Why does it feel like I'm losing?

Why do I feel so utterly alone?

looking back, it doesn't surprise me that the boys didn't care or tried to understand. men, especially white men, have continuously failed to earn my trust. i had no intention to remain friends with them.

but i had no idea my friendships with the girls would end that day too. The girls (secretly) continued to hang out with them. they got lunch, attended their parties, and dated them after i was promptly discarded. the girls would apologize to me out of pity and praise me for my bravery but ignore me in the halls if the boys were in sight. they comforted and validated me when i received threatening text messages but allowed them to torment, harass, and bully me for speaking out. neutrality was their medicine and they drank it with such ease and purpose.

the complicity of these white girls is not an isolated account. historically white women have always been complicit. carolyn bryant, who falsely accused Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old Black child of sexual harassment, remained silent for years after white men brutally kidnapped and murdered Emmett, who was beaten until he was unrecognizable even to his own mother. white women's silence justifies and allows white violence. to this day, bryant's complicity has

awarded her life, protection, and public sympathy. she remains untouched by the justice system.

why would any white woman want to speak out when silence has always been their armor and shield?

we all learned about the death of Emmett Till in our junior year history class. i read about white womanhood next to white girls who perpetuated the same phenomenon. this complicity and silence continue to have real-world violent consequences today just like a hundred years ago. the lack of acknowledgment of white women's terrorizing inaction reflects their position of power: their means to do nothing. absolutely nothing.

white women's proximity to white male privilege grants many advantages such as protection, power, and respect. but being labeled as racist doesn't look great in regards to social capital. these girls understood that their neutrality could allow them to keep their relationships with the boys; within this gray area they could also be accepted by their fellow classmates of color if they waited long enough to not be publicly seen with the boys. by toeing this line of ally and enabler, their hands were clean and innocent. and i was too tired of confrontation.

this was the hard part. i expected to see these white girls, my previous friends, value integrity and true empathy to the victims of this situation over male validation, social clout, and invites to parties. i would have loved to have had a united stance against their violent actions together. it was painful to watch them empower the boys racist decisions by ignoring and accepting their actions as if it wasn't humane.

i realize now our friendship was performative. me remaining friends with the girls absolved any guilt they felt for not speaking out and i served as the token for them to not be labeled as racists. but ultimately they remained silent because it benefited them. and perhaps they never spoke out because it meant they would have to tackle their own wrongdoings and racism, the same reason that carolyn bryant kept her secret at the expense of countless murders of the Black community. by avoiding the issue, the blame could be solely placed on the boys. so this leads me back to my statement, that i don't and i *refuse* to trust white women.

A letter from the art committee:

If you asked me to name a concrete similarity between the art pieces we selected this winter I'm not sure I would be able to give you one. Still, I don't think that's a bad thing—I love the Art Committee for its freedom and openness to so many different themes and mediums. This quarter, we have accepted a graphic novel excerpt, a digital art piece, photography, mixed media work and even a song, all to be presented side by side. Still, despite all their differences, all the pieces seem to hold a general spirit of youth. From the coming of age story portrayed in the "Getting in the Program" vignette, to the nostalgic love story in the song "Capistrano" and the all-too-true experience of dealing with any type of life crisis by cutting bangs like the subject of "Uh Oh," I think our art selection this quarter shows a different part of being young with each of its pieces.

I also really have to thank all the people in the Art Committee for helping bring the joy of youth to our meetings as well! It is so lovely to be a part of a community that engages in thoughtful intellectual discussion about the pieces but doesn't focus only on the work, but also making space for building friendships and connections. Thank you for all the laughter, and for brightening up my winter!

I hope you enjoy this selection of art and find some part of this youthfulness that you can relate to as well!



Sabrina Ellis
Executive Art Editor



Elisa Espinoza

ebb and flow.

medium: 35 mm scans

Author Susan Plann on the following piece:

Unaccompanied child migration is on the rise: it is, according to Human Rights Watch, the new normal. When Americans think of unaccompanied migrant children, we tend to think of those who arrive on our southern border, but there are others who deserve our attention as well. Since the early 1990s, thousands of unaccompanied Moroccan minors—nearly all of them boys—have “burned” across the Strait of Gibraltar to Spain in search of a better life. (In Moroccan Arabic “to burn” means “to migrate clandestinely.”) *Burning up the Strait*, a graphic novel in the making, tells the story of one of these boys.

This fictionalized memoir is inspired by my longitudinal study of some 30 Moroccan youth who arrived in Spain as unaccompanied minors. Farid, the narrator/protagonist, is a composite of these interviewees. Veteran illustrator Ariel Iacci brings his story to life with wit, sensitivity, and nuance.

The following is a vignette from *Burning up the Strait*. In an earlier installment in the previous issue of this journal, “MENAS on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown,” Farid had reached Madrid and was struggling with culture shock and feelings of alienation. (MENA is the Spanish acronym for unaccompanied foreign minor). In the present vignette, “Getting with the Program,” Farid and his friend Mouad are assimilating to their new environment and engaging in new activities—some of which are haram, forbidden in their Islamic faith.

Farid’s account, which begins in Tangier and ends in Morocco, challenges long-held stereotypes of both Moroccans and Spaniards and offers new perspectives on the child im/migrant experience. A mixture of humor, irony, and tragedy, *Burning up the Strait*, like Farid himself, is both unique and universal.

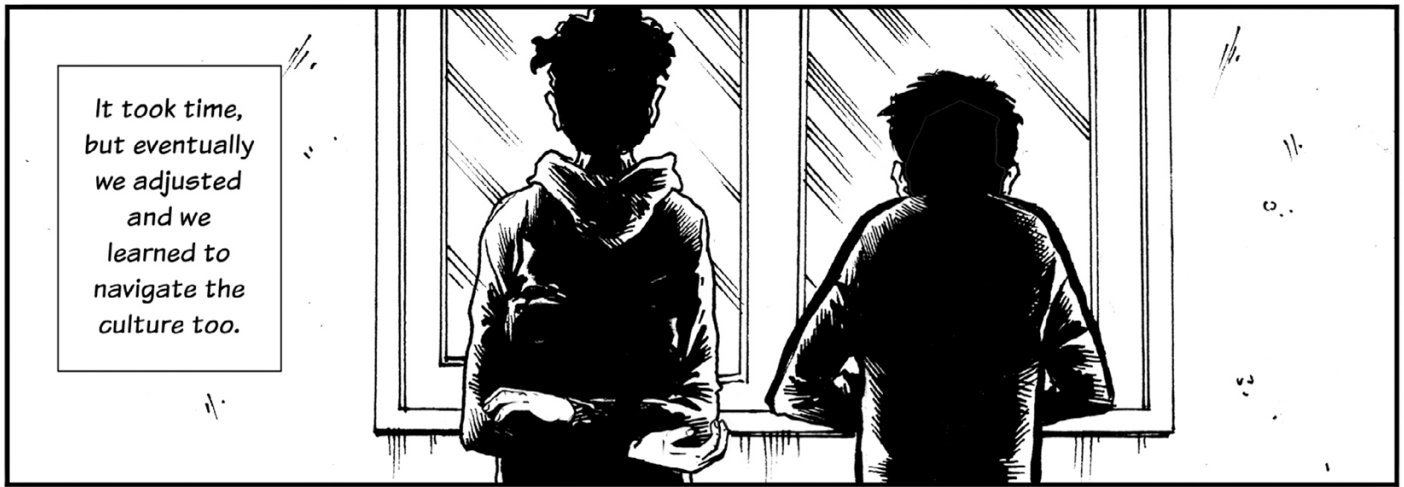
Author [Susan Plann](#) & illustrator [Ariel Iacci](#)

Excerpt from *Burning up the Strait: A Graphic Novel in the Making*

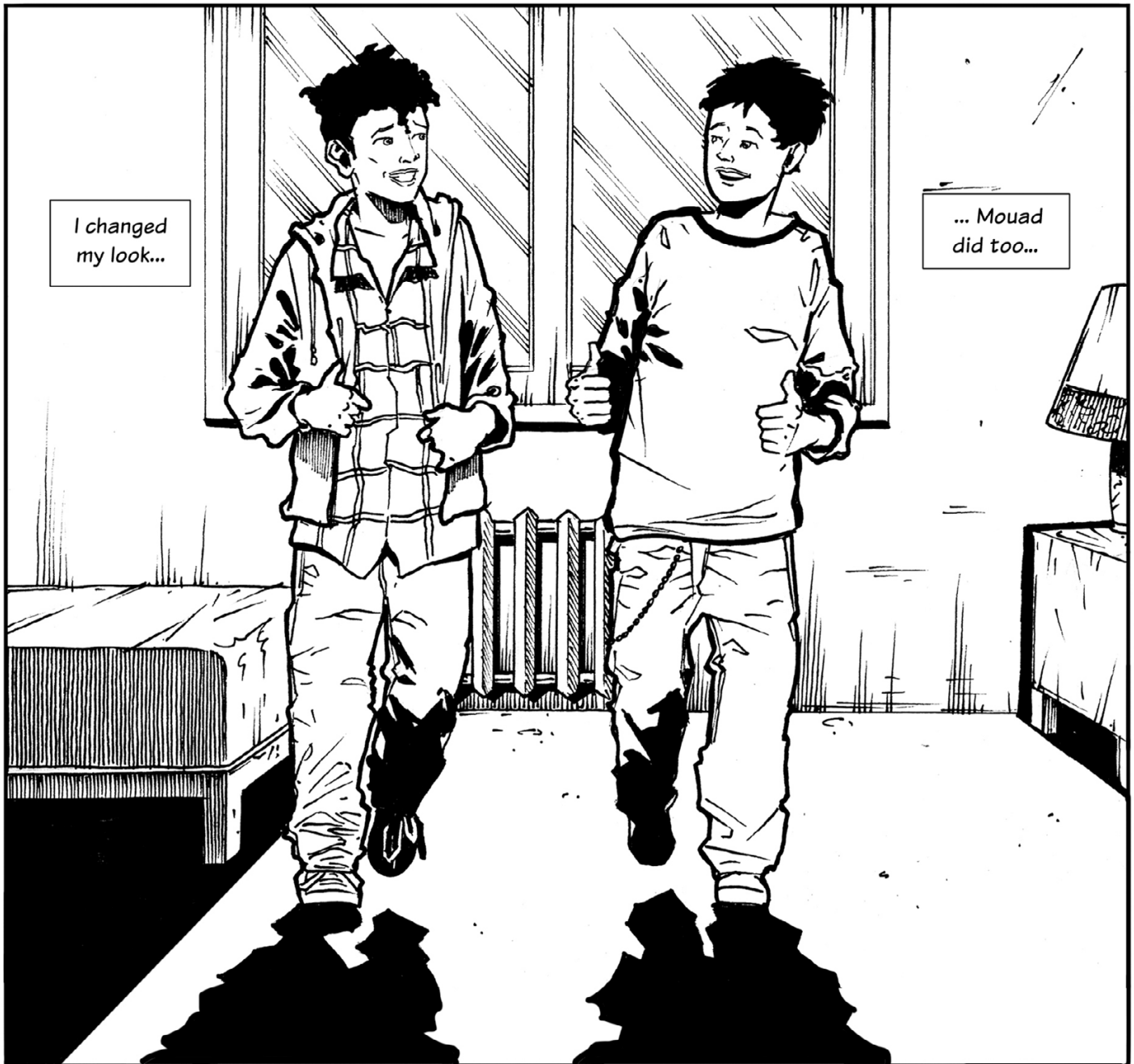
medium: digital illustration



GETTING WITH THE PROGRAM



It took time,
but eventually
we adjusted
and we
learned to
navigate the
culture too.



I changed
my look...

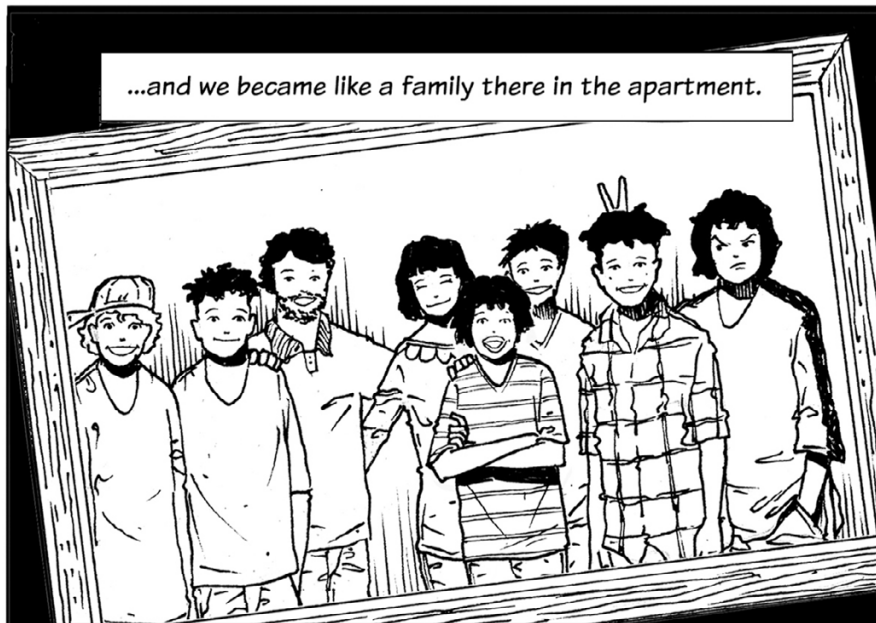
... Mouad
did too...

Author [Susan Plann](#) & illustrator [Ariel Iacci](#)

Excerpt from *Burning up the Strait: A Graphic Novel in the Making*

medium: digital art

...and we became like a family there in the apartment.



Like every family, we had our disagreements.

I want to work and earn money!

You can't, you're a minor!

You have to go to school!



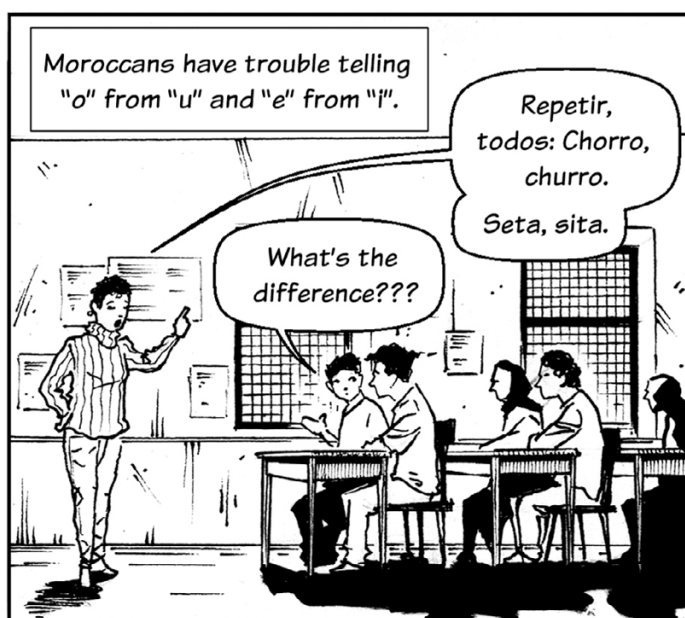
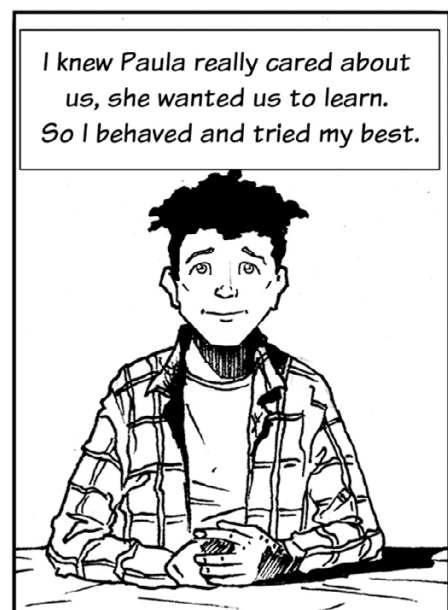
There was no escaping it, so we went to school.



We started with special classes to learn the language. Paula, our teacher, spoke to us only in Spanish.

Buenos días, clase.





In Morocco I could never learn French, but here I learned Spanish really fast.

Moda, muda.

Deje, dije.

Pata, bata.



In our free time we explored Madrid...

...and we came to love it.



Everywhere we went, there were girls.



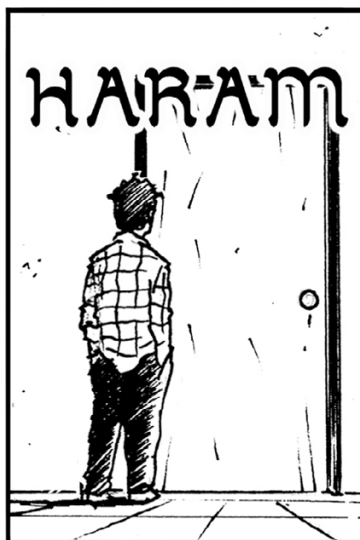
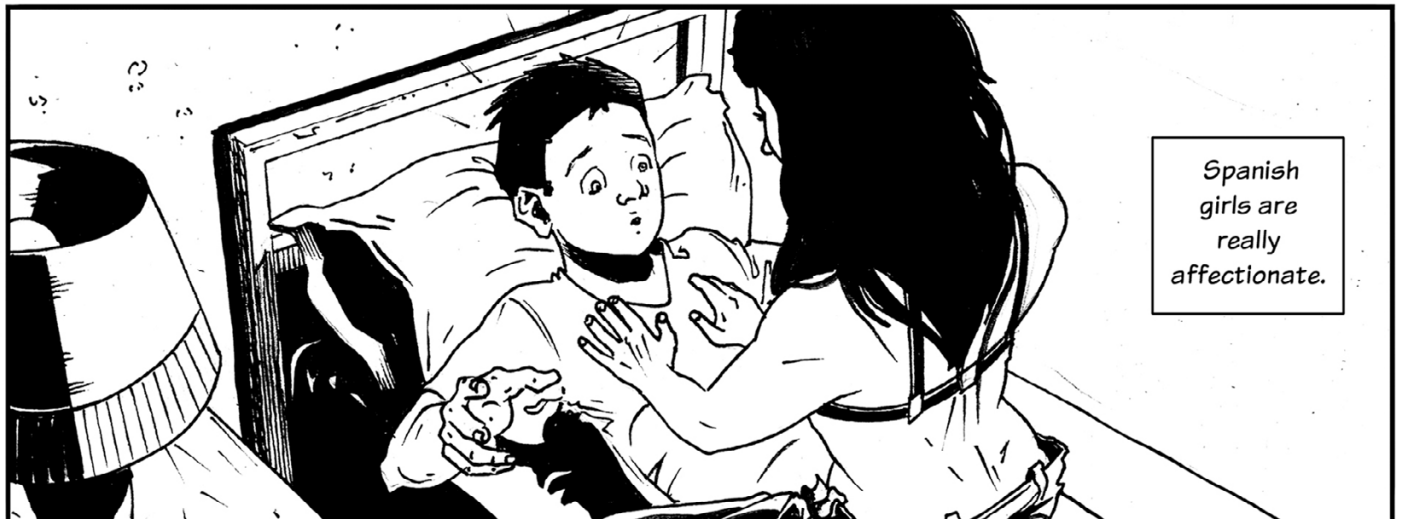
In Morocco girls wouldn't even look at boys.

Spanish girls were different.

They talked to us.

Bye!





حلو وحليلو اللي يذوقه يرجع ليلو

Sweet and delicious, he who tastes it will go back to it.
--Moroccan saying



Selena Perez

It Eats

mixed media



Jade Ichimura

Uh Oh

medium: digital illustration

Drop the top, turn up the eight track
Slide that ... baby in gear
Pick up my darlin', just before sunset
Catchin' the surf break, under the pier

Illustration by A. Jinha Song

Takin' my Mustang, (to) San Juan Capistrano
Takin my baby, to heaven on earth
We're gonna stay there, in old Capistrano
Watchin' the sun slide into the surf

There'll be a beach fire, to light up the evening
The sweet lilt of banda, fillin' the air
The warmth of the sand dunes, holdin' my baby
Under the starlight, I'm taking you there

Drivin' my Mustang, (to) San Juan Capistrano
Takin my baby, to heaven on earth
We're gonna stay there, in old Capistrano
Watchin' the sun slide into the surf



James Reeder
Capistrano

medium: song

Contributors

Jannat Alam. Inmate of heaven.

Shreya Dodbballapur is a third-year English and History double major at UCLA. She is from Sacramento and loves movies.

David Egan is a 3rd year English major at UCLA from Altadena, CA.

Elisa Espinoza is a student at UCLA, pursuing her Master’s Degree in Social Welfare. She is an artist of many mediums, including photography, songwriting, zines, and improv comedy. In the future, she looks forward to combining her passions for mental health and creative arts by working as an expressive arts therapist.

Ilea Farrall is a third-year UCLA student from the Sacramento area. In between her English studies, she enjoys reading and writing narrative poetry. Her free time is spent hanging out with friends and reading every form of written word she can get her hands on.

Kurt Gassman is currently a copywriter at brand and marketing agency, Zambezi, in Culver City. Throughout his career, Kurt has written scripts for various well-known TV commercials including Taco Bell’s “The Ex” and Beats by Dre’s “Unleashed.” Outside of his profession, Kurt has written various short stories and is in the early stages of writing a novel.

Maria Gray is a 23-year-old poet from Portland, Oregon, currently based in Lewiston, Maine. Her poetry is published in *Best New Poets 2022*, *Kissing Dynamite Poetry*, *The Lumiere Review*, and others; she edits *Snaggletooth Magazine* and reads for *Counterclock Journal*. She will start her MFA in poetry at NYU this autumn. Find her at mariagray.carrd.co.

Ariel Iacci is a graphic artist who lives in Olympia, Washington. He can be reached at ariaxy@gmail.com

Jade Ichimura (Jichi) has been a self-taught artist and aspiring designer for almost ten years. She primarily draws with her iPad and Apple Pencil that she acquired last Fall. Otherwise, she creates in Adobe Photoshop with a Wacom Cintiq 13HD. She really enjoys making one-page comic strips that allow the viewer to make up the rest of the story.

Maggie Nerz Iribarne is 53, lives in Syracuse, NY, writes about witches, cleaning ladies, struggling teachers, neighborhood ghosts, and other things. She keeps a portfolio of her published work at <https://www.maggienerziribarne.com>.

Jade Lacy is a senior studying English, Creative Writing, and Asian American Studies at UCLA. She hails from the Bay Area but has made her home in Los

Angeles. Her short fiction and poetry have been published in *Westwind Journal of the Arts* and *Mandarin Magazine*.

London March is a third-year transfer student from the Bay Area. She is an English major and Music Industry minor. She is especially passionate about writing about queer experiences.

Kendra Maye Christian is currently a first-year English major at UCLA and considers herself to be somewhat of a poetry novice. You can find her first attempt at the art in the 2017 edition of the *Anthology of Poetry by Young Americans*. She is originally from Monrovia, California , and you can usually find her reading an eBook or singing karaoke alone in her living room.

Kaya Napachoti is a Southeast Asian American with a coffee addiction who grew up in Northern California until finding themself studying Art History at UCLA. Most of her writing in the last few years has been academic musings on material culture but has delved back into creative writing where she explores and grapples with themes of family. Most days Kaya is graphic designing, analyzing artwork, or knitting another sweater.

E. Nightingale is a Political Science student at UCLA, who was published before in *Westwind*.

Selena Perez is an aspiring novelist and poet, studying English and Psychology at UCLA. Her creative works have been published in *Westwind Journal*, *Matchbox Magazine*, *The Mandarin Magazine*, and *FEM Newsmagazine*. She holds the ideology that to be a writer is to be a vessel for stories begging to be told.

Susan Plann is a Research Professor Emerita of the UCLA Department of Chicana/o and Central American Studies who lives in Tacoma, Washington. She can be reached at plann@ucla.edu.

James Reeder worked as an actor for many years and then moved on to songwriting for television. He has a BA and an MFA in Theater from UCLA.

Elise Shiota Schofield is a fourth-year at UCLA studying sociology with a minor in Asian American Studies. She is 21 years old and from Berkeley, California.

Dominic Viti has written for *Harvard Review*, *The Penn Review*, *Beloit Fiction Journal*, *USA Today* and *Chorus* (Simon & Schuster).

Wiley Waggoner is a philosophy student at UCLA. He grew up in Encinitas, CA and is interested in the fields of history and archaeology. He is a coauthor of *The American Exile: An Era of American Foreign Policy*.

Nikki Wolin is a junior English major at UCLA. She enjoys writing short stories, tackling too-long books, and thinking up The *Twilight Zone* episodes. She aspires to be an author.

Jannat Alam Kendra Maye Christian

Shreya Dodballapur David Egan Elisa Espinoza

Ilea Farrall Kurt Gassman Maria Gray Ariel Iacci

Jade Ichimura Maggie Iribarne Jade Lacy

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Selena Perez Susan Plann James Reeder

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