

WESTWIND



**JOURNAL OF
THE ARTS**

**FALL
2022**

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A letter from our editors:

This issue is a big one for us. There's no metaphor there. We received more submissions for this journal than any other in recent memory. It was a hectic few weeks as we read through the influx of work we received, but we are so grateful to have been able to review incredible pieces from writers across the country. This journal was also produced in the midst of the largest higher education strike in U.S. history, as academic workers, graduate students, and post-docs of the UC system protested for vital improvements in their wages, job security, and rights as workers. We at *Westwind* stand with the UAW strike and believe that a living wage is absolutely necessary to foster academic and creative work that happens at UCLA.

The stories, poems, and art you find in this journal struck a special cord with us. As young people who have stumbled through our formative years facing crisis after crisis, we are familiar with chasing uncertain futures and looking back on pasts that can never be recovered. The pieces in this journal react to the cruelty of the world in different ways—some with sadness, some with anger, and some with a determination to make what little change we can. They gaze into the void and see a glimmer of meaning in the darkness. We hope that you will find something in this issue that calls out to you as it did to us.

Thank you, first and foremost, to the contributors who have trusted us with their art. Thank you also to our board and staff for plunging into their work with dedication during this tumultuous quarter. *Westwind* is possible because of the support of Professor Reed Wilson and the UCLA English Department. Without further ado, enjoy the Fall 2022 issue of *Westwind Journal of the Arts*.

Best wishes,

Jade Lacy and Austin Nguyen
Managing Editors Fall 2022

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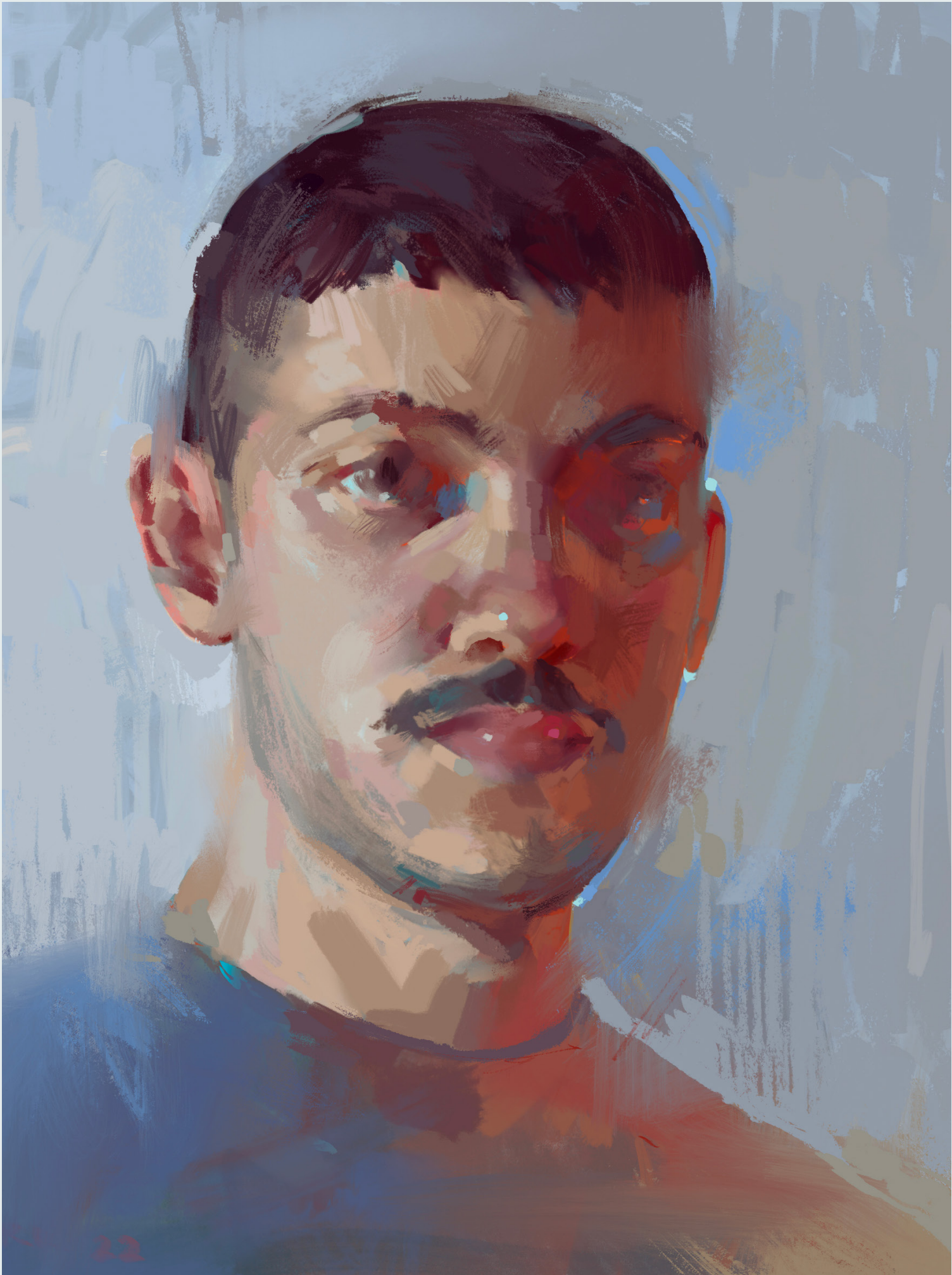
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[Austen Marr](#)

B in digital

medium: digital painting



[Austen Marr](#)

Self-portrait in digital

medium: digital painting

Julie Levin

Lost in Pasadena, 1980

The *Thomas Guide*, laying open
on your steering wheel,
as you drive slowly into Pasadena,
wondering where the hell you are,
and wow, who knew that Pasadena
had such impressive houses?

When the address you seek is just off the edge
of page 143. So, at the next light,
you scan the margin to see you must turn
not to 144, but 27

And, it's nowhere on page 27
and the light is green,
and the Toyota Corolla in the rearview
honks!

Then, fuck it,
who needs to be at some party
in the foothills of fucking Pasadena
when there is a perfectly good
Del Taco right on the corner.

And while you are eating your delicious
mystery meat burrito, those two guys
from AP History pull in.
They eat burritos with you and your friends,
maybe flirting, hard to tell, before inviting you
to follow them to the address, which,
it turns out, is just around the corner.

You see it a day later in the light,
on the dining room table,
a craftsman bungalow, on a tiny cul de sac,
barely visible at the edge of page 27.

Edited by Kylee Kropf

WW / Poetry / 6

Julie Levin

Ripening

I find a patch of roughness
at the ankle, like dried mud
the color of my own skin,

my own skin, dried and caked
like mud. I scrub with thumb and nail
flakes of my own flesh falling

to the floor, a buffet for mites.
I smell my fingertips. Isn't this
what we all do in secret, reveling

in the wonder of the olfactory self,
a fingerprint of scent, the partnership
of microscopic things that colonize me

and whatever is left that I think of
as myself. My ankle smoothed,
my fingers smell like mushrooms,

like forest-floor. If a sommelier
could taste me, words like
earthy, oaky, and open

might pour from his lips.
He might smile, enjoying the vintage,
the way that time softens sharp flavors,

cultivating depth. Can you tell,
I am a little bit in love
with the flesh of me?

Funny, I didn't know
how delicious I would become
as I ripen.

Edited by Kylee Kropf

WW / Poetry / 7



illustration by Ayumi Bergan

summer and dirt lined the linoleum floors
I sat upon, knees red from ripping
the lake bed to shreds as I scrambled up
for wet air

my hair dripped holy water,
soaking my shoulders, threatening
to expose the black bra I had hidden
shielded by my tee, now bleeding
with well wishes and sharpie

I sat
criss-cross
applesauce
behind

Amy Taylor
with the long and from the
eyelashes other cabin

looking forward desperately
trying, tithing every cent of attention
to the droning that went in one ear
and out the other
with the infection

I rose feeling
that itch on the back of my neck—
a nip from a pest in the dark
that nags still at daybreak

I am told that He runs through me
in my drowning
in my sitting
in my scratching

but I know that He has sucked himself
out of me
and I have left Him
in that mosquito

Elegy at the Start of Summer

She refuses to take you for your shot,
& your second, & to the doctor
when your liver thumps in your side.
You post online asking what to do
about an errant girlfriend, why she
seems not to care, why she moved weeks
ago into the back bedroom & took the
her weighted blanket & the fancy sheets.
The last of your friends tell you to break
up with her, to kick her out, or to join
them for a drink. They'll buy the opening
rounds of pub golf, the game you played
when you first met your girlfriend, or
now the girl who lives down the hall
& texts you *one of us has to move out*.
She was charmed by you, in the beginning,
when you weren't such a fuck-up, when
you wore Levi's & band shirts & drank session
lager & not cheap vodka cut with White Claw.
But what else could you do when you got laid
off from the bar & stayed home & watched SVU
reruns & she thought you got turned on by the violence
because you wanted to fuck every time she came
home. Something has to change, she says most days.
Or this is it. & you agree, yet you carry on drinking,
just PBR though, & you cannot wait to tell her
you're returning to normal & she can sleep
in the master & the two of you can fuck,
if she wants, or just hold each other.
Any contact is good. Welcome. Needed.
& this is what you should say, & not post shit online,
which is what you do, knowing already she's gone
& you'll have to get through summer alone.

Blasphemy on the Royal Arches Trial

Lilly is dead.
My sneakers scrape
God damn it
as I roll the boulder

of my blasphemy
up the Royal Arches trail.
(Which is to say I whisper
damn God).

Lilly died in Instagram increments.
At the end, filters couldn't disguise
the ravaged jaundice of her skin.
She spoke of Jesus

and healing as the blades
of her collarbones sharpened
despite our prayers.
I trudge up the mountain

and beg God to speak.
As I pass through the pines,
the wind slices my chest.
I am emptied

but cannot hear Him.
The flamed throats of mountain
roses yawn from clefts
of slab rock, but they stay silent.

The cricket answers my plea
and sings—*today, today, only today*.
I pass under the arch which tops
the peak and step into the gold shot

grandeur of an infinite sky.
Sunset shimmers and the breeze stills.
I am baptized by a light so radiant
that I almost believe in Heaven.

Thief

When I was seventeen,
I walked along Lake Michigan
and glimpsed a chain of people
dredging the water with their feet.

A man tripped over a boy
who lay beneath the waves.
He placed him on the sand.
Someone pumped his chest;

another blew into his lungs.
We circled him and prayed,
but he stayed gray like the lake
as it swallowed the sun.

When I was a young mother,
we walked Malibu's rock strewn
shoreline — a baby strapped to my chest
while my oldest son ran ahead.

Without warning, the ocean reared
and knocked my husband to his knees;
and then, I no longer saw my boy.
The baby bounced in his sling

as I sprinted and screamed
his brother's name. The waves grew
more enraged and pummeled the shore.
I rounded the bend. He was not there.

I looked up to see him standing
upon a bluff, beckoning
the ocean with his arms,
singing his names for the sea

into the wind.
He laughed *my blue,*
my deep, my magic,
mine, mine, mine.

When I was a harried mom
on a Saturday in June,
three sons were scattered
at parties and practices.

Only baby Simon was home
and I thought he was playing
inside, until my husband fished
him from the swimming pool.

My son was silent.
My son was blue.
My son was dead.
I grabbed my boy,

laid him down
and pumped his chest.
Each springy thrust begged
him to come back to me.

I kissed his mouth and filled
his lungs with my air.
I'd already reordered my life
when Simon opened his eyes.

It is said that a foolish
man builds his house
upon the sand;
I will build my house

on the highest mountain.
When I sleep with the windows
open at night,
I will hear only the wind

rustling the trees —
far enough away to ignore
the water's monstrous whisper —
mine mine mine.

Diagnosis with a Composite Organism

The doctor mutters my diagnosis, her mouth
fenced around the first word: *Lichen*.
A tree falls, blocks my mind's path.
Lichen sclerosis,
very common in post-menopausal women.
The tree falls again.

I think of women at the Y, the older ones,
always there working out, sharpening themselves
into spears aimed at age. Behind them careers,
kids, marriages, so many pasts, so many branches,
reaching, tangled, snapping, descending. Now, as they begin

to revert back to earth, something new grows,
something frilled and strong, something on the inside
of their wrist or soft underside of breast, a scar
pearling over stone.

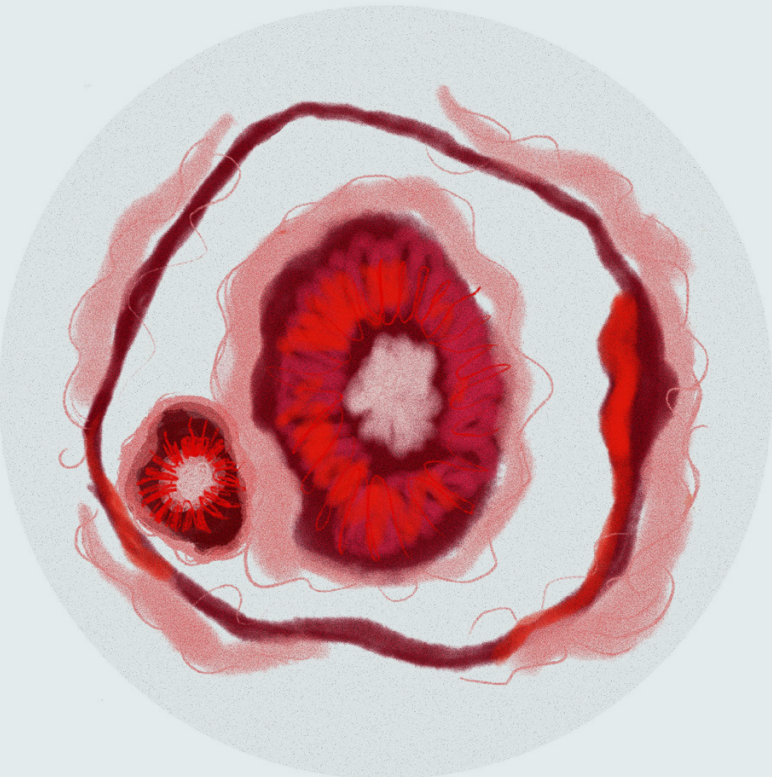


illustration by Breanna Diaz

Fishing

First, there is the white front porch with those vibrant green bushes in a gray cul-de-sac under a crackling sky. Second, there are the two of us, my father and I, clutching fishing rods, even though neither of us have ever actually fished. Understandable for me, age four, long-haired child of small-town suburbia. Less understandable for him, age twenty-seven, who has lived so many places he can't remember them all. Surely one of them had a pond. Surely his father, an airforce man, cared about fishing. The problem was his father seemed to care about everything but his only son so this is why my father had never been fishing. Third, there is that sweet-smelling rain starting slowly, then all at once, raindrops plunging like divers into the world, and we cast our rods into its sea as if we were experts with those crazy orange rubber galoshes up to our hips, heads tipped back, our auburn hair blowing in our eyes. *Crack!*—out go the lines, into the snarl of shrubs, flung like the dreams we harbor out and into the wild storm of everything. *Crack!*—maybe the electricity will strike us like Ben Franklin's kite, and we, too, will change the world. Maybe in that world, fathers will care for their sons and take them fishing under the summer blaze, under the blue sky with soft clouds white as my grandfather's hair. Fourth, *Crack!*—stubborn, taut resistance as our thin lines wrap their bodies around the thick branches of those green bushes. We tug, how we tug, and we laugh at the futility of the situation, though instead of *futile* I would've said *keep trying, keep trying, keep trying!* After one last good yank, the rods—my pink one and his black one—snap right in two, and the rain empties clean out of all those heavy clouds, with only that inexplicable scent of rain hovering over the concrete and in between strands of our damp hair. We go in after that. Fifth, like slow forgiveness, there is a whisper of a barefoot young child with long braids and a pink nightgown leaning over that front porch in the rain fishing for her father's dreams, still trying to untangle the lines.

City Deer

Every morning this week three speckled visitors
stood stock still in the middle of my yard, nibbling.
Each time I see them, my breath catches
and my fingers so preoccupied with producing
something worthy of praise

freeze in their wide headlight gaze.
They seemed insistent on minding their own business,
wholly unconcerned with matters of lesson
planning, or real estate, or even this little poem
of which they are the subject. They certainly do not

think about the poet who is, just now, fretting
madly about all these things. But
I suppose when you are a deer
in the middle of the city
you can't mind the traffic

and the cracked concrete
and the yellowing grass
too much. You can't be so terribly worried
about expectation or perfection.
You can only look

the neighborhood square in the eye, and simply
hold still with a curious wondering.
You can only move slowly,
and breathe, and then go on
eating your breakfast.



illustration by Ayumi Bergan

Alyssa Stadlander

saint mary on the mount

They built you a house and stained the glass
windows with renderings of your own life but you probably don't
recognize the white-skinned man in a long white robe

looking down his nose at the people bowed low
and hovering around his ankles. No, you do not even bestow
the building a backwards glance. Instead, you plant yourself

in the garden, a pale pink rosary draped over your palms
pressed together in determined desperation. Your knowing eyes
look out over the city, waiting for your beloved

son to crest the horizon, to warm the three wide rivers, the golden
bridges, the shadowy folds of your body. Yes, it is only out there that you see
your heart's glory, this sunrise waking us, and the gentle edges

of your lips turn upwards, joyous recognition on your face.

Songbird

Once the mackerel clouds
shrink into the sky
my mother appears as
a songbird that knocks against
my east-facing window.

The tulip trees and wisteria
agree on something
like silence as she claws
my davenport and pecks
my eyelids begging to be seen.

Some days I find
her body inert on the lawn
by an outcropping
her bloodied wings and soft
plumage cradled in my palms.
When she comes to

she warbles an apology.
"I forget I'm a bird
sometimes," she says
then chirps for me to fix
the window which appears
to her as a slipstream of air.

Recently I've been doing
fine without my mother
but she doesn't buy the lies
I feed her. She holds me
in her infirm wing squawking

that her new Florida friends
have already heard
the song of my loneliness.

if a blank canvas
ever craves (or creates) space

if biscotti cookies
ever long for sp(ice)

if denim
ever yearns for satin

if wo(men) on the moon
ever lose track of time

if laundromats
can erase all stains (& pain)

who writes the songs
that make old men cry

if sugar cane
contemplates sweetness

who writes the books
that make babies sigh

if puddles
ever consume their own reflection

if notebooks
ever feel pain

if rain clouds
ever doubt the return of sun(shine)

if coffee
ever aches for cream

if glasses of ice
ever resist melting

what Lousia May Alcott
would think of an online date

what Alcatraz
might make of Rikers

who reads (& writes)
top 10(0) baby names lists

if curry & cumin
prefer spice

if raindrops (& rainbows)
ever dream of dry heat

if headphones
ever seek silence

if flights across oceans
ever ease (or erase) pangs

if a name in lights
is the same as fame

if hell
refers to itself by name

if darkness
ever craves light

if Charlotte
meets Wilbur in heaven

what makes a name
persist afer life

if grief
ever reverses motion



[Ashley Nickel](#)

When Bears Walked Upright

medium: acrylic ink paint on watercolor paper

David runs, five times a week to be exact. Each day’s run comes with a different route, distance, and speed. For example, Mondays he runs a fast four miles at the Rillito River Park, Tuesdays he sprints 400 meters down on the block twelve times, Wednesdays are a slow six miles... etc. On Saturdays he runs trails. Trail runs strengthen the calves and ankles, and David especially cares about those parts of himself. He believes toned calves and ankles made him look more dignified. For this reason, Saturday runs were his favorite.

It is 8:12AM and David ties his shoelaces above the sound of his partner snoring in the bed. *A bit late.* He gnashes his teeth in anticipation as the neon green shoelaces slip in and out of his fingers. His mountain-dew green Garmin glares back at him with the time and his heartbeat, 85bpm. A little high David thinks, as his partner exhales loudly. It must be anxiety; at 10:30AM he plans to have brunch with his grandmother. He missed last weeks’ brunch and hates to disappoint his grandmother.

Each week, David chooses a new trail to run on. He never runs the same trail twice because he believes this sense of variety keeps him interesting to his partner. This week David has set his mind, or legs, to run Yetman’s trail in the Tucson Mountains. Finally, David finishes tying his shoes and, swinging his car keys over his index finger, walks out to the driveway. The morning proves gorgeous. Winter lingers in the cooled air, and last night’s rains have rejuvenated the colors of the desert to a pale musky glow. It was as if the desert was calling “Look at me!”

After double checking his face in the rearview mirror to see if he had in fact put sunscreen on, David ignites the engine and pulls out of the driveway. He feels pressure to not be away too long and worry his partner.

Once in the car, David relaxes. Heart rate: 74bpm. *That’s more like it.* David plugs in the aux and puts on British rap. He likes the way the rappers softly rolled their r’s. It leaves a minty aftertaste in his mouth. Even his GPS guides him in a British staccato.

St. Mary’s haphazard road snakes through the foothills of the Tucson mountains. As he climbs a hill, David peers through his rear-view mirror at a picturesque view of downtown Tucson. The tall brutalist buildings pixelate into a gray and blue gradient. He looks forward and imagines he’s exchanged an eighty’s movie for an Old Western. In the foothills, developments cluster off the side of the road like beehives among the organ pipe and cholla cactus. A chalk-colored Chevy Impala passes him, the driver has their head turned and looking out of the passenger window. David turns to look too, and the view shocks him.

A morning rain in the Catalinas sent clouds tumbling over the mountain range hovering right above the ground. David almost changes his mind and repeats a trail.

The Painted Hills Trail lay to his right, and an open parking spot, memory of a good run, and the view of the valley all tempt him. However, he readjusts his wrist over the steering wheel and retunes himself into Google Maps. He continues his original mission to Yetman's Trail.

At 8:33AM, he arrives. Yetman's Trail is more isolated than David imagined it would be, undoubtedly more isolated than the other trails he runs. He hops out of the car and faces the trail. It follows a canyon's base, two mountains like seized raindrops leap up from either side of it. To the West, far-off clouds tinge the sky gray. *Hopefully it doesn't rain.* David shudders at the thought of his car getting stuck in the mud here. His partner would kill him.

After jogging past the fence demarcating the trail's true beginning, he sees nothing but mountain hugging him on either side and more mountain still awaiting him on the other side of each turn. Scraggly cholla intrudes on the trail waiting for a high five and rocks burst up from the ground playing a cruel trick on the unaware trespasser. David doesn't mind, he dodges them all with ease. In truth, he buzzes like a roadrunner, the flat trail makes it easy. He smiles as he senses the muscles tearing and rebuilding in his calves. *Small steps* he reminds himself.

The canyon suddenly opened and the trail split, to one-way Yetman's trail continued far into the flattening desert, and to the other, a new trail, Bowen's trail, led to Starr Pass Resort. He chooses to go to the left. The open sky calls to him in birdsong. He is completely at ease. 8:56AM, one mile, 154bpm.

He passes an elderly man walking with a tall stick to his left. David huffs, "On your left."

"Oh yes, you scared me," the old man's voice echoes across the landscape. David apologizes.

"It's ok, have a nice run."

Then the whisper of the desert overcomes him again. David never checks his surroundings much when running; he keeps both eyes focused on the trail. When he does look at his surroundings, he only glances at the general landscape, blind to the creatures skulking within it. Only the crunch of their footsteps alerts him of their existence. He's larger than them all; he has nothing to fear.

Birds chirp around him when he reaches his second mile at 9:04AM. Suddenly, the trail steepens, and David's pace slows. He passes more hikers, all of whom move off the trail to let him pass. Hikers tend to be very kind to him, giving him the right-of-way on both the down and uphill. Maybe they feel glad they aren't running, or in the downhill case, fear David would run over them. David *is* a big man, six foot four and two hundred pounds.

Anyway, David pauses on the curve of the switchback to take some breaths. He surveys the land around him. The valley lies to the East flat as a pancake, yet the path before him unravels into something like Mario Kart.

Although severe, the desert brings David closer to the Earth than any other setting. He sucks in his breath like a lemon and blows it back out. The clouds in the western sky have moved eastward, revealing their graphite color. David, who only now notices the sky, feels a sudden pinch between his shoulder blades. He thinks it's either from staring down at the ground or from pressure to run faster to avoid the rain. 9:17AM, 2.67 miles. *Calm down.*

On the downhill David picks his speed up significantly and makes up time lost on the uphill. Every fifteen seconds or so he peers at the sky, watching the clouds enclose in on the canyon that leads him back to his car.

Something strange happens, while looking up David suddenly begins to fall toward the rocky trail, yet he never remembers landing. He just remembers his head hurts from then on and he keeps running.

Once on the canyon floor, raindrops begin to prick his skin, even though sun still shines above him. *Damn it.* 9:35AM, 3 miles. He sprints. The rain picks up. He passes a family with two little girls, who talk excitedly about the spots appearing in the dirt. "Look, Mommy! A raindrop!" 9:42AM, 4 miles. David's head throbs.

He was now close to the end, back where the trail had split. He no longer worries; his feet barely place themselves on the ground before picking themselves back up. Birds chirp frantically about him. A medium sized black bird with a white chest and hooked beak flies across the path in front of him. A lizard, or the sound of one, is heard from off the trail.

Now, the sky above is clouded and the rain falls thick as a shower. David feels as if his head is splitting and he considers stopping. His partner would understand, he wasn't a monster. Looking down at the path, he notices how the individual drops stain the rocks. One drop near the crevice of a rock appears red. Is that blood? He can't distinguish the red of the drop from a deeper shade of the rock's natural one revealed by rain, so he shakes the thought from his mind.

As he continues, he notices more red drops. All of them slightly darker than the granite colors of the rock, so he thinks of blood. Or, maybe, his headache is making him nervous. 9:44AM, 4.2 miles. The more he thinks about red on the rocks, the more he sees them, until they are streaks, until they are stains on the rocks' surfaces. His head hurts, pounds. He remembers his fall again, and this time he remembers the trail in front of him before he hit the ground. He remembers a big shadow blocking the path.

It must've been just a coyote hunting a bird, he reasons. However, he keeps seeing the red. All the rocks in his path drip in red. His arms grow cold. It really rains now, and the red slathers onto his body, growing colder in the winter rain, claiming David for its own. He wishes to look somewhere else besides the ground.

But when he looks up, he no longer sees the trail neither in front of nor behind him. He is in the canyon still, but off the trail. Saguaro stands on each side of him, like judges in a court. His head hurts. He thinks.

The clouds in the western sky have moved eastward, revealing their graphite color. David, who only now notices the sky, feels a sudden pinch between his shoulder blades.

All he has to do is continue down the canyon's floor and he should be spit out back again by the beginning of the trail.

He edges the dry creek bed and hugs the creosote bushes. The creosote's leaves splotch with red. *They were already dried red from winter*, he reassures himself.

He runs, now sprints. He can't even feel his head, weightless and cold upon his shoulders. He longs to get back to his car, to turn on the heater, to listen to British rap. He longs to pull into his driveway, to hear his partner scold him before rushing to grab the Tylenol, or Advil. He longs for his shower, for his grandmother's smile and warm food. He makes an effort not to look at the ground, but when he looks ahead, he is surrounded by creosote and mesquite glistening with red. His heart beats in slow motion. *How can I still be running?*

9:50AM, 4.6 miles, 32 bpm. He should be back to the parking lot by now. He stops again, much to his frustration, to get his bearings.

Somehow, he has climbed up and away from the canyon's floor, but from this vantage point he can see the fence demarcating the start of the trail. He thinks he knows this place, it looks familiar to him. A dream of head meeting hard rock and mixing with it cuts through his dreams of British rap, impatient partners, showers, and grandmas. But, then, he forgets. He pumps his fist. *I'll make it*. He shivers. The earth has frozen around him. 9:51, 4.6 miles, 4bpm.

He tears through a creosote bush blocking his path, blood shaking off the leaves like a leaping fire. He remembers falling, he remembers the shadow blocking his path coming to life in the form of a mountain lion. Fear forms in a bleaching skeleton. David opens his eyes wide, gasps for air. Just then, the sky meets the earth and the rain washes and washes.

There once lived a very satisfied cat. Satisfied because instead of living in the confines of mortared walls, they lived in alleyways, and instead of eating questionably dried meat bits they feasted on fresh pigeons, rats, and the occasional canned tuna. They liked to tease the other house cats by prancing gracefully on the walls of backyards. They liked to evoke pity in humans with their Ferrell inclined depravity.

Most days, the cat slept under a green-trunked tree and between two prickly bushes in front of a house. The dog inside the house liked to bark at them from the front room because the dog wanted to eat them, but to everyone else in the house, it appeared the dog was barking at the corner of the room. “How strange,” the household, including the other dog, thought. You see, none of them could see through walls, and more importantly, none of them, except for the dog, had a sniffer for distinguishing cats. However, the cat took no notice, not being able to hear the bark through the modern soundproof walls (the cat lived in a relatively nice neighborhood—the kind where families of college graduates still paying off their Student Plus plans live.) The cat took no notice when the family began to believe their dog was barking at a ghost that lived in their house. The cat had no care when the ghost in the living room became an obsession, something for the family to mention to guests so they seemed interesting. The cat stretched, purred, and hummed to the rhythm of cicadas in the green-trunked tree all the same. “At least the ghost only seems to be haunting during the day” the family agreed.

One day, the cat woke from napping and felt a sticker in their paw. They brought their hind paw up to meet their mouth when a bright flash of light caught their attention. Narrowing their cat eyes, they looked through the prickly bushes to the path leading to the front door of the house. A man walked down it; a strange man. The man wore all black except for a salient white collar that stiffed around his neck that folded like gills. A silver necklace lay around the man’s neck, ending in a cross that gleamed in the sun. Behind the man, a familiar woman and familiar man followed, the woman holding onto the man’s elbow with her hand. Maybe, if the cat were human he would know this was the mother and father of the family that lived there. The three of them walked silently and hurriedly down the path. To be clear, the scene and the strange man interested the cat only to the extent that it was near where they slept, and all wild animals know sleeping spots are sacred and necessarily need to be secure. The cat licked the sticker out of their paw, and tossing it to the side, lay down again.

The cat closed their eyes when FLASH! Another shot of bright light emanated from the strange man’s chest through the cat’s eyelids. Enough! “*Rawr!*” They cried out in wild frustration. This spot was obviously no longer good for the cat. They got up and tore across the yard and path, crossed the people, who

stopped and stared. They ran straight into the low-hanging grapefruit branches of the old-woman-on-the-corner’s tree. They settled down in the shade and slept. The cat was, after all, pretty tired. They then had a nice dream about chasing flat silver animals with triangles for legs, gilly necks, and scary eyeballs that smelled delicious like the pungent meat the old woman on the corner sometimes offered to him from cans.

The cat couldn’t see this part, but afterward the strange man with the stiff collar and gleaming necklace twisted his hands behind his back and muttered: A black cat. Yes, the Devil was undoubtedly here. But no more. God bless.

We Tore the Sun in Two. That’s what the headline said. I read it on my phone and skimmed the article in disbelief. The Solaris Mission had been experimenting with nuclear fusion in outer space. The quest for unlimited energy. Instead, they ripped the sun apart. They sent the message back in time to us, through a black hole...

I stopped reading. Does it matter how it happened? I knew enough basic science. We had 8 light minutes before it was all over.

I was in my black office building. Everyone was gathering at the elevators. I looked around at crying faces and scared children in ugly ties and baggy pant suits. My boss clutched his briefcase to his chest. They all got in the elevator, and so did I. We rode it up. It took 34 seconds. I didn’t know the song that played.

One by One
One by One, by One
One by One

I got out on the top floor, the roof. There was a line in the hallway to get outside. I got in it. I asked the gruff, chubby man ahead of me what was taking so long. What are we waiting for? He shrugged his shoulders. Dunno. There were six or so minutes left.

There was a man waiting in the doorway, stuck holding the door permanently open for the unmoving line. He stuck his head outside into the morning. “It smells like butter!” He said.

Then, a kid from IT came in from outside, shaking his head. He did the no go sign with his hand, mock cutting his own throat. Won’t work. He said. No more pavement. It’s just a pile of bodies down there. He said. Too soft.

A few people abandoned the line and followed him into the stairs. I followed them. They galloped down, searching for a new, clear landing from which to throw themselves off. They exited the stairwell on the 6th floor. I stopped and watched them run through rows of desks towards the southern facing porch. I kept going down.

On the 3rd floor, there was another smaller deck over the western facing facade. Four and a half minutes to go. As I jogged through the kitchenette, I heard a small, stifled, gurgling sound.

A woman slumped down in the corner, holding a basket of strawberries next to an open mini refrigerator. They looked shiny, red and delicious. Could I have

one? I asked. No, she said. Just one? They're mine. Please? The woman looked up.

There were three minutes left, when I got outside.

I wrote this. Who am I even writing this for, besides myself? My name is Madeline Sayers. There is one minute left, now. I will stop. There is a man out here. His name is Clark. We watch bodies fly and tumble through the sky. I wonder if it will hurt, when the sun splits. I wonder if I should've gotten off on the 6th floor. If we will slowly freeze or dissolve or shatter. I ask Clark. He says what has been will simply not be.

I remember it's not 8 minutes. Slightly longer. A decimal more. I will hold Clark so close to me. We will share this small strawberry. We will stare right at the sun. There's not a cloud in the sky. A shame. It would have been such a nice day.



illustration by Sabrina Ellis

Method of ‘Thinking’

Edited by Taylor Shoda

It’s the summer after my freshman year of college and I get a job at a store in my parents’ neighborhood that exclusively sells satin jackets. Everything is overpriced. On my first day, I sign tax forms and answer questions about my BMI and astrological sign. I am shown how to clean the succulent wall and restock the shelves using a 20-foot rose gold hook. There’s a paragraph in the handbook about how to formally address our boss. She is either to be called by her last name or “OT,” which I’m told means “Owner/Tailor.” We are not allowed to look her in the eye.

The store is no bigger than a walk-in closet. The floor is concrete, the walls are covered in mirrors, the ceiling too. I am encouraged by my surroundings to do nothing but stare at myself all day. This does not bode well for my self-image. At the beginning of summer break, I got a bad haircut that I’m forced to watch grow out, one shift at a time. I wish someone had told me I didn’t have the right face shape for a “lob.” This is also the summer I stop shaving my armpits because I keep giving myself ingrown hairs, although I tell my mom I’m making a statement. My period reappears after a six-month hiatus when I start taking birth control and Kate Spade hangs herself in her apartment. I can’t look at my KS purse, a bat mitzvah gift from my grandma, without thinking about dying, so I dig up a tote bag from the pantry and start using that instead.

On average, I greet about two customers a day. OT complains about the lack of foot traffic, but the real problem is that she’s trying to sell a product nobody on this side of Beverly can afford. The business model doesn’t make any sense either. OT outsources all the designs to a team of eager fashion students who she neither credits nor pays. Because she is obsessed with buying the highest quality Italian fabrics, the company makes no profit. I have no idea where my salary comes from. Meanwhile, OT doesn’t eat anything besides almonds and is cheating on her husband with the landlord. Part of my job is to pretend like I don’t see all of this.

It’s a Wednesday, which means it’s even quieter than quiet. I’ve been working at the store for a month and a half. Emily rhythmically taps the desk with her press-on nails. We aren’t usually in the store at the same time but she’s taking over the afternoon shift and I still have a few minutes before I clock out. I’m steaming the lining of the jackets like she taught me, hoping she’ll tell me I’m doing a good job.

I’m jealous because OT fawns over Emily, who gets paid extra to model for the website. I stare at her face every time I open the store computer. She looks like she weighs about ninety pounds, her body seeming more bird-like than human. I should worry. Instead, I poke at my stomach and zip up the defective sample jacket they give me to wear at work that’s a size “extra-large,” according to the

label, although I'm usually a "small." The jackets are designed for children or women with eating disorders. It makes me sad watching potential customers try to squeeze themselves into two-thousand dollars of neon pink and green metallic satin.

"Why do they run so small?" Everyone asks.

"We will be expanding sizing soon," I spit out robotically. That's what OT tells us to say, although I'm sure she has no intention of making her brand more inclusive.

Suddenly, some pop song I don't recognize blares through the sound system, drowning Emily out. Someone in the back office must've disapproved of my early 2000s pop-country playlist. I'm embarrassed but try not to show it. I've gotten used to doing everything wrong. I'm trying to reframe it as a talent.

"Hey," Emily says, leaning against the desk, which is also covered in mirrors. "Can I ask you something?" Her voice lowers a whole octave.

"Sure." I attempt to mask the uneasiness I feel. She leans in closer, practically whispering in my ear. Her breath smells like cigarettes and five-spice.

"Are you one of them?"

We both let the question linger. I have no idea what she's referring to. I fear if I respond too quickly, it'll seem like I'm lying or hiding something.

After a few moments of silence, I ask: "What?"

"You know," she says, discreetly pointing in the direction of the back office. "A Scientologist."

"I'm not," I assure her, trying to sound as convincing as possible. The blood rushes to my face and I turn tomato-like. I become hyper-aware of the security cameras hanging from the ceiling. I look for potential escape routes, but Emily is blocking me from the door. You hear a lot of stories growing up in LA. Parents who train their kids to indoctrinate their friends. Kids who think it's a funny prank to go check out the church, then never come home. One time, my brother's friend with Scientologist parents gave him a "vitamin" to "replace his electrolytes" when they were staying up late to finish a biology project. It had some sort of symbol on it. My brother started feeling weird and called me crying, begging me to not tell our parents.

"Ok, good," Emily says louder than she should. She backs away from the desk and plops down dramatically into one of the armchairs. "Basically, I went to OT yesterday after my shift and told her I wanted to stop drinking. I knew she got sober a few years ago and I guess, like, I was looking for some guidance. My mom hasn't been much help."

There's a beeping sound coming from the tablet embedded into the wall that indicates my shift is over, but I feel like I can't leave now. I clock out and sit in the chair next to her.

You hear a lot of stories growing up in LA. Parents who train their kids to indoctrinate their friends. Kids who think it's a funny prank to go check out the church, then never come home.

"Never mind," Emily says. "You can go if you need to."

"It's all good." My voice cracks as I assure her. I can tell she notices but pretends not to.

"So we're sitting in the back office and she tells me that she did something that worked. She was being all cryptic about it. I was like, *AA?* And she says, *no, no don't go there.*"

I see where this is going but I don't say anything.

"She starts talking about *Scientology*," she whispers the word, "handing me pamphlets, inviting me to events, telling me all the ways it's helped her. She's got a whole cabinet of products with symbols and shit." Emily takes a break from talking to suck on her vape pen, then exhales through her nose. "And then I blacked out."

"You what?"

"She told me about this energy drink that helped her quit. She had some extra, so I tried it. And then I woke up in my car."

"How did you get into your car?"

"Do you not know how blacking out works? I don't remember."

Footsteps echo in the hallway behind the shop.

"Dude, *everyone* in the company is in it," Emily whispers. "Most of the models too."

About a dozen follow up questions come to mind, yet "wow" is all I can muster. In truth, I'm selfishly wrapped up in my own safety. What if I'd been offered the drink? Would I have taken it out of fear of losing my job? What does that say about me?

"I'm going to quit soon. I think you should too." She takes another hit from the pen. "OT said our conversation inspired her to schedule a company meeting, whatever the fuck that means. I don't wanna find out. Probably some indoctrination bullshit."

There is a lull in the conversation and I feel as though I have to fill it.

"I go back to school soon anyway," I say.

"Right," Emily says. "Fucking academic we got over here."

"Barely."

"I wanna go to med school one day," she admits, then pauses to suck from her pen, an item suddenly embedded with irony. "Wanna help little kids and shit."

"A pediatrician," I say. "That's cool."

"No like, not for feet," she says. "For kids."

Before I can correct her, she says: "Well, thanks for listening," although she doesn't sound like she means it. She stands up, walks behind the desk, and starts emptying the contents of her designer bag: to-go iced coffee, phone, nail

polish (she really gets away with a lot here) and acts like we didn't just share this brief moment of connection. I know this is my cue to leave. I hang up the sample jacket in the employee closet and say goodbye to her casually, although it feels strange because we may never see each other again. We both seem to be okay with the prospect of that.

The company meeting never happens. Instead, I get an email from OT saying that the store is closing for renovations. By the time it'll reopen, I'll already be back in Providence for my second year of college. The timing of this is eerie but I don't question it.

For the last few weeks of summer, I don't do much besides walk around my parents' neighborhood, watch baking competition shows and get my heart so badly broken that I question death when I see it, but that's a story for another time. At the library, I pick up a copy of *Dianetics* and flip through it, the way you do when you're assessing the weight and feel of a book, not the words themselves. I spot the letters "OT" throughout and understand, even laugh a little at my obliviousness and my boss's obviousness.

Then I flip to a random page. It must be an important chapter, at least for the book's previous owner, because the binding is showing through the middle, bony like a human spine. It begins: "There is a method of 'thinking' which Man did not know he had." And for a moment, I want to believe it.



[Ashley Nickel](#)

The Traveling Companion

medium: cut-paper illustration

It was summer in Antarctica, and so the ever-present sun suspended above us in constant high noon. A satellite dish cast the only shadow for miles, propped up by a skeleton of scaffolding. Its hundred-foot mouth gaped at the empty sky. On the tundra below, our sled dogs nipped at each other, unperturbed by the cold.

My boot slipped on the melting ice and for a moment I teetered on the edge of the satellite's platform, ten feet above the ground, before Dr. Brooke caught my arm. His mirrored goggles reflected my face in fish-eye.

"Careful, Rothwell," he said. Brooke was a small man, but his voice contained unexpected gravel—probably from all those goddamn cigarettes. He used to smoke them at his computer after each meal, like dessert, until the smell got on my nerves and I made him take them outside. Sometimes I watched him from the window—cigarette tucked between his gloved fingers, smoke mixing with the vapor of his breath.

"Thanks," I said.

The satellite hadn't been properly designed for subzero—a generator pumped hot water through a maze of pipes to keep the electronics warm, but a section of piping kept freezing over, so once a week we took the sled out to salt the frozen machinery. Brooke surveyed the sloughs of slush with a nod. He tossed his shovel over the edge, careful to avoid the dogs, and heaved a salt bag into his arms. I followed suit, balancing a bag on my shoulder to make it down the ladder. We piled the supplies back on the sled and climbed on. Brooke hawed at the dogs, who took off over the packed snow, running us the mile back to the station.

For the past three months, Brooke and I had been the sole occupants of Dobson Station, a remote research site located in the white wasteland between the South Pole and Lake Vostok. The Earth's ozone layer was weakest down here, and we were contracted by a private energy company to study the bits of radiation and solar wind that slipped through the cracks. Decades in the field had convinced me that the climate crisis's end would be long, brutal, and generally unstoppable, but the public liked to know the numbers.

It was dinner time when we reached the station, but the unrelenting sun still slanted in. Dobson was outfitted with a clock in each room and blackout curtains for the windows in a futile attempt to keep our circadian rhythms semi-regular. On our first night, I tried to shut the curtains in our shared quarters, but Brooke protested. He'd looked so pitiful that I agreed to keep them cracked and settle for a sleep mask. At least the sun would keep the place warm.

Brooke needed a lot of accommodations. He needed the alarm to go off at 7 am every day, even on weekends. He needed to count the dogs in the attached kennel at lunch and again at dinner. He needed to listen to David Bowie when he coded, and he needed to listen to Queen when he drafted the daily progress report. Once he let it slip that he was ex-military, said systems kept him grounded.

I didn't ask any more questions. After all, we'd both applied to the station job under the assumption we would be alone. You need some kind of screw loose to ask for that, even if we'd both managed to bullshit our way through the psych evals.

A supply shipment came in every four weeks; we'd just gotten one yesterday. Canned food, coffee, tools for the equipment. Chewing gum for me, a fresh battalion of cigarettes for Brooke. We received a pack of beer we planned to finish that night over a movie. Internet was spotty at best, so we took turns picking from the DVD collection. Brooke had the uncanny ability to sense if a movie would feature a tragic dog-death scene, even when there wasn't a dog anywhere on the cover. Inevitably we watched the movie to confirm, inevitably Brooke was right, inevitably we were both drunk enough to cry.

Brooke wanted another cigarette before bed, and something made me sit outside with him, even though I knew being in the sun would make it difficult to sleep.

"Did you read the reports from yesterday?" Brooke asked. He offered me a pull, and I shook my head. The taste of tobacco reminded me of my second ex-wife, which might be the reason why I sometimes thought about kissing Brooke. I think I just liked terrible decisions.

"Not yet," I said. We received updates from our contractor over email, but the connection was inconsistent, so they sent us physical copies with each supply shipment.

"They're returning to the original plan."

"Which is...?"

Brooke blew out a stream of smoke. "Only one of us." Panic sluiced through me, but I suppressed it as Brooke continued, "I don't know who they're cutting or when, but I wanted to make sure you knew."

"And do you want it? The job?"

Brooke shrugged. The tip of his nose was bright red from the cold. "I'm here, aren't I?"

Later in our quarters, I waited for Brooke's breath to go even before slipping out to the lab. Lack of access to alcohol had my tolerance shot—my old counselor would have been proud—and the beers from earlier set me on the edge of a headache. I shut the blinds against the merciless sun and shuffled through updates until I found the one Brooke referenced. He was right. Not that I thought

After all, we'd both applied to the station job under the assumption we would be alone. You need some kind of screw loose to ask for that, even if we'd both managed to bullshit our way through the psych evals.

he'd been lying, but I had to be sure. Out of curiosity, I opened Brooke's desk drawer where he kept his letters home, but it was empty, the missives sent away with the shipping boat. He wrote to his mother, who lived in a nursing home, to his daughter, who was going through medical school.

I didn't write any letters. Which meant I was goddamn perfect for a solitary job.

I spent the rest of the night prepping a new radiation-detection project we were set to run. I didn't know what the deciding factor would be when they made the cut, but putting in a couple more hours couldn't hurt. It was around 4am when I opened Brooke's code for the new project. His love of systems did not seem to translate to programming, because it was nearly impossible to decipher—I deleted a commented Bowie lyric. It wasn't until 5am that I managed, with a burst of satisfaction, to unearth an error.

I would fix it. I would fix Brooke's mistake and turn it in and then they would keep me.

"What are you doing up?"

I jumped so hard my knee cracked on the underside of the desk. Jerkily, I shut the tab and turned to Brooke, who leaned against the doorjamb, looking half-asleep and a little hungover.

"You know we don't get paid for overtime," he said with an awkward laugh.

"I'll go back to bed soon. I was just, uh, looking over the code for tomorrow."

Brooke suddenly looked awake. My eyes narrowed. "What's wrong?" I said.

"Nothing. The code works, I ran it earlier."

"Are you sure? Because I found a mistake."

"There are no mistakes. I just told you, it ran earlier without any bugs."

I reopened the computer tab as Brooke came up behind me, arms tight across his chest. "Look," I said, jabbing at the screen. "These lines—they're suppressing data. You're not allowing the full radiation spectrum to come through."

"I see," Brooke said. He schooled his features, but I'd struck enough nerves in my lifetime to know I'd snagged one of his.

I forced a laugh, even as my insides soured. "Well, no need to be embarrassed. It's an easy fix, I'll just send quick note to headquarters—"

"Don't." We both startled at the urgency in his tone. Brooke swallowed. "Arthur—"

I flinched at the sound of my name, and Brooke sighed, shoulders sagging. "—Rothwell," he amended. "Just let me handle the programming."

"No. You made the mistake, I caught it." I paused for a beat, then added, "I'm not going to let you take credit for that."

Brooke tore a hand through his hair. "Fine! It's not a mistake, okay? I said to leave it, so leave it."

"You're saying this isn't a mistake? You're suppressing data," I said. "The high peaks of radiation—you're filtering them out of the records. What the hell?"

"Rothwell," Brooke started.

"You're doctoring data. You realize this shit has real world consequences?" I leapt from my chair, almost tripping over myself. My headache lurched against my temples.

"I'm just following orders!" Brooke spread his hands, whether to catch me or ward me off, I wasn't sure. "Headquarters told me to—"

It had been hours since my last beer, but I felt drunk again. "They—what? *Headquarters* told you to doctor the data?" The room spun. If they gave Brooke this secret order, they must trust him more.

"Contact them," Brooke pleaded. "They gave me a bonus, they'll give you one too—"

"That's not the point. How can you just—"

A chorus of screens lit red with marching error messages. Brooke swore. "The satellite. It's frozen over. We must not have been thorough enough yesterday." He swept past me. "We have to defrost it or there'll be a data gap."

"Oh, because you clearly care so much about authentic results," I snapped.

Brooke paused trying to get both boots on at once. "I'm sorry, Rothwell, okay? I know it's wrong, but if keeping my job means keeping my head down, so be it. I—I need to be here."

"So what's your PhD in, again? Ass kissing?"

We stared at each other, and the force of his gaze nearly pressed a gasp out of me, until he pulled the reflective goggles over his eyes. "We'll talk after we salt the machines." He disappeared out the station door, leaving me shivering in the burst of cold.

I wanted to protest, but instead I clenched my jaw and piled on my clothes. By the time I made it outside, Brooke had the dogs tacked and the sled loaded. We didn't speak on the ride from Dobson, not that we could have anyway—the wind was picking up, tearing at our ears and kicking up whirls of snow. Sunlight glinted off each flake.

We reached the satellite. Ice clawed at the machinery; it looked like a dead giant, frozen in place. I mounted the ladder, knocking loose snow off the rungs. At the platform, Brooke tore open the bags and we got to work.

Maybe I was being unfair. Maybe Brooke did need this job—he had people who relied on him, cared about him. But wasn't that just it? He didn't belong out here, not like I did.

"Why didn't you tell me about the code?" I shouted against the wind.

"What?" Brooke called back.

We reached the satellite. Ice clawed at the machinery; it looked like a dead giant, frozen in place.

"Why didn't they—" I broke off with a swear, my grip tightened on the shovel. It was subzero, but sweat trickled down my spine. The words escaped my gritted teeth before I could stop them. "Why do you even want this job?"

Brooke stabbed his shovel into the salt.

"You want it enough that you're willing to lie," I said. "So, what is it?"

"I just need some quiet, okay? Things...things out there are so loud. I just need time to—"

Even with my goggles, sunspots flared across my line of vision. Brooke's figure blurred, went double, slid back together with each throb of my head. "You... you don't..."

Brooke stopped shoveling. "Wait. Is this about one of us being cut?" When I didn't reply, he laughed. "You don't give a shit about authenticity! You're jealous they asked me to do it!"

"Like they would ever keep you."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

I threw down my shovel, and it clanged against the platform. "You think you can handle this alone? You're a grown man scared of the fucking *dark*, Brooke. You realize Antarctica is all day right now because it's going to be all night later?"

"Shut up," Brooke said, so quiet I could barely hear him.

"Yeah, or what? You'll start counting at me? Does headquarters know how fucked you are, or should I mention that when I write in for my bonus?"

I didn't mean to push him, or I don't think I did. One step forward and my boot caught on my shovel. I tripped forward, slipped on ice, and rammed into Brooke. He went over the side of the platform, his body hanging in the air for a moment like a cartoon, before he plummeted to the ground ten feet below.

I dropped to my knees and scrambled to the edge, heart in my mouth. Brooke lay splayed on the ground, unmoving, wrist crooked. The dogs, still attached to the sled, pulled themselves into a tangle trying to all lick his face at once. They wouldn't do that if he were dead, right?

I was halfway down the ladder when Brooke finally rolled over and shoved himself to his feet. The dogs yipped and bounced around him, tails pinwheeling. I nearly laughed with relief.

"Brooke!" I shouted. "Thank god, I'm so sorry, I—"

He didn't look at me. Instead, he clucked his tongue at the dogs, and they returned to formation.

"Brooke?"

He climbed onto the sled and hawed. The dogs started running. My mouth went slack as I watched them leave.

When the weather was good, I could see Dobson from here—I could have watched him ride all the way home without me. But today the sky hung

low, a mist of snow obscuring the station from view; Brooke and the dogs disappeared.

The sun felt cold. Inexplicably, I thought of my name on Brooke’s lips. No one familiar enough to use it ever lasted long.

My first wife and I were assistant professors. We worked in the same lab—it took me two marriages to realize that was a bullshit idea. She didn’t document her ongoing projects well enough; *Rothwell* didn’t mean much when there were two of us, and when we divorced, most of her work became mine. She couldn’t look at me and I couldn’t apologize even if I wanted to, so I took to sleeping in my office with a pillow propped on the desk. If any of our undergrad assistants noticed, they were too afraid of collateral to do anything. It felt like the world caving in—if only I’d known then how far a person can run.

The last time I saw her was in the parking lot outside the courtroom. The yawning space between us was a different kind of infinity. *Bravo*, Arthur, she said behind sunglasses. *Encore*. Over a decade later, she still has no research papers in her name, and I still like things chewed up and spit out.

My lungs shivered under a sudden pressure, as if the empty air had weight. Just me and the sleeping satellite, and thousands upon thousands of miles of ice. Antarctica was a desert—most people didn’t know that. It was the largest desert in the goddamn world. I could pick a direction and no one would miss me.

I yanked a compass from my belt and started walking.

What should have been a ten minute sled ride took me over an hour. I shoved open the station door and fell inside. The heat of indoors made my skin burn.

Brooke leaned over one of the computers—he froze when I came in. One of his hands was wrapped in bandages.

“What are you doing?” I said.

“Sending an SOS to headquarters,” Brooke replied. “You broke my fucking wrist.”

I felt dizzy. I was hungover, I was thirsty, I’d spent too much time in the sun. “You—you can’t—” I winced. “Don’t tell them—they won’t-won’t keep me...”

Brooke gaped. He turned back to the computer, typing as fast as one hand would allow.

Panic surged. He couldn’t send it. I ran past him to the utility closet, tore open the control panel, grabbed a fistful of wire, and pulled so hard I fell backward when they broke. The constant hum of computers ceased as every screen blinked black, as every lightbulb went out. The curtains were still drawn from earlier, and the room plunged into darkness so absolute I couldn’t make out my own hands.

From somewhere to my right, Brooke drew a shaking breath. “That’s not funny, Rothwell. Turn the lights back on.”

I squeezed my eyes shut, as if that would make it all disappear more than it already had.

"I'm being serious, I can't...I—" He swore. "Please, Rothwell, turn them on."

I took an audible step in his direction and he gasped like I'd hit him. This, too, reminded me of people I used to know—blows with no punches.

"*Stop*. Don't m-move. Don't move when I can't see you." He started scrambling; something crashed off the desk, a chair slammed into the wall.

"Don't tell them," I said. "I didn't even push you! It was an accident, I was just—"

Brooke found the station door, and I shielded my eyes from the sudden inpour of light. He stumbled out and landed on his knees, heaving and trembling like a drowned man. One of the dogs howled from the kennel.

I followed him out. Before I could say or do anything, Brooke threw himself at me, knocking the air from my chest and sending us both sprawling.

"You're out of your mind," he hissed. Melted snow plastered his hair to his temples. Our faces were inches apart; I winced as the smell of tobacco wafted over me.

"I didn't push you!"

"You ripped out our electricity! You realize our *heater* is electric? Of course they're not going to keep you, you're actually out of your *mind*—"

My fist swung of its own accord, and his nose crushed under my knuckles. It broke easier than I expected—blood bloomed. Brooke tried to pull off me, but I buried a hand in his collar. His good fist hit my sternum, my face, and a labored gasp of vapor burst from his mouth with each blow.

Blood in the snow. It didn't seem real, so stark and bright it hurt to look at. The sun rendered the world shadowless.

I stood, stumbled. Before I could rescue my balance, Brooke shouldered me against the side of the station, the metal so cold it bit. Red ran from his nose, filling the spaces between gritted teeth. I caught his broken wrist, pinched it between my fingers until he swore and knocked my legs from under me. He aimed a kick at my ribcage then staggered out of reach, chest hitching. The dogs keened again, sensing something amiss. My pounding head kept tune, still hungover and sunsick.

"Arthur," Brooke said, my own name his sentencing. He stood over me, his head perfectly blocking out that derisive Antarctic sun. The rays framed his face like a halo, even as blood dribbled down his chin. "Why do you want this job so bad?"

"Because," I said. I thought of yesterday's movie, how Brooke predicted the ending but cried anyway; I wonder if he ever predicted this. To me, I couldn't see it any other way. "I ruin people."

He stared at me a final time, expression impossible. "You can have it," he said, and went back to the station. The door closed behind him.

The aching tundra swallowed me.



[Eli Nachimson](#)

Eye of the Sun

medium: digital photograph



[Eli Nachimson](#)

Masked Boy

medium: digital photograph

When You Won't Look So Pretty

They called me the German. Sure, my dad came from Germany but I was born in Spring Valley, Illinois. Coal town. Still, the name stuck: *German*. I didn't mind. In those early days I welcomed any reason to stand out. Fighting alone wasn't enough. Everyone I knew was a fighter. Miners and railway workers by day, fighters by night.

What choice did we have? We were kids with nowhere to go but home and that was the last place we wanted to be. We were terrified of ending up like our dads. Bitter and broken. Drinking ourselves to death. They beat us. Woe unto the kid that dared do something about it. This one kid Paulie teased his dad. "That all you got, old man?" Got hit with a claw hammer and then he wasn't right in the head no more. Started hearing voices that weren't there. Got so involved with them he didn't even notice his real friends stopped visiting.

So we let our dads hit us. Same as their dads had done to them. We vowed to pass on the blows too when we had kids. But for now, we had to content ourselves with hitting each other. We were good at it. We were strong like you wouldn't believe. We dug coal and laid tracks with our bare hands. Fourteen-hour days. Got blown to bits by a bad fuse, some of us did. Got our shoulders dislocated, hands crushed. But if you survived the day, you went out to fight.

There were bars around town where we made a few dollars if we put on a clean show. No sending guys through the ropes, breaking tables. It wasn't about the money though. We tried killing each other so we wouldn't kill ourselves. Call us savages because that's what we were. Never did I fight harder than when I fought my friends. Never did I want to kill a man as bad, truly murder him. Not until I met Ketch that is. Stanley Ketchel.

By the time I met Ketchel in the ring I was no longer known as the German. Thunderbolt was what the newspapers called me. Again, I welcomed it. Got me a manager pretty soon after and I was on my way. See, boxing is not just about the blows. It's about the show too. Folks don't remember Billy Papke. Even among my friends there was a handful of Billies. But they remember the Thunderbolt.

Ketch knew this. They called him the Assassin because he laid his opponents out cold. He wasn't a graceful fighter. By God, was he a slugger. But he was a showman too. He wore chaps and spurs. Wanted everyone to believe he was a cowboy. It worked. Folks talked about him. Said he'd knocked out two-hundred men before going pro. No one figured he was just some Polish kid from Grand Rapids, Michigan. His real name sounded like a mouthful of gravel. Didn't matter. Didn't matter he was just a kid who ran away from home when he was fourteen. Ketch understood better than any of us that fighting is a kind of storytelling.

I lost not a single fight in my first two years of going pro. Twenty-three solid wins. Pound for pound I was the toughest fighter in the middleweight division. They called me Thunderbolt because of my corkscrew uppercuts and loop-de-loops. I'd put my opponent against the ropes, hook my left arm under their right, turn to my left, bring my right fist up and around the outside and *boom*, nailed them. Only two years into my professional career and already I was headed for the world title. Until this bull they called the Assassin snatched it right from under my nose. Then I wanted to murder him as bad as I did my friends back home.

Notice how Ketch's nickname had nothing to do with skill, only with his brutality? He was nearly unstoppable. I say "nearly" because I was able to stop him. And of course, he's been long dead now, stopped for good. I've been told when his manager heard that Ketch was dead, he said, "Give him the count and he'll get up again." People thought he was unstoppable because he was such a ruthless hitter. Getting hit by Stanley Ketchel was like getting hit with an anvil. He had an incredibly long reach. He used it to put momentum behind his punches. The man possessed no grace. Fighting him was like fighting a windmill. He just kept swinging those gorilla arms.

I'd heard all this when I got in the ring with him but I'd not witnessed it in person. The day before our first fight I went to see who I'd be dealing with. His training camp was in Whitefish Bay, a few miles outside of Milwaukee. That's where the fight was held. He was surprised to see me and I couldn't for the life of me determine what all the hullabaloo was about. He was just a Midwestern kid like so many I knew back home.

"You've got an edge on me," I told him. "You saw me put up a fight against Hugo Kelly but I never before saw you until this minute."

He replied, "I'll see you later when you won't look so pretty."

Oh, he was arrogant, that Ketchel. Next morning, he told the newspapers, "I came a long way to get this fellow and haven't the slightest doubt that he will fall like all the rest of them." This from a cowboy.

He knocked me down four seconds after the opening bell. First time I ever hit the canvas. Caught a short right hand just as I moved in and it almost turned out the lights. I backed off then but next round I came at him hard. He clinched me. I ducked low and drove my head up and followed with an uppercut. This slowed him down and I thought I had him. But he was a sideways fighter. He came up and over with his left and already his right was in motion. And whatever that right fist touched it destroyed. It was all in the waist. I had a hell of a hard time hitting him.

We were both bleeding by the end of the sixth round. He sent me to the canvas a second time but I got up. I could feel him forcing me toward the ropes to finish me off. End of the seventh round he had me there. Doubled me over with a wicked blow to the stomach. Round eight we went toe to toe and goddammit if he wasn't grinning the whole time.

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That trick he must've learned from me. I never showed signs of pain or fatigue. No matter how hard-pressed I was in the ring. Always kept my best side out. I didn't want my opponents to know their punches were getting to me. Thing about boxing is, a punch doesn't hurt at the time of impact. Only later it does. A punch hurts inside your head. It bruises your ego. It's the mind that gives up. You get tired of being hit. But not him, not Ketch. That brute just kept going. Rumor was he loved his mama so much, he'd imagine you insulted the old lady and fly into a murderous rage.

Murder. Long before the end Stanley Ketchel already wedded himself to that word. Either you murdered him or he murdered you, and there were few who managed the first. Tell you the truth, Ketch fought like he was prepared to die. He had no regard for anyone in the ring. Not even his own person. How do you reason with a man like that? A man who's already thrown in the towel on himself? That man is the most powerful being in the universe. You can't beat him. Took me years to understand that.

Next round I stunned him good but not enough to stop him. Tenth he opened with a hard right to the chin. Had me back on the ropes. I ripped a left to his mouth and broke away. He clinched me. Put me right back. I knew then I was done. All I could do was circle him so as not to get knocked out for real.

I learned my lesson from that fight. Ketch of course didn't. He was too much the brute. Thought he knew it all. The great showman who drove around New York in a kimono tossing peanuts at onlookers. But I knew his trick now. He steamrolled over you. So I challenged him to a rematch.

The murderous thoughts this man evoked in me. I knew I had to do something unusual. Start of our second fight he stepped to the center of the ring to touch gloves. Straightaway I hit him. A left to the jaw and a right between the eyes. There were no official rules against it. Referee didn't know what to do. This was Jim Jeffries, retired heavyweight champion of the world. A massive fellow who'd never been knocked down his entire career. He looked at Ketch and he looked at me and he allowed the fight to start.

I went after Ketch like a rabid dog. I wanted his title and to shame him too. It wasn't a gentlemanly thing I did, surprise him with two blows to the face. But he was a jester so jesting was what he got from me. Split his brow and shut his left eye so he couldn't see. I could've put him away in the first round but I enjoyed the spectacle. Him bleeding and stumbling all over the place. Stanley Ketchel was taking the beating of his life and I had the best seat in the house.

Afterward, Jeffries shook my hand. He was tall and handsome. Outstripped me by a good five or six inches. But I felt his equal in stature. No one dared tell me I'd won unfairly. Not even the undefeated heavyweight champ himself. Sure, Ketch's manager cussed me out something good. He died a couple years later and I suspect he called foul play all the way to the grave. But I was the Thunderbolt. I'd knocked Ketchel off his feet four times in just the first round. Showed him all sides of the ring. Probably he never knew a ring had four sides until I showed him. I toyed with him for twelve rounds before I let Jeffries count him out. Then I had my title.

This time I wasn't so eager for a rematch. Tom, my manager, told the papers that even if we gave Ketchel another chance he couldn't fight till Christmas

at the earliest. The man was in shambles. I'd made sure of that. A fighter by the name of Sam Langsford started bothering me then for a shot at the title. I was in no mind to fight but I couldn't guard my title forever. So Tom negotiated with Ketchel's camp. We were confirmed for a third match in Colma, California. Thanksgiving Day, 1908.

That third fight, he opened with a blow that drove me straight into the ropes. Then he proceeded to unleash hell on me. I'd heard he was furious at the 10-6 odds against him and he wanted me to feel it. Worked my face, my ribs, my stomach. By the fourth round I was bleeding from the nose. My insides felt like minced meat.

"It took you twelve rounds to stop a blind man," he said. "I'm gonna let your eyes stay open until the eleventh so you can see me knock you out."

I got in some good punches. Made his nose bleed in the sixth round. Worked his torso to try and tire him. But eleventh round I caught a wild left and hit the canvas. I got up at the count of eight and was immediately knocked down again. Got up once more but the referee had already counted me out. I heard seven and eight and next thing the bell rang. Never got to ten. I objected that it was a miscount. Referee wouldn't listen. Ketchel rejoiced. Walked right up to the press and declared, "I can't say anything good about that fellow, so I won't."

After that, Ketch went to the East Coast. I stayed in California. Battled Hugo Kelly and Fireman Jim Flynn. Didn't do my record any favors. I dropped the bout with the Fireman and Kelly ended in a draw though I beat him in the rematch. I was still shaken up from the thrashing Ketchel gave me.

It became clear to me that Stanley Ketchel was the great foe of my life. The holy mountain I had to conquer or it conquered me.

Fourth time we met, a year later, was an embarrassment. We were both off our game. Ketch high on hop. Wasted on whores and drink and gambling. September in Los Angeles was wicked hot. I couldn't breathe. When they awarded Ketch the win based on points I wasn't even upset. I was thankful it was over.

I remember that fight as the moment folks started giving up on Ketch and me. First was Tom. He'd been my manager from the start. He was a barber in Spring Valley. Ran a little athletic club on the side. He was the first man to believe in me and the first to cast me aside. I replaced him with a fellow named Sam Berger. Tom went on to win championship titles with the likes of Ad Wolgast and Jess Willard. "Maker of Champions" is what they call him now. But they don't figure me into his tally.

Over in Ketchel's camp, his manager died. This was October 1909. I heard it was sudden and painful. A violent hemorrhaging of the stomach. This other fellow, Wilson Mizner, took over. But Ketchel wasn't the same fighter no more. You can't live and fight like that and expect to stay healthy and have a long career. Ketch took a terrible beating from Jack Johnson, the heavyweight champion. Cost him some teeth. He lost a six-round newspaper decision to that Langford fellow.

It became clear to me that Stanley Ketchel was the great foe of my life. The holy mountain I had to conquer or it conquered me.

I heard Mizner had to cough up a pretty penny to ensure Ketch got home free in his next few fights.

He was in bad shape. He took a break from boxing. Moved to a ranch in Missouri to restore his health. Folks said he found true happiness there. Fell in love with the landscape and the rancher's life. But he was shot and killed one morning by a hand who believed Ketch had messed around with his wife. Wouldn't surprise me if he had. Here was a man who was willing to die for his passions.

I didn't know how much rage I still had till I heard about his murder. Stanley Ketchel had been snuffed out by a bullet rather than my gloves. I cursed him. Hollered his name till I grew hoarse. I felt as if something had been stolen from me. Part of my own person had been cut off.

I had no recourse but to take my rage into the ring. But I wasn't the same no more either. I struggled to wrap my head around it. By continuing to return to Ketchel I had become like him. Motivated just by pride and fury. After he was killed, several of us mittmen stepped up to claim the title. Fought like coyotes over a dead man's treasure. It was Hugo Kelly that won, a man I'd previously beaten.

What was I to do with my rage? All the guys from my early days they either died or retired. I was just twenty-four when Ketchel was killed. I'm fifty now. It's been seventeen years since my last fight. A loss on points against Jimmy Darcy.

I tried to make a life outside the ring. Had a son with my wife, Edna. Our Billy Jr. did alright in the glove business for a while. Won more fights than he lost. Got out with his soul and honor intact and that's the best he could've hoped for. The boy had no natural talent for boxing. No heart. Still, I was proud of him. Proud as my dad never was. I think I disappointed him. I disappointed Billy Jr. too. He wanted to be like his dad until he decided it wasn't for him.

But what about me? What if being Billy Papke wasn't for me no more either? Life after the ring always felt like a half-life. I was a boxer. It's all I was ever good at. The Thunderbolt. The German. It's a mercy Ketch went out young as he did. He stayed a fighter till the end. They tell stories about him. Same old stories he used to tell himself. Folks come up to me here at Jim Flynn's bar. Folks like yourself. Sign by the door says, "Meet Billy Papke, your host, a great fighter." But it's Ketchel you want to know about. You only love him more for getting killed. Even the ranch hand that shot him. He hated Ketchel enough to put a bullet in his chest and that's a kind of love too.

I have no one to hate me that much. Not even Edna. She never liked boxing. Never came to a single fight. Kept our kids away from it too. They never knew what their dad did until they were fully grown. Back when we first got together, I thought she was proud I was a boxer. We were married so long. But we came to the end of it as total strangers. She said it's because the only person I ever wanted to be close to was Ketch. Losing her felt like getting hit by Ketchel's hidden hand. The one he kept to his side. He came up with his left only to destroy me with his right.

Maybe in the next life Ketch and I will meet again. If I recognize him with his face all blown to pieces.

Every night I come here to talk. I'm not an educated man. It's beyond my capacities to write these things down. But they rattle around inside me like nails in a can. Driving me crazy. I keep thinking of this kid Paulie I used to know. Got hit in the head with a claw hammer. My head doesn't feel right anymore either. The light has gone out of the world. People will say it was Stanley Ketchel but it was me. It was always me.

The plastic binder flaps weakly to the floor. I kneel to pick it up. My swollen ankles complain against the edges of my stiff shoes. I flip through labeled plastic inserts attached to the binder’s three ring spine and find my name. Pulling a disorganized pile of bills out, two weeks of cash tips breaks down easily. Something cold and gummy on the edge of my knuckle distracts me. A slimy grain of oatmeal. It must have fallen out during my break. Ten minutes isn’t enough time to eat, let alone rest. I return to the unshuffling and ignore my manager’s lumbering form as he emerges from the bathroom behind me.

“Picking up your tips?” His hand grips the back of the plastic chair. I feel the heat of his thick thumb just below my shoulder blades. Mentally wincing, I will myself not to inch away. Water trickles through the pipes overhead.

“Yea.” I offer him little in response. He tries to fill the gap.

“What are you up to this weekend? Liz and I are thinking of going up to Marin to camp, sounds like the weather will be gorgeous.” The shadow of his head falls over the pile of grimy bills. Weak fluorescents from the ceiling hum along.

Ignoring the gaze boring into my back, I try to end the conversation.

“I’ll probably get some chores done. Might see a friend later today.” Stacking the piles again, the count remains the same. I take a handful of twenties out of the cashbox and shove the smaller bills back into the vacant space, replacing the value. My feet push the chair back without alerting him. Its cheap legs squeak under our combined weight.

“See you later.”

Sharp light cuts through the front of the cafe. I shuffle past a monstera’s wide leaves that hang down into the service doorway. Rachel waves at me. Her other hand supports a steaming pitcher.

“Have a nice day off!” she shouts over the thin hiss. I wave back and pocket my tips. Once I’m outside, the baying whine of a nearby train punctuates the late morning calm.

My squat Art Deco apartment complex sits just over the hill from the coffee shop. Its once green trim has soured into shiftless gray. The building reminded me of a schoolhouse when I first moved in, its clean and measured angles something easily understood. None of its preserved decor is evident inside. Thick coats of paint suffocate every piece of once glamorous crown molding. Flourishes that adorn the mantle over my fireplace melt from florals into bloated hands. The room’s main window is glued shut by layers of a slightly different white.

This past weekend I was without company. I took the scaling knife that had come with my oak block’s set and imprecisely cut away at these thick gobs, chipping off slices of eggshell, moonlight, and marshmallow, bleached sedimentary rock.

I have more pressing tasks this afternoon. The stacked blades of a drugstore safety razor greet my pubic bone, ass cheek, calf. Six days of consecutive work tense the muscles of my upper back into frozen marble. Pain ripples into my hips as I arch over in the shower, precariously wielding the plastic handle. I bend my knee, softening the strain on my hamstrings, and wishing I had more time to stretch before he arrives. With one last stroke up my leg, a sliver of skin comes off near my ankle. Diluted pink swims away from me and down the basin of the tub.

Sitting anxiously on the sole chair in my apartment, I press a bath towel into the shallow cut. My grandmother’s knockoff Eames Lounge set, complete with ottoman. The creases in the black leather widen as I adjust myself. I have an untested theory that the furniture helps with the high-class drag. The framed neutrality of art posters, unlit pillar candles, a dozen potted plants. An interior designed for ease of use. The posh surroundings have become my gilded nest. Aspirational domestic comfort helps me justify a stranger’s refusal to see me in public.

Pulling away the towel for a moment, blood blooms at the surface, right where the knob of bone protrudes. The towel meets my ankle again. Numbness trickles in, beckoning me toward dissociation to ease the next hour. My thighs bounce in place. Protective radio static buzzes through my skull. I fidget again. The chair, the candle, my nervously shifting body, each applying their own claustrophobic force.

Three shrill chimes from my phone. Accepting the call without lifting it to my ear, I punch in six. The automatic front door buzzes on the line and faintly down the hall. A quick cold sweat in my armpits. Standing, I dab at the nervous response with my towel, checking to see that I haven’t placed a blood splotch on my ribs. One more glance in the gold mirror. No lipstick on my teeth. Erasing every trace of error from my skin, the exhausting salvation of femininity opens before me. I mime a pout as creaking footsteps inch down the apartment hallway toward me. Walking over to the door, an estate sale silk robe glides just behind my feet, licking the floor.

A cautious knock. I steal a brief glance through the peephole. The timer on my phone begins ticking down sixty minutes as the door opens.

“Hi, can I come in?” An ill-fitting business suit fills the doorway. The door’s fisheye lens neglected to inform me of his height.

“Hi! Of course, please do.” He ducks just under the entryway and crosses the room quickly. The window frames him in silhouette. His shoulders arch in waves as he wriggles out of the heavy jacket. Loosening his tie, he turns toward me. Ink blotches under his arms stain the powder blue dress shirt.

With one last
stroke up my leg,
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the tub.

"This is a nice place you've got Gra... should I call you Grace? Or Mistress Grace? I..." Silent jaws flap for a moment on unspoken introductions.

"Either one is fine," I purr. The sound of my own voice stretching into supplication throws me off for just a moment. Abject accommodation is an unfamiliar mode with clients. If I've been disciplined about anything it's my boundaries around roles. Self doubt animates my eyebrow for a moment.

Swishing over to him, I place my hands over his sweating palms. Grabbing the Windsor knot of cornflower colored silk, the tie pulls his neck down toward me. His thin lips tremble as they meet mine. Too much imprecise tongue overwhelms me. I'm reminded of the reflexive nerve twitches of recently deceased fish. The rank sweetness of burnt coffee taints his breath.

"What's yours?" I whisper next to his cheek. Stubble grazes past my ear as he pulls away to stare down at me.

"Oh, it's um. You saw my email right?" The sallow puffiness of his face twitches, and his eyes dart across the room, away from me.

"I did, it's Mark right?"

Still looking past me, Mark's eyebrows raise in panicked recognition for a brief moment.

"Yea, just... I only see providers in the East Bay, I don't want my family finding out. You can understand that, right?" The sting is small but unsurprising.

I nod, hoping it comes across as empathy and not my creeping disinterest. Clients are generally wary but mine seem fixated on discretion. Any positive attention I get from them within these white walls fades alongside a history of being hidden. A toy for private display, some passing fascination. My flesh is a nesting doll. Trans, woman, whore, each shrinking adjective a further illicit accumulation.

"Okay great. I've been excited to meet you, you're so gorgeous in person."

"Thank you, you're too sweet." I try to bring his head down for another kiss, but he jerks away and flops down onto the couch. He starts to undress, pauses, and then scratches at the edges of a coffee stain in the upholstery. I was so eager to have a used piece of Restoration Hardware that I didn't mind the faint tan halo. His shirt buttons shimmer like crystal in a clear stream.

Mark stops fussing and looks up at me. I meet his desperate gaze and resign myself to being in charge once more. One more man who doesn't know how to ask for what he wants, one more man terrified of what he's already signed up for. Straddling the broad landscape of his knees, his eyes take me in. As he reaches for the pearly silk of my thigh garter, I place his hands behind his head and playfully yell.

"Stop!" He freezes and I giggle at the shift in his demeanor. Gripping the graying hair on the back of his head, his mouth careens toward my thighs.

"Lick but don't touch," echoes from my lips, and his hands drop weakly to his lap. The bristle of his cheek scrapes along my hips. After a minute of placing

kisses on my stomach, he tries to pull away, but I gently force his head back into service.

“Good boy,” I coo. Through the web of my fingers on his scalp, his skin glows red.

“Can I... go down on you?” A meek voice pleads up to me.

“Not yet. I just don’t feel worshiped enough.” My right knee meets his chest, gently pushing his back against the couch cushions. I want to plunge my stiletto heel through him, through my multiple jobs, through all this drab scarcity.

Sliding onto his lap, the loose tie slips past his chin stubble and over his eyes. His fingers fumble with my bra strap. My breasts fall from their hoisted position. Back muscles suddenly clench with new weight. I wince, but keep gently grinding against his lap. Cupping them together, my pinkies glance across the thin pink scars under their newly expanded mass. The nerves fire, then limply tingle. Partial numbness from recent surgery forms an imprecise quilt of sensation across my chest.

But I know the danger of a man’s imagination left undirected. My thumb parts his lips.

I don’t care enough to ask what Mark is thinking about, but I also don’t want to compete with untended straight introspection. I once spent ten minutes mistakenly slipping into bliss with a client. He left after less than half an hour. Whether he was revolted at the transaction or with the terrifying reality of my body, I can only guess. But I know the danger of a man’s imagination left undirected. My thumb parts his lips.

“Do you want a taste?” He nods greedily and I place a nipple on his waiting tongue. Without shifting too much, I reach down to the coffee table next to me. Checking my phone behind his head, I realize with dismay that it’s only been thirty minutes.

His lips glance along a patch of my chest that registers the touch as steel wool. My eyes flicker with discomfort while I try to tap softly enough along the glass phone screen to text Geneva. *This client... Girl I am so fucking bored.* She responds quickly. *Put him in yr pleasers & tell him to clean yr dusty art gallery of an apartment!* I snort and Mark wriggles underneath me.

“Mwhat?” He tries to form words, his mouth still wrapped around my breast.

“Nothing baby, just keep making me feel good.” I press his head onto me again. A few minutes later, he asks the same question, his clammy lips still firmly anchored to me.

“Cam I pwease go down on you now?” The request makes my stomach turn.

“Good boys get rewarded when they work hard,” I hear myself say.

I stand, the silver soles of my worn Prada heels tacky under my sweating feet. Leading him to the bed, I curl up against the headboard and watch him blindly crawl towards me. His face quivers with anticipation. I swallow, stomaching the encroaching discomfort. His mouth tips forward. Tentative licks against the lace

windowpane. Precum clings to his lower lip. It stretches into the translucent lace of a spiderweb, as if he blundered naked through wilderness to this bed.

"Can I take this blindfold off?" He asks, already fumbling with it.

"Sure, let me help you." I lean forward. The tie's knot perched above his left ear unravels.

He stares down at my crotch and I imagine him licking his lips. Another cartoon wolf to entertain. Pulling my panties to the side, the delicate pink length of my cock falls, nestling along my hip bone. Inelegantly forcing his mouth around it, he sucks until his cheeks pucker. I squirm. Tell him to slow down. He mumbles but doesn't change his approach.

Panting now, having worked himself into a frenzy, he asks if I'm going to come. The sparse cathedral of an oak trees' canopy of branches curves past my windows. Flat on my back, I study the underside of their wooden buttresses. He asks again and I start feigning proximity. A breeze dances by, shaking loose acorns that plunk against the window. My thighs tighten around his head while I force a moan out. Hips cascade in waterfalls of faux ecstasy. His eyes meet mine in elated shock. Across the room the timer on my phone goes off.

I return to the shower after shutting the door, thin pink trails still lining the bathtub's valley. Caking salt scrub onto my arms, I exhale. The small crystals scrape along my torso and legs, some abrasion, thankfully chosen.

My phone glows as I emerge from the mist. *Hey girl* from Geneva. We responsibly agree to discuss her surgical prep, but the San Francisco wine bar we choose as a venue suggests otherwise. I tell her that I'll be there soon. Crossing over the Bay always takes some minor courage, and clients seem to inevitably scatter mine. *Order helps*, an older provider friend told me when I started working. *Build a ritual for ending the session*.

I pull the trim stack of hundreds out of the blank envelope first. Digging in the back of a dresser drawer, I retrieve my hidden tips. Shuffling the two stacks together, the worn, grimy, crisp, and new bleed into something unified. I imagine it as protection against state surveillance, making my paper trail more difficult to track. It's a silly comfort, naive and superstitious.

I reset my pout in the mirror. Catching the light, I repeat "You're hot. You're powerful. It's okay to want more," never breaking eye contact with myself. The chant's power feels elusive and affecting. I throw an oversized hockey jersey on, long enough to work as a dress. My skin is desperate for a momentary distance from touch. I open all the windows, let the settling mist of offshore breeze trickle inside. The last step involves walking through a cloud of stolen perfume. I vaguely recall the card, how the scent was made by Italian monks for some minor royalty. The proximity to sacrifice is appealing, but it's the bracing florality that resets me even more.

Geneva greets me outside the squat wine bar. Evening sunlight disappears under the encroaching fog. She always compliments how I look, but her words disappear into the warmth of my shoulder as we hug. I squeeze her closer and we stay there for a moment. She's closer to me than anyone I've dated. The one exposingly intimate decision I've allowed my life to make. Embracing her feels blissfully free from expectation.

When we separate, I return the compliment, and playfully snap the black thong that pokes over her waistband, carving two semi-circles above her hips. The cold flesh around the thin band bristles into goosebumps. The baggy cow-print pants she’s wearing are ones I’ve seen her post process videos of for the past week. Countless nights I’ve sat with her while she’s hunched over a sewing machine. Her fingers twist scraps, spinning whole outfits out of the hammering needle.

The inside is a low din of voices. We pick a bottle and retreat from the counter. A dark booth hugs our exhaustion close together. Geneva props her leg up on the smooth leather expanse, and I lean onto her. A tiger tattoo caps her shoulder, nudging against my bicep. I picture its silken fur rubbing along my frayed nerves, marking me.

“So was he that bad?” she swirls the pale orange liquid and I watch the legs form rivulets down the glass.

“It was fine, really. I’m just tired. The work is easy enough, but hearing the same questions, the same requests over and over again is...” Drinking down the melodrama of a sigh, I take in the small cavern of space.

“It must fucking suck.” She finishes for me. The bar’s emptiness and Geneva’s willingness to listen let the poison of whatever small shame I’m holding onto evaporate. She tracks my momentary silence.

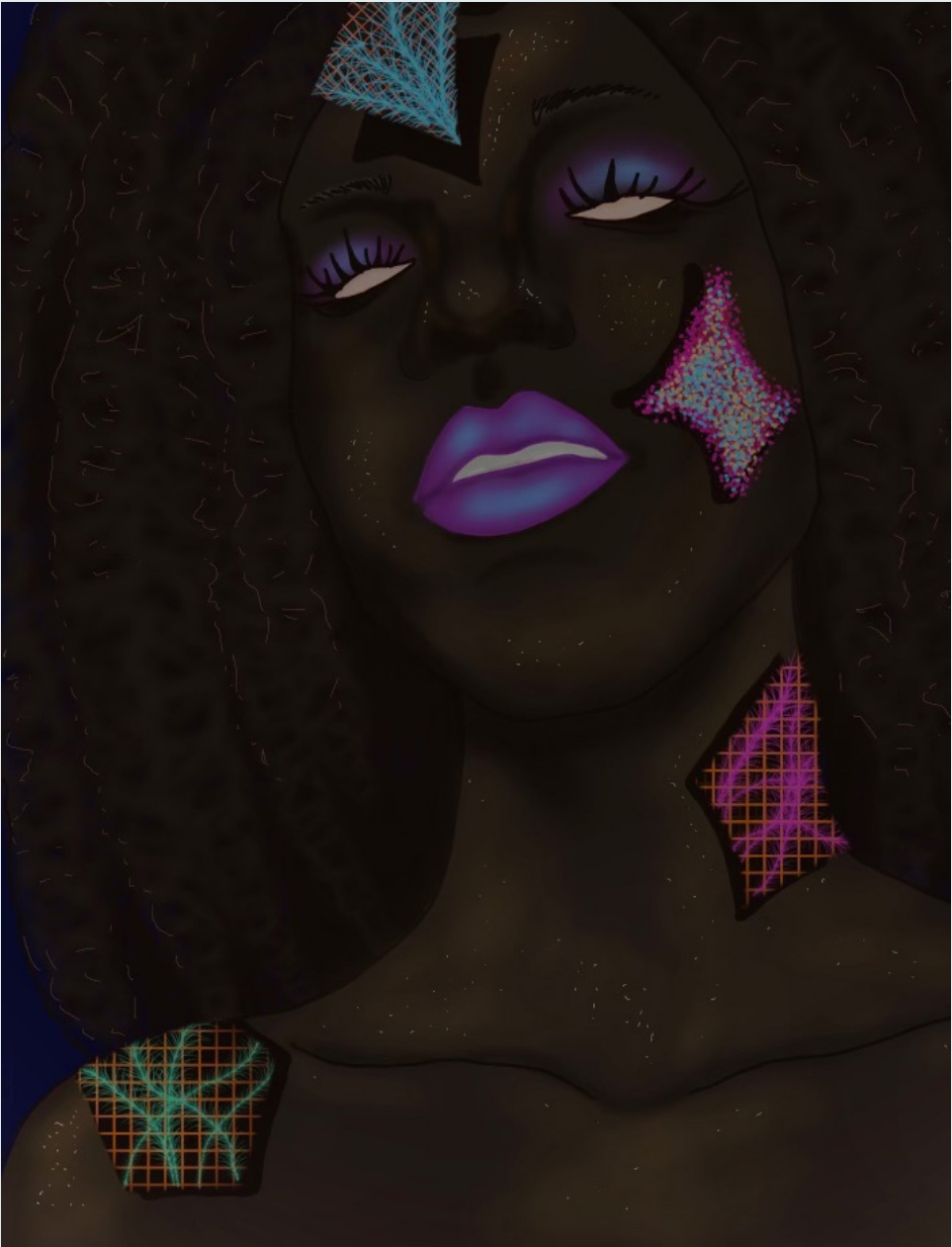


illustration by Jillian Cantu

"What's going on?" Her question is muffled at the end by a sip. The bell fogs with the heat of her breath.

"Do you think it's really like this for other providers? I'm working inside, I can be a little choosy, but I still feel like there's a ceiling I've reached. Clients don't take me out like they take out these cis workers I see. All they want is to be inside my space, inside me, and then leave. I just feel so fucking hollowed out." The last word is whispered, tears swelling in my eyes.

Geneva squeezes my thigh. Her knuckles' pulse makes the circle of tattooed text on the back of her hand ripple. Before I can bury myself in further comparisons, she cuts in.

"It's really hard work. You know that. *And* you're good at it. But just because some girls advertise how frequently they're taken to Michelin starred places, or flown out, or doted on, doesn't mean it's always like that. They're selling an idea, just like you are."

"You're right. Like I know you're right, it's just hard to convince myself. But at least this has helped me save money. Which is something I truly never thought could happen." Another sip. Gratitude starts to permeate the bristling resentment I usually reach toward. Studying the plump curve of Geneva's cheeks, I wonder what part of her face she could possibly want to change.

Two shapes appear in the rectangle of the doorway, an older couple seemingly disoriented by the dark atmosphere of the space. Before I recognize them, I whisper "Go back to Pac Heights" into Geneva's ear. She slips "If found, please return to Outer Richmond" back to me and I giggle. Their faces materialize under a lamp hanging above the bar. It's Mark, and a woman I assume to be his wife.

"Oh my god, that's him." My words are barely audible, smothered by the specter of possible discovery.

"Who? What, that man? Wait is he—" Geneva starts at a normal volume, but once she sees the urgency on my face, her voice drops to meet my whisper.

"Yes, that's my client from today!" I hiss through gritted teeth.

Wine glasses in hand, Mark and his wife scan the room for an open table. He notices us in the corner and swallows hard, immediately averting his eyes. Placing his hand against the small of his wife's back, he gently shoves her through the scattered crowd, hastening their escape.

Whatever appeal his fear of being discovered might hold is drowned out by sick confirmation. Another day spent as a monumental sculpture. Statues have their meaning determined for them, books written about them, are washed with descriptions of awe or horror but never beige emotion. Another man cowering before the fetishized marble of my body. Plinths are only made for worshipping from a safe distance. Finishing my glass, I will the museum to collapse.

Dead Holy

Sometimes when people die, they become the holiest they’ve ever been.

Maybe it’s because they’re leaving to meet the unknown, finally bearing witness to what we’ve been fearing and worshiping our entire lives, and we either become jealous or respect them for it.

It doesn’t always happen, and people spit on graves all the same, but when papa died, he became so holy I forgot what he looked like.

I was twelve and he was old, diagnosed with cancer in the brain one summer afternoon. Stopped breathing two months later.

It was fast, it was confusing, it was normal.

I understood the news, yet at the same time couldn’t believe it. Spun round and round in the eye of an ignorant tornado, tending to homework and friends and sleepovers and hospitals and suddenly he was dead and gone for good, just like that.

And then he became holy.

People dared whisper his name only under the rarest of occasions, always somber and reverent. We praised him and his long years of loyal work, applauded the way he fed his family like he was supposed to, and after about a week or so, you weren’t allowed to say his name at all.

Unless you were family of course.

I was family, incidentally enough, and so was my mama, and my sister.

Mama tore down any photos hung above the broken fireplace mantle that had papa and papa only, but she let the family reunion pictures be, pointedly avoiding their pitiful gazes.

My sister I sometimes caught staring down at one family photo magnetized to the fridge door, eyes hard and shiny like scuffed up marbles after recess, and I knew who she was glaring at because when she noticed my presence, she’d bump against my shoulder hard on the way out.

I still blessed my papa’s name in prayer, still kept his phone number, silly profile picture and nickname of “papa pear” and all.

Kept everything.

Till I couldn’t remember his face for one full struggling minute at two AM in the morning, after weeks of dreaming—accepting his impossible revivals without question—livid as I punched the mattress and rubbed my eyes like sandpaper.

—

Papa taught me how to drift in Mario Kart and how to siphon cars of gas when no one was looking.

He always complained whenever a meal wasn't spicy and began taking to carrying a small bottle of hot sauce wherever he went.

Even after Sunday sermon, when we'd join all the other praying families at the long cafeteria tables, he'd quietly slip it out, unscrew the cap, and shake a fat glob of red in the middle of whatever pile of rice, meat, or corn he deemed "no good" at the time.

His voice never changed, always the same level tones of funny gravel and monotone wit that I tried to copy in some way.

I kept hearing that voice now and again, shouting my name from down the stairs because I forgot to turn the TV off, or from around the garage outside after falling off my bike. Infrequent, but I learned to stop hoping after the first two times.

I once asked my sister if she ever heard papa's voice call her sometimes, and she slapped me straight across the jaw, leaving a handprint dark enough for her to then later cover up with makeup so mama wouldn't try nothing.

She later gave me some ice in a bag too, and I kept it on my face till I fell asleep, even after my nose felt numb and my gums couldn't move.

—

When I turned into a man, I heard papa say to steal the bitch's wallet and leave.

Or, maybe not "say", but he suggested it none-too-lightly. If it weren't for that gravel, I would've assumed it was someone else's flying thought and swatted it away.

And I didn't know why he said that, really. The only time he's ever called anyone a bitch was when a homeless woman grabbed my ankle as we were walking back from church to the car.

I defended her, saying she wasn't a bitch, and was actually a very nice lady with two kids and a painting class at the local library.

He shot that she was a whore, and that was no kind of life to live for any woman.

In the end, I did take her wallet and leave, because he was right. She was a prostitute.

I left out a hundred dollar bill on the hotel kitchen counter, then went back to the bar I met her at to spend the rest on tequila; not once bothering to shoo away mahogany hair splayed across cotton sheets, sun reflected on a few select strands as it rose out the mountains. Amber eyes.

Papa always loved tequila. Said it could keep you feeling like fire, naked on a snowy day out.

When I turned
into a man, I
heard papa say to
steal the bitch's
wallet and leave.

—

Since I left for out of state college, my sister and I both grew tall in our separate orchards.

I had my first blackout, my first high, my first string of flings. She had her first kiss in grade 9, her first straight As report card, her first fight with mom that left the two on negligible speaking terms for a week straight.

I came back for winter break and made fun of her belly button piercing and tiny butterfly tattoo mom would no doubt kill her over, and she made fun of my military-esque haircut and the mole on my neck which only seemed to grow bigger as time went by.

As we clicked through deteriorating TV channels, she told me her first kiss (and subsequent kisses) was with a girl named Jackie, and I couldn't talk for five minutes.

It may as well have been five hours.

Later, she cursed me. She cursed our mama, and she cursed papa, which is when I stood up from the couch and began speaking again.

Beating me to it,

"You learned nothing at college huh? Nothing."

I objected that I did in fact learn a few things. I learned about troches, I learned from life science how one's feelings weren't always the same as fact, and that she was wrong. She was wrong.

"Says who? Your professors, or professor Lee?"

And I pushed past her, saying she was wrong again for calling papa by his last name, just call him papa, and she screamed that wasn't his name stupid not really, and I shut my bedroom door loud enough for her to laugh, laying down in a bed that didn't feel like home anymore since I brought every stupid childhood blanket and stupid pillow to my college dorm and left it back there for stupid luggage space.

My eyes were dry.

—

Papa's voice was always even, except for the times it rose in volume, and it did that a lot during Thanksgiving.

My family never did a whole lot for Thanksgiving, and nobody ever really liked turkey all that much anyway, but we'd still come together and eat what we liked and talk.

My sister brought over a *'friend'*, all shaking heads and hushed chuckles, but mama never knew.

Just went on talking about how much she adored the intruder's hair and smooth skin and fashion sense, while I kept taking breaks to the kitchen so I could grab more Tabasco sauce.

Eventually, when I saw the two hold hands under the table, I felt like I became two different people. Split clean down the seams of my bony veins and divvied up 50/50. 60/40 even. Maybe.

Part of me congratulated her.

Part of me was proud of her for being the first between us to break our childhood oath to “never tell anyone, keep it in forever and ever until we die so maybe God would be impressed enough to let us by, pinkie swear”.

Part of me became the man she would’ve wanted me to be, and for a moment, I think I was that man.

But a different man bent his neck beneath the weight of papa’s lips behind his ear, hurt and confused.

Papa was hurt and confused.

And this time, I let myself cry as I drove myself back to the airport, still hearing mama shout and scream at my sister and her girl, while my sister shouted and screamed at me for outing her, or at least—forcing an honest woman out of Jackie, but it was okay.

It was all okay because I couldn’t hear papa screaming anymore, and that airplane ride back to college was the quietest my mind’s been since a long, long while.

—

*Forgot you were gone
Crack rosaries like you’re holy
salt blurred eyes*

—

Funnily enough, it wasn’t any fight with my family that got me hurt, but with a ‘friend’.

He was playing Mario Kart with me in my dorm, buzzing off red bull and something else I probably couldn’t pronounce the name of, and eventually he set the controller down and hit his forehead on my arm, ranting and rambling on about his own papa named “dad”.

Dad would always pick fights at the dinner table, dad would never smile, and dad would sometimes flick his fingers against my forehead and leave a stinging to last for a good few minutes.

I nodded, playing the controller even though the game was still paused, and I figured papa was different from dad, save for that last bit, which I thought was kinda funny since papa would only ever do that when he was either annoyed from a mess I made or when I would call his bluff.

It was funny.

But my friend told me no, it was all wrong and bad and stupid and god he drank a little too much tonight but he knew he was right, it was *wrong*.

But a different
man bent his
neck beneath the
weight of papa’s
lips behind his
ear, hurt and
confused.

I couldn't agree, even though I'd just concluded that my papa was too different from his to be talked down the same, and he shoved off my helping hand and left the room, stumbling in pinched lips, hurt, and confused.

I continued to play and win the game, him being last place and holding up the race till I finished for him.

I left the room after that too, walking till it hit about four AM and I found myself nearing the freeway bridge.

Papa said to make eye contact, but I just crossed the street whenever spotting the rare woman come up on the same sidewalk as me. My sister always carried a taser out, that at least we could agree on.

He kept on, saying she was foolish for having thrown away her soul to the devil for a bitch, and I didn't reply until I reached the middle of the bridge and there was no other person in sight save for the cars blurring by, and I muttered under my breath that maybe, maybe he shouldn't be saying that word if he was up in heaven kicking it with god.

And then it was like I summoned a storm, all twisted knuckles and thundering shoes, papa yelling and raving and shrieking at me louder than he ever has in his living and non-living life.

He called me ungrateful then called me his son. He called me a sinner then called me God's son.

I wanted to be reasonable, to hail him down and say that I'd rather be his son—a human full of flaws and good and evil—more than the son of a perfect being who never ever made a mistake and created the universe because he was bored.

But instead, I gripped the railings of the bridge and flung my head past all the barriers the city built up to redirect suicidal people to pretty please try someplace else, and I screamed myself hoarse, raw, probably for the first time,

wrong
wrong
wrong, you're *wrong*

The storm went on pause as its cutting winds froze midway in slicing my face to bits, and I cried

[Papa wasn't perfect, wasn't *Our Heavenly Father, Hallowed Be Thy Name*, wasn't even *good*.

Folly to think dying could ever fix one's sins, even if there were a god out there, somewhere, that forgave them.]

and cried

[Just because you're dead doesn't mean that you're right, and I wish that you could've learned as I learned, as my sister learned—I wish you were *here*, yes, of course still—but instead, you're as dead and rigid of a time capsule as mama's become.]

He called me
ungrateful then
called me his son.
He called me a
sinner then called
me God's son.

and cried

[Let there never be any doubt that I loved you, as I realize that you need to die again, just one more time.

Worse yet; that I need to kill you. And I don't know where that'll leave me, or where you'll go this time, because the thought of you going to hell hurts more than anything ever, but by whatever holy power vested in me, let there be

Nothing.]

—

My forehead was full of cotton, and an angry buzzing fog clouded my mind, loud and silent and unbearable. Weeping eyes wrung out, they opened up to nothing but unchanged cement and damp skies of a slightly darker gray.

Quiet.

Finally, finally.

I knew the peace couldn't last forever, I knew it would take at least half a decade of radio silence to heal both mine and my sister's bleeding drums for us to speak again, I knew and yet I—to the peaceful roar of cars and ocean waves and holy ghosts never meant to be worshiped—

I laughed my voice away.

It happened on a Saturday, which felt a little uncalled for. I'd been sitting on the porch, drinking beer as I painted my toenails. When the sky opened up, I thought, *that's new*. I wasn't in the habit of reading the news then, so I assumed there'd been some notice I'd missed.

There hadn't been. No warnings, no signs, no horsemen nor plagues. Just a clean, bright gash cleaving the firmament, terrifying as it was lovely.

We began to float, then. First the living, then the dead, who rocketed from their graves, skin plumping, flushing, blinking again. Our clothes slipped off as we ascended, each of us shuddering in the starkness of the atmosphere. I saw my neighbor's cock and blushed.

I don't remember how God looked. He was friendly, I think, and vaguely familiar—like a character actor you can't quite place.

With the wave of a hand, He separated humanity in two: the goats and the lambs; the sinners and the saved; the raptured, and the rest of us. His smile was apologetic. I do remember that.

Falling to Earth didn't hurt, but we did damage some rooftops. This was the first of many inconveniences.

Gadiel says that first night after the apocalypse was pandemonium, but I don't recall it like that. In truth, I spent the evening alone in my bedroom. The air outside my open window was warm, but not unpleasant. No hellfire, I mean. I finished my six-pack. Listening to Peggy Lee, I waited for the power to blink off forever. It never did.

—

Gadiel is my supervisor. He's also an angel. He looks like how you'd expect: white wings, long arms, jaw like Ziggy Stardust, eyes like shattered glass. My favorite part though, is his mouth—plump and deep and arched perfectly. He likes to use it to smoke cigarettes.

The angels came down to watch over us while God tended to the raptured. They also extended His deal: If we, the mortals, labored long enough for Him, the angels would arrange for our ascension. I signed a contract for sixty years, portioned into 8-hour daily shifts. If I wanted benefits—like healthcare, cash, and eternal youth—I could simply deduct earned time from each pay period. It seemed logical. Merciful. I expected to sign my name in blood, but Gadiel handed me a ballpoint pen.

The job wasn't bad. Neither was my life outside of it. Some called it "a pleasant surprise," the way we could go on shopping and dancing and scrolling through our feeds free of the devil, who never did show up to deliver our punishment.

"Lucifer isn't really into sin and torture anymore," Gadiel said. This was one of the first times we slept together. We did it on his desk, right there in front of his vast corner windows. His office supplies—binders, stapler, mug, and pens—laid below us like a city in ruin. "Hell cut Armageddon out of the budget a while back."

"But the Bible," I said dumbly, picking up my underwear.

"A little outdated; that's all." He lit a cigarette. The smoke traveled in blueish curls from his soft, parted lips. "The politics of heaven are always changing. You know how it is."

I returned to my cubicle, where I worked alongside several other women who were probably also fucking him. All day, we stared at never-ending word lists. Our job was to type up whatever antonyms came to mind. Couldn't think on our answers too hard; had to act on instinct.

Family, the screen would flash, and I would type: *Alone*.

Grass, it said. I typed: *Indoors*.

Singing: Silence.

Embrace: Alone.

Baby: Death.

Date: Abandon.

Gather: Alone.

I typed *alone* often.

—

About half of us had been raptured. Forty-eight percent, to be exact. I knew a handful of them well, including my roommate, whose absence, of course, had doubled my rent. My landlord was still around though. He told me—kindly, clutching my hands—that the security deposit had been in her name.

Those first few months, the world felt empty as a party past midnight: most of us gone, the rest just staggering, swaying, dazed. The streets were littered with signs of our abandonment; cars stopped in the middle of nowhere; private pools thick with algae; shirts, scarves, and dresses, colors faded, carried in the wind.

It was difficult to see the logic behind who had ascended and who had been left below. Plenty of good folks seemed to linger on Earth while other, more unsavory characters had joined Him above. I grew obsessed with the Reddit forums and news specials dedicated to cracking the pattern. Virgins? No, there were still nuns and children among our ranks. The sober? No, a Swedish popstar, recently scandalized for snorting bumps on stage, had gone Heaven-wise.

“Lucifer isn’t really into sin and torture anymore,” Gadiel said. “Hell cut Armageddon out of the budget a while back.”

Sometimes, I'd air my theories to Gadiel, who promised to tell me if I ever got it right.

"Catholics?" I'd guess after letting him rub his cock between my breasts.
"Conservatives? Bilinguals?"

And he'd laugh, ashing a cigarette as he skimmed channels on the TV. That's another thing the angels liked: television. All the vices they were denied in heaven, they indulged in here on earth.

What is it like? I asked once. *Heaven?*

Cloudy, is all he answered. *Big.*

He didn't love me. Couldn't love me. He made that clear—and yet, sometimes, after we fucked, he would kiss my forehead and smooth my hair as if tucking me into sleep. My heart broke every time. Still, I kept coming back.

—

A few years into work, my job duties changed. They called it a promotion, but there was never any increase in compensation. I did, however, get to sleep for my entire shift. Each day, the angels gave me two white, egg-shaped pills. The first one knocked me out. On something like a doctor's bed, I writhed, unconscious, tearing at the paper sheets. When I woke up seven hours later, they led me to a sound booth where I described each of the day's nightmares.

Then, they gave me coffee. The second pill. With it, I forgot all my bad dreams. It was necessary, Gadiel said, this dim, sweeping void made in my mind each day. Without it, I might be afraid to fall asleep.

And you don't want to be afraid, he asked, smiling graciously. *Do you?*

No. I shook my head. *No, no.*

For a time, then, I was nocturnal. Some nights—if I had done a good job, maybe, though I didn't remember either way—I would receive visits from Gadiel, who never needed to sleep.

I cleaned my house for him. Cooked meals. Bought a TV.

"Organ donors," I guessed, kneeling before him as he marathoned 80s sitcoms.

He shook his head. His wings glistened as he grabbed my hair and guided my mouth forth and back, forth and back.

"Perverts," I gasped once he was spent. "Or eunuchs. Asexuals."

"Funny," he murmured, his cigarette burning into my coffee table.

Most nights, though, I spent on my own. I liked to lay in bed and make vignettes out of the water stains on my ceiling. It was almost like dreaming, which I missed. I listened to music on my tinny speakers. Not new music. There was hardly any new music. Sore lack of movies, too. By now, most of us had taken up God on His deal. The work left us too tired to pursue human industries. Some stores closed down, mostly Mom and Pops. My favorite bar. Still. It's not like we were being flayed or burned or trapped in a sea of ice. Life was normal, more or less.

Eventually, the angels got all the use they could out of my nightmares. Would you be open to switching work stations? an email from Gadiel asked.

Of course, I typed. After all, it hadn't really been a question.

The next job was rough. For an hour each morning, they shut me in to a small, black room and asked me to scream. My throat ran raw. My tongue itched. To alleviate this, I was not to speak during the remainder of my shift. Instead, I was tasked with writing lists. Lists of goals, lists of regrets. Vacations I wanted to take, but never did. People I wished I'd never kissed. I wrote Gadiel's name on top of this last one.

"Mormons," I said hoarsely, slapping my kiss-list on his desk. "Lucid dreamers. People with Neanderthal DNA."

He glanced at the paper, then up at me. His eyes were the bleak, dreary blue of moonlight.

"Wrong. Wrong. Wrong," he said.

At home, I boiled water with faux-honey. I laid on my couch with my hands folded on my chest, pretending I was dead, or with him, or with Him. My breath was ragged, always. At night, my dreams were little more than dull smears of color, punctuated by the sounds outside my window: voices shouting, cats in heats, car stereos ferrying songs from better days.

I'd like to think I was tough. I lasted six months before I caved, crying voicelessly into his lap as he polished off a costume drama. I hated the screaming. Couldn't take the screaming.

"I'll quit," I threatened.

Without looking up, he told me angels can tell when humans are lying. The television blued his pale skin. On screen, a duchess insisted on marrying for love.

"But," he sighed when I didn't stop weeping, "We can change your position. If you'd really, really like, we can change your position."

This new job was farther from home. Out of the office, and into some sort of industrial edifice. You could tell at a glance that the angels had constructed it. Unlike the old human buildings—ivy-eaten, weather-worn—this one was crisp, gleaming, immaculate. Its steepled rooftops serrated the sky. Inside, long hallways stretched under the cathedral ceilings.

Here, it was important that the other employees and I did not interact. There were codes of conduct, NDAs. We arrived in staggered shifts, then tucked ourselves into lonely offices. Mine contained a chair, a stove, a branding iron, and a speaker I could plug my phone into. Every few minutes, a hand would press against a grated vent on the floor. I was to hold the hot iron against each palm until the skin sizzled. Cruel, I know. But I had a contract to satisfy. And it's

not like it was my fault, I told myself each day as I clocked in. I was just a node in a machine whose cruel intentions were now beginning to come to light.

Gadiel went a long time without returning my calls. As I worked my shifts, I left him long, puling voice messages. I sent him pictures of my torso, posed and bare. Most of all, though, I fantasized about our reunion. I would make him miss me. I would give in. I would stand him up, then stalk him from afar. I would murder him. I would let him murder me.

"We're torturing people." is what I said when we did meet up again. At a bar, this time. After I'd spent our last tryst crying, he wanted somewhere public. Plus, he liked the way he could pinch my thigh under the tablecloth.

"Somebody has to," he answered, swirling a spritz.

"Is that what all the jobs have added up to? The screaming, the nightmares, the lists, the...?"

"Don't make a scene."

I scowled at him from across the table. I wanted to destroy him, then. Let God obliterate those eyes He had created, foul and blue and empty as they were perceptive. Let Him crush that mouth, that chin, those long, pale fingers now reaching for a cigarette.

"I deserve to know," I insisted like a child, "If I'm just helping punish..."

He smiled. "Yes; go ahead. Guess. Who's on the other end?"

My face caught fire. I stood, gathering my things. "Draft dodgers," I muttered. "Brunettes."

Gadiel looked disappointed. "You aren't even trying anymore."

—

Time moved slowly. Days slipped into one another without clear beginnings or ends. Five years passed, then ten—and yet, I only made a three-year dent in my contract. It was the weekends, I figured. I had to stop taking breaks.

So, on Saturdays and Sundays, I took whatever work the angels offered up. I mopped floors. I drove splinters into nail beds. I sobbed into microphones and updated mailing lists. I understood what these tasks added up to. I understood, I mean, that there were people on the other end. Caring, though—it had started to feel like a luxury.

Then, one day, I saw their faces for the first time. The damned. There they were, their bodies rendered in miniature on my computer screen. Beneath each avatar, I was to type *a comprehensive list of all physical flaws*.

I sat, chewing my pen. The man on my monitor was short, brunette, a little overweight. Although I thought I'd grown immune to their suffering, I felt oddly touched.

So, I tried being gentle. *Nose crooked, but just slightly*, I wrote. *May be balding, hard to tell*—but the computer program didn't let me advance until I offered something harsher. *Fat*, I ceded. *Hair, greasy. Stubby legs*. This seemed to do.

For hours, then, I moved through dozens of small, hopeless avatars, inventing insults like *thick-wristed* and *chiclet-toothed* and *sow-faced*. By noon, my eyes were strained and clouding. I blinked, surprised by my tears. I hadn't cried in ages.

A blonde appeared on screen, about my age, give-or-take. She had a delicate jaw (*weak chin*, I typed, *over-bit*) and a smattering of freckles (*bad skin*). Her eyes were small and round and I knew her, I realized in a sudden, awful wave. I knew her. Donna. My old roommate. How could I forget?

But she had been raptured, I thought. I'd thought—she was in a better place.

I left my things at my desk—purse, coat, kicked-off heels—and ran to the bathroom, where I vomited, rinsed my mouth, and reapplied lipstick before heading upstairs. I was in my old office—my first office—and I knew exactly where to find him. An elevator ride. Seven stories to the top.

"Gadiel." I pounded on the frosted glass of his office door. "Gadiel, open up. You bastard. You liar."

I knocked, and knocked, and threw my weight against the door so that, when he turned the knob, he found me collapsed like a beggar on his polished floor.

"No one went to Heaven," I managed, staring at his feet.

His long, pale fingers crossed my vision. Without thinking, I took the hand, my body trembling as I stood. His suit was crumpled, smoke-stale. His eyes burned as he grinned. His teeth were so jagged, his lips so dark and dry, and—how had I never noticed this?

Still—when he pulled me into an embrace, I relented. He pet my shoulder. Brushed back my hair. It felt nice. It felt like being loved.

"No one ever does," he said.

The Alien Hour

Edited by Amelia Boeh

At two a.m. I'm out of bed as it comes down. I'll let you know now—you were in my dream, your face jolted me awake. Wet-faced and heart-hurt, I find your name on my device, find the right combinations of letters and words to say I miss who you were. I'm about due for that consolation prize, that glass of water to fill myself back up again. To the kitchen: down the stairs, turn the corner, and there it was, a blue light, all at once and so bright, coming down on my lawn. What could be falling out of the sky at this late hour? Two a.m. is reserved only for heartbreak and wasted dreams and thirst. And alien abductions, apparently.

They've got me now, and I'm already typing it out in my mind. Addendum to my previous message: little green men are actually gray. Send message. The rest is the same: beady eyes, bulging heads, ultraviolet beams of radiation.

I'll be the first to say it wasn't all so bad. I didn't mean to leave like this, you know. It's just how it happened, but I wish I'd said goodbye.

I see the moon rise as I rise in unison with it, into the air, towards the disc in the sky. You know, I never did find out what a saucer is.

Now you're just waking up to see the text I sent. Don't bother replying, I'm gone. But don't come looking for me, either. This tractor beam won't take you home.

I'd ask you to look up at the stars and call my name, but we both know that won't be enough. Not in this lifetime, anyways. Maybe there's a different world, one with two suns and three moons, where the stars are all wrong, but we're all right, and it's more than enough to beckon me home. Rocketship, correct your course. Beam me back where you ripped me from.

But we both know, or at least I finally do, and these little gray men must know too, for why else would they have taken me? They know it's for the better. It's a chance to find a new place to be from, one where my stars align. I can't just picture it yet, but I know once I get past the cold kaleidoscope skies in this shiny tin box with these little gray men and my mind full of unsent messages, I will stop watching for your face in the stars.

I'm learning how to live amongst new matter: atoms, dust, and gas. Brush up on our origins, remember that life hitched a ride on a meteorite to our world not so long ago. I'm only fulfilling my genetic destiny, a fish out to sea, a molecule out to more. I'll leave you to your picket fence and your earthly dreams. They're no longer for me.

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 in 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. In the following vignette, “MENAS on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown,” Farid has made his way to Madrid and is living in a state-sponsored apartment for unaccompanied children. (MENA is the Spanish acronym for unaccompanied foreign minors.) Overwhelmed by culture shock and alienation, he struggles to adjust to his new environment.

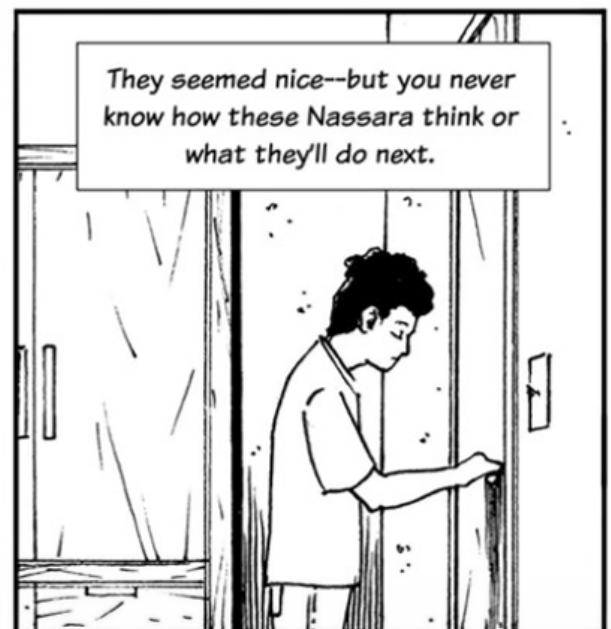
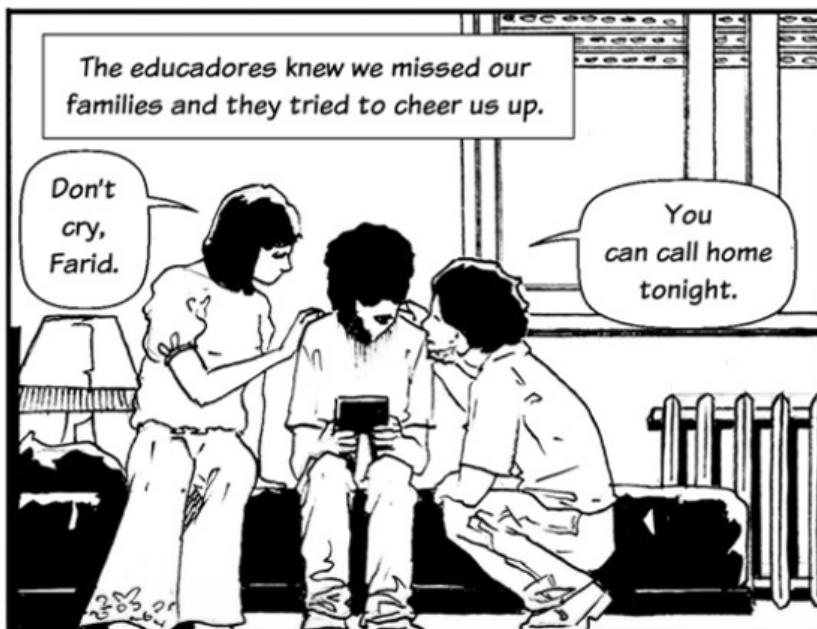
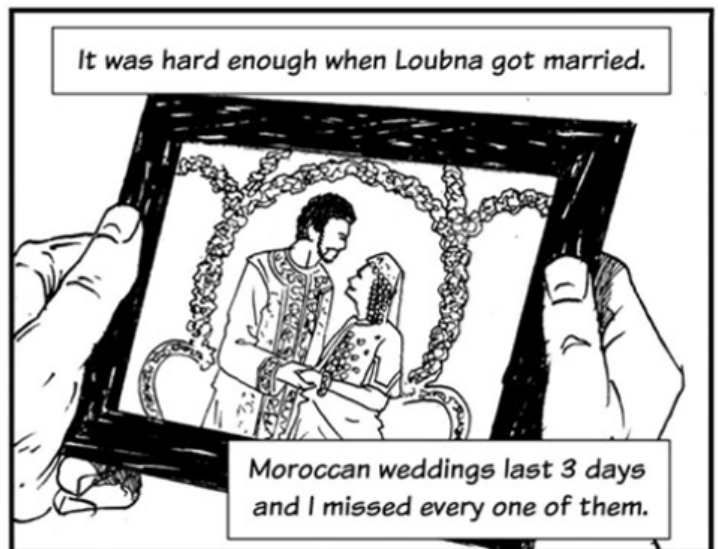
Farid’s account, which begins in Tangier and ends in Morocco, challenges long-held stereotypes of both Moroccans and Spaniards and offers new perspectives on the child im/migrant experience. A mixture of humor, irony, and tragedy, *Burning up the Strait*, like Farid himself, is both unique and universal.

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

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

medium: digital art

MENAS ON THE VERGE OF A NERVOUS BREAKDOWN



Edited by A. Jinha Song

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

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

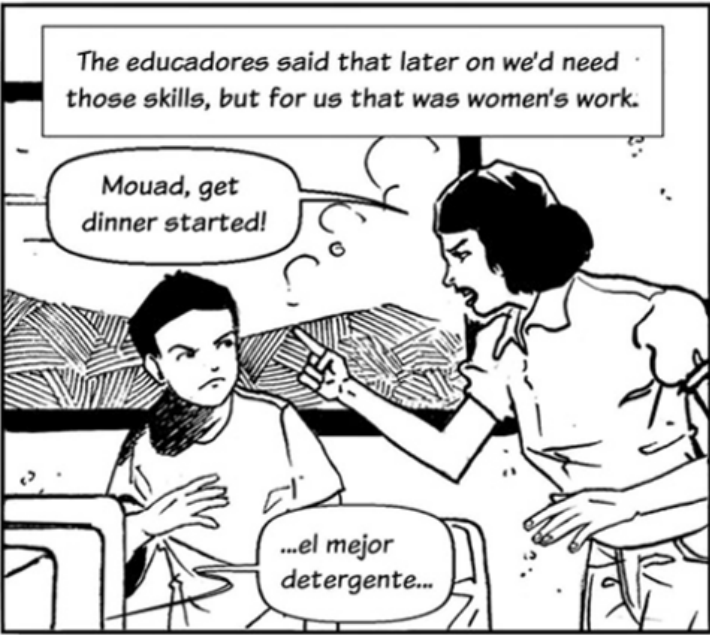
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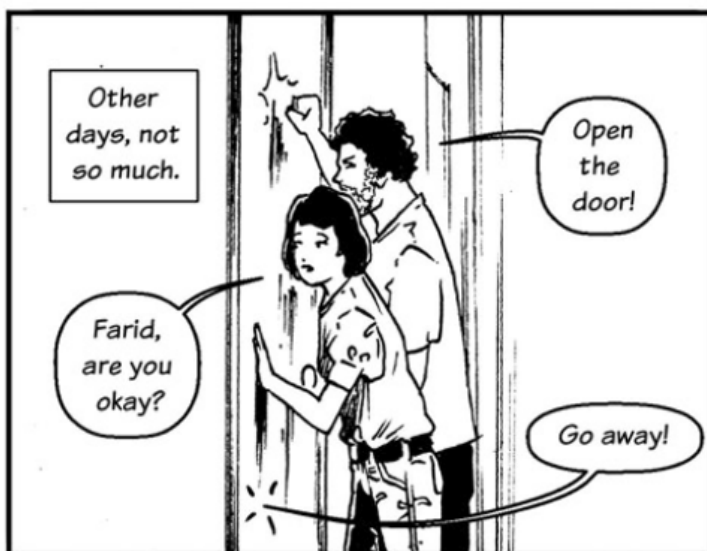
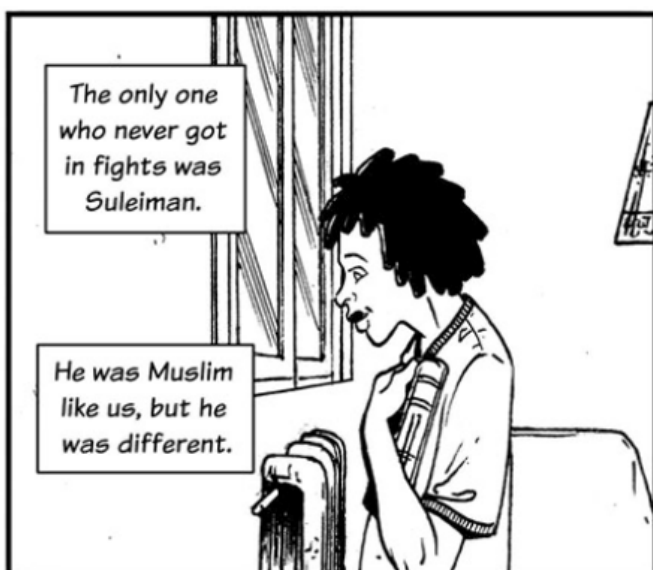
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هرب من الحفرة طاح في البير
 He ran away from a hole. he fell into a well.
 Moroccan saying

In seventh grade, your weekends were filled with Bar and Bat Mitzvahs. Friday night, Saturday afternoon, Saturday night, and sometimes, even Sunday services. You didn't want to be seen re-wearing the same dress. You asked your mom to take you to the mall, the Brazilian store that no longer exists, but at the time it sold all sorts of dresses made of comfortable, moveable fabric, something you could dance in. They always had black dresses, which you wore most, even if the parties weren't black tie. You always straightened your hair and did your own makeup. You got ready with friends and carpooled to the services, were bussed over to the receptions, picked up by your parents when the night was over. It was toward the end of the night when things got interesting. Someone found a glass of whiskey on a table. Someone's parents gave them wine. Someone snuck weed inside of a Black & Mild and you headed outside to form a circle and pass it around. The parties were where hookups happened, where slow dancing turned to kissing or grinding turned to racing to the bathroom to find a more private space to do things. No one took your hand and asked if it was okay. Hands wriggled up dresses, the black dresses your moms bought you. Your own hands cupped the crotches of dress pants. You were shy, but you were also ready.

You didn't have to be Jewish to get invited to a Bar or Bat Mitzvah. But only the Jewish kids understood that you gave chai or double chai. You didn't even know until years later that chai was Hebrew for "life," but at least you knew your parents were supposed to write a check for \$18 dollars if the party was for an acquaintance, or \$36 if it was a close friend. Only you knew it was funny if someone gave \$25 cash or a gift card to someplace. After a few parties, you knew to bring socks so you could take off your heels and actually dance. You slid across the slippery dance floor like a kid, but when the music slowed you felt passionate like an adult. It was about how close you could get. You always wanted to be closer than you got.

It was understood then that the boys had more power than the girls. If a boy turned his head to the right, you went right. If a boy lowered your spaghetti strap, you shimmied a shoulder to let loose the other. Boys were leaders and you became their mirrors. They knew what they wanted when you didn't know yet how to want. You had ideas: holding hands, cuddling, kissing, going for a walk, private moments looking into each other's eyes, titles like boyfriend and girlfriend, saying how much you liked someone, writing notes, receiving notes, hickeys and rubbing over your clothes. These things might be nice if you could only control how far they went. If you could say *that's enough, that's all I want to do*. But you didn't know those words. You only knew how to let someone tell you, or rather show you, what should be done.

Some girls made it look so easy. Boys gathered around them like a sideshow attraction. These girls blew smoke-rings. These girls had tongue piercings. These girls had tattoos of pink Playboy bunnies and purple butterflies on their lower hips. They didn't wear black. They wore hot pink and red and gold. They were glamorous. They were glorious. They were women among girls. They had full chests that seemed ample, always growing, always blossoming bigger, bigger, fuller. The boys seemed so young compared to them, like little puppies crawling around in their wake. They opened their mouths, tongues out. They sniffed at the berry perfume and licked the sugar lotion from tanning bed skin.

Digital cameras documented these nights, nights that in memory are black and gold, dusted with glitter, flashing lights and the bass of loud music. When you looked at the photos on the way home in the car, they were all blurry and chaotic and didn't do justice to the snapshots that lived in your head. You remembered the candle lighting ceremonies, how friends and family were called up one by one and handed long, taper candles that after being lit would be placed into an elaborate namesake arrangement of the birthday boy or girl. "NICOLE" dazzled in baby pink sparkles. "AARON" in metallic blue. The names rode away in cardboard racecars or sat inside moveable treasure chests or rested delicately on the tutus of ballerinas.

There was always one candle to remember the dead, a memorial candle, but it didn't stop the giggles and whispers and passing of alcohol under the table. Altogether there were thirteen; candles for grandma and grandpa and cousins and parents and best friends and siblings and newborns and special guests of honor. It was during these ceremonies that you realized the parties were infinite. They seemed to go on forever, candles burning into Saturday, Sunday, the smoke rising and lifting above your head and into the rest of your life. It became hard to tell which party was which, how much time had passed since you sat in services, what girl you were fighting with, which boy you were after now.

At the parties, anything was possible. The way time stretched and grew, how hours opened up and waited patiently for you to meet them. At school, time was held tight, every minute strictly accounted for. And at school, everything happened in the light of day. There was no magic, no glitter, no dancing, no music. At school, you were plain and ordinary, a kid in uniform khakis and polo shirts, a kid who wore a backpack and carried a pencil case. You had a face full of acne and got your period in the middle of the day. You listened to the Velcro sound of someone opening a sanitary pad in the bathroom, the way it echoed like a call across time. You traded aqua blue gel capsules of Advil to other girls across lunch tables, pointed to your abdomens, pointed to your heads. You chewed spearmint gum and sucked on cinnamon Altoids. You picked at overcooked cafeteria hamburgers or brought leftover broiled chicken from home. You flipped open plastic caps on Gatorade bottles and drank the orange, yellow, blue, red, green. In the bathroom after lunch, you re-applied concealer below your eyes, a bright white too light for your face, but you wanted to look awake, alive.

They opened
their mouths,
tongues out.
They sniffed at
the berry perfume
and licked the
sugar lotion
from tanning
bed skin.

You were warned about something called Bar Mitzvah blues. When all the parties were over—when there were no more services, no more dances—when another year had passed and you waved goodbye to it, you would feel sad that it was over. You would miss the parties, the routine of it, the excitement. At first you couldn't imagine missing all this chaos, all the outfits and hair and makeup. But as spring turned to summer and kids went to sleep away camp, to sports camps, on summer trips with families, to the Keys and to Europe and to the Hamptons and to elsewhere and beyond, you did miss it. You had the blues. You missed the confined spaces made just for you. Never again would you sit in temples and throw candies at your friends. Never again would you flail your limbs as the DJ called for a game of Coke and Pepsi. Moses had parted the Red Sea of your childhood and the wall of it was now closed behind you. You had crossed over, but when, and how, and could you go back, please?

As a Jew, these parties were the only time your religion was celebrated and not made fun of. You were cool; you were coveted. The rest of the years, your holidays were overlapped by Christmas, overshadowed by Easter. Even when Hanukkah fell during November, no one cared because all they could think about was Thanksgiving turkey. Your parents never understood why school was held on Yom Kippur, on Purim. At the local mall, kids waited in line and paid twenty bucks to see Santa, but you could visit the lone Menorah by Saks Fifth Avenue for free. You put down your shopping bags and stared at this life-size thing that was still not as tall as you and you tried to make sense of it. What did it mean to be Jewish? What did it mean that your best friend was not? Or that the boy you liked was not? What did you believe and why? You stood there as Christmas music played and they pumped A/C into the mall and you tried to catch your reflection in the silver base of the menorah, only for rust to glare back.

Later, around a smaller menorah, the one you made when you were little, the one made of wood with steel washers and nuts glued in place to hold the candles, the one your parents kept all these years because it was endearing, you light the candles and say the blessing aloud in the privacy of your own home. You say the words in Hebrew, words you've memorized by sounding them out over the years. But you know the translation too, the words that come naturally to your mind as you watch the candles glow: *Praised are You, Our God, Ruler of the universe, Who has given us life and sustained us and enabled us to reach this season.*

Your Love A Guillotine

How easy it is to fall victim to all that good you do for me. How diligent you are at teaching me to live on the outskirts of my own desire and cater to yours. Your neediness my harness, strapping me tight to a singular, narrow path. In your eyes, after years of marriage I am still proving myself.

You loom over me, too close to be standing next to me. Your gaze is directed at my hands holding the kitchen scissors as I cut open each tiny octopus’s mantle, removing its eyes and beak with surgical precision.

You are not helping me, just watching, making sure that all is done according to “the rules.” I perform the same lobotomy on all of the tiny heads, cleaning out their gills, heart, reproductive apparatus and digestive tract. All neatly packed in one place. The smallest of their organs is the brain, which sits below the stomach and above the eyes.

“That’s where all the shit is... do you want to eat their shit?” you say.

I shrug. Their tiny bodies will be dropped into boiling water at temperatures high enough to dissolve any trace of bacteria. That’s what I think.

In school I dissected a frog and went on plankton hauls for Marine Biology taught by an ex-cop. He ate live shrimp caught in the nets by biting off their heads while their afflicted bodies winced between his lips, guillotined by the white of his teeth.

Your throat is filled with phlegm, your words gargled, readily expelled like sediment from dirty water.

“And those eyes, delicious, especially the sound they will make between your teeth.”

Like sand I suppose, or a light crunch like shredded glass. I just clean out their guts and eyes and squeeze out their beak and strip them of their grey skin, leaving the tentacles to hang by a thread of connective tissue.

I am not interested in their biology. I just want this to be over.

I must've looked small, brown and full of joy; a pink mouth coughing up river water.

Driving through farm fields I imagine living in
Apricots bought from a man in a straw hat
Joking that could be you,
You when you're older,
Not you now, in your ribbed tank, vaping lightly next to me

My mental projection of the future changed. Where once was ambition, now a river flows.

After it was over she said "it's not your fault but I'm, like, going to hell."

With them, I sat silent and small. I felt ugly, the mirror reflected round-faced gluttony. I sit on a ledge and stare at the opposite shore. Towering walls of red rock cradle me while I recall my miserable life in LA. I come from a town where "daily bread" is a saying, not a practice.

I'm friends with the poor and soon to be famous. Rich beat nicks. At a party in my tuxedo top, I waste time. A Philadelphia soul new to the scene suggests I tattoo my wrist. His eyes skitter and fly as I tell him I only ink words on my skin. He does not listen, showing me arms branded with etchings of nature. I wonder if they remind him of home. I tell him we are wasting time here. I note the gaps in our conversation.

Being no one, going no where, star fucker.

There is more weight on my frame, my arms no longer resemble winter branches. I avoid mirrors, and laughs come quicker, dark thoughts don't linger. My appearance is irrelevant, tied to me by a string, but I am sexy and alluring as I swing my substance down Ventura Blvd.

It's hard believing you don't need to be beautiful. I'm an LA native, lily of this place, child of this city, sister to its successful.

To be honest, I couldn't see his face. I mostly kissed him in the dark. Sometimes I caught a glimpse and forgot why I was there. But then he kissed me, and I was reminded. *And just like the river, I've been running ever since.* I fear being just another girl, just another body next to his. Another face he saw, taken stock of only to forget.

Music rises, culminates in a too loud wave as the doctor tells me my tumor's gotten larger. This tumor in my throat...I don't know what to make of it. I think I caused it by not speaking up. Vision of myself in his passenger seat, weak but

tan, with a scar running down the length of my neck. On the red carpet, smiling amidst the flashing, with a scar crawling down my neck. In bed with him, head turned the other way, and he notices the scar weaving down my neck. Washing my hands, glancing in the mirror at the scar dripping down my neck. "I was gonna die young," Sylvan Esso *shut the fuck up*.

I won't recall my beauty, but I will smile remembering how I once laughed in lamplight, choking on peaches because of something my brother said.

Not a time piece in sight, time doesn't matter, not on the river with long-limbed men rowing you shore to shore. Miles fall away like hours in this sun-burn pause. I look into the eyes of the stranger next to me, she is my only way of knowing I am here. Rules lose weight here. It's so easy to breathe in water, let out air. Deflated, I sit on the edge of our raft. My toes tease the river. The wind is a hair dryer, a cruel dry warm, it tickles my skin. The guides tell us not to believe a word they say. *How do you know if a raft guide is lying? His lips are moving.* My father sits, unshaven and calm, singing next to me. Music is the only thing he misses. We sing songs we remember from life above, and I pretend the world ended and we have only these echoes to remind us of what was.

When I was little, my favorite place in the world was my father's arms. My father would lie in the sun, and I, small and unknowing, would bundle my limbs around him. Sleeping on his belly or curled into his side, I heard the gurgling and bubbling of his aliveness. The ultimate lullaby is the sound of my father's digestive system. I don't remember when I got older and stopped taking refuge in him; at some point in a girl's life, her father's body no longer feels like an option. Despite wanting to rest there always, I sought new places to lay my head. The only time I get close to the peace I felt on my father's belly is when I wrap myself in the arms of lovers. I contort my now grown frame into tiny configurations, and rest on top of their sometimes soft, sometimes taut, bodies. I listen to their hearts and stomachs, and smile at the sounds I discover. Boy sounds. I usually rise unsatisfied, disentangling myself from them and the subconscious knowing that their sounds were not, and never can be again, the sounds of my father.

He will kiss me in a teepee built while I hide crying over my ugliness. Before his lips touch mine I say *I'll never figure it out*.

Smiling, sunburned faces shine at me. I can't stomach how they juxtapose against the stark, white, sunken faces filling my sunny Los Angeles memory.

Your job is to facilitate people's undoing, unraveling everything they have ever known. It hurt when you pulled me into the boat after I jumped. I'm sorry I didn't sleep beside you our last night. There wasn't room for me in the dirt. *I'll never figure it out*.

I don't know what I'm passionate about but does good taste in music count? I know how to dress myself and write a sentence. I know how to tell someone they are worth more than they think, and how to talk to adults at parties. I know what kind of playlist is needed for a drive through Bakersfield, and how to hug my dad goodbye. I don't know how to care about things that don't matter to me,

The only time I
get close to the
peace I felt on
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arms of lovers.

or how to hold this in. I don't know everything the world has to offer, or what my life holds in store. I'm learning how to trust in something bigger than myself, to trust my gut. It's that little calm voice making me feel nothing.

And what if you were taken to a beach and a man 13 years older than you proposed skinny dipping as a first date, and your laugh echoed off canyon walls as you said *only cuz I'm on vacation* (love always a vacation, hence why it's a drug), and so you stripped off the white nightgown you hate and swam in River water, naked, with someone you imagined licking sweat off of? And what if you stared at the stars as he hurriedly asked if you were on birth control and you asked if he had a condom but both ended up gasping, raw in the sand anyway? And what if you spent the rest of the night alert and bare, as he called you "river nymph," running your finger over his nose? And what if when he kissed you, you remembered something you didn't know you forgot? He'll walk you back, quietly now, and the red glow from his flashlight shows you exactly where you belong. The other campers are prone, meaningless forms as you stumble into your family's campsite and brush your teeth using your little brother's water bottle. You accidentally wake him, but say only "good night." You offer no explanations on this family vacation.

Opposites collided in that water starved front lawn, and I watched myself romanticize strong men from small places.

And she might be a writer, or a girl.

And she might be yours, or his, or her own.

And she might be looking at you, or looking away,

her eyes invisible behind Arizona gas station shades.

Cindy Lamothe

*I Never Understood Día de los Muertos
Until It Helped Me Grieve My Brother*

I'm sitting on the edge of a grave in one of the cemeteries of Santa Ana, El Salvador. It's Día de los Muertos, a celebration of the dead. My friend's 55-year-old aunt, Elena, has invited us to join her in adorning her mother's grave with wreaths of vibrant margaritas and blood-colored claveles. She wraps them tenderly around the headstone, leaving a trail that encloses us. Then, she sets out her mother's favorite foods: pan con pavo, pupusas, atol de leche.

There are hundreds, if not thousands of others around us doing the same. They offer their love without restraint. Death, here, is a joyful event, uniting those left behind with those who can never return; even if only for a day.

I am not impressed. Even as I laugh with my friend and Elena's relatives, eat from their offerings alongside them, I am a stranger to this kind of grieving.

Watching these open displays of mourning both enthralls and repulses me. My own brother, Jay, had taken his own life two years before, and the thought of celebrating his departure fills me with nausea.

As an expat who'd only relocated to Central America three years before, this had never been my holiday growing up. My Honduran mother had left her Catholic upbringing behind long ago and had readily embraced my dad's Americanisms. As a mixed-race family in the suburbs, we wore elaborate Halloween costumes, went trick-or-treating, roasted pumpkin seeds, and celebrated fictional ghosts rather than our own.

And so sitting among the dead was alien to me. I watched as Elena unwrapped tamales and hojuelas slathered in honey; the traditional Salvadoran treats given on this day. She lovingly passed them around to us. One by one, her family shared memories of their deceased mother; the way she'd served her children the choicest plates, never sitting down herself, until everyone had been fed.

If a funeral is a sendoff, then Día de los Muertos is a homecoming.

"How did your mother die?" I'd asked Elena when we first arrived. Droplets of sweat rolled down her face as she guided us to the right spot. "Cancer," she nodded. "Yo era muy joven... only eleven."

I understood what it felt to be orphaned. Jay had been more than a brother to me; he was a surrogate parent, a protector — my best friend. I looked around me as people of all ages gingerly set up floral arrangements around their loved ones' tombs, and imagined all of the untold stories left in this place. The fractured lives that continued, the way people left behind their flowers and returned year after year.

I would never have that with Jay. There would be no place to set out his favorite mint chocolate ice cream or Marlboros. My brother had asked to be cremated, and so there would never be a headstone to pay homage to, there would never again be a physical representation of my love, my devotion.

Sixteen years have passed since that day at the cemetery, and my heart has softened. Now, living in Guatemala with my young son, I've watched as friends and acquaintances prepare their ingredients for fiambre, a traditional Guatemalan salad eaten every November 1st. They look forward to celebrating together even from inside their homes.

The year is 2021 and the pandemic has restricted us from large gatherings, and so people's grief must remain unrecognized, the way it has had to the rest of



illustration by Breanna Diaz

the year. But this season feels different somehow. Millions of lives have been lost and the heaviness of our collective mourning weighs in the air.

My then five-year-old asks me about the picture-frame of Jay hanging in my office. "He's my older brother," I say. "But he died a long time ago."

Words fail me. How do you explain the grief of suicide to your child? Or express the love you once held; still hold?

"Is he a skeleton now?," my son asks.

Several years ago, we watched the film *Coco* for the first time, and he'd sat enraptured by this colorful depiction of the afterlife. Here, the dead don't disappear, they exist among us.

Sitting from the comfort of our living-room, I saw the glimmer of my old self reflected back to me. Characters sitting among graves, placing their flowers and treats upon headstones, speaking of the importance of remembering.

I wish I'd known then what I know now: we don't have to carry our losses alone.

It was never the physical grave that mattered, it was being together; it was having our love witnessed.

Though my wounds haven't healed, they've evolved. For the first time, I tell my son that I'd like to make a special altar for my brother; adorn his photo with delicate petals and the foods he was most fond of. I'd like my son to know Jay and share in my grief with joy rather than sadness. To have a day of remembrance, a day of communing with the invisible present.

The fleur-de-lis as a symbol of New Orleans, of its rebirth and resilience, and of Louisiana in general, gained prominence in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. At least, I think this is true. Suddenly, it seemed at the time, they were everywhere and on everything, from dish towels and earrings to garden flags and decorative bowls. You couldn't turn around without a dainty little fleur posing for you on a guest towel or reminding you of your heritage from the bottom of a shot glass. Though again, I think this was the case. I'd already left.

Katrina barreled toward New Orleans and the Gulf Coast in the later days of August, making landfall on the 29th. Desperate families on rooftops reaching out for rescue, levees breached and bursting, Anderson Cooper wading down Canal Street in waist-high water—these were images of a foreign land. I watched it all on TV from a hotel room in Chelsea. It was my first day as a grad student in New York.

It's funny how I never thought I would really leave Baton Rouge, like actually go and not come back. That was something other people did. The stories about them were always fascinating, inspiring even. Older kids in school who'd gotten scholarships to far-flung places like Texas or Georgia, or my third cousin who'd mystified everyone by moving to Southeast Asia to teach English and not running immediately back screaming for gumbo.

They were the outliers, though, these itinerant friends of friends and distant relatives. Every now and then, you'd hear a story about one of them buying a house or getting married. This was like learning they'd registered for china after landing on Mars. Why would you do that? How much can shipping possibly be to Mars? Aren't you actually going to, you know, *come back from Mars*?

The farther one of these outliers went, the further my incredulity was stretched. It was one thing to seek higher education elsewhere, to spend a few years teaching the kids and exploring the tropical sights of Thailand. You could still categorize yourself as "visiting." You were away, but not paying property tax. Gone, but not needing the services of a notary public. But it was something else to me, something akin to interstellar space flight, to not only leave without set plans to come back but to also actively take steps to impede coming back. Why would you do that?

I get it now, two thousand miles away from home and browsing Zillow in a zip code I never could've imagined would be attached to my name. But I didn't all those years ago, gossiping about people I kind of knew in far-flung locales. I thought about these people a lot and wondered what they were doing, what it was like for them. But it was just wondering. It was just a poster of the Lower Manhattan skyline taped above my bed. All of it was very far away, but I did wonder what it was like there.

In the days and weeks and eventually years that started ticking by after getting to New York, I amassed a scandalous assortment of fleur-de-lis items. By “scandalous,” I mean embarrassing. Hand towels and earrings are fine. But a fleur-de-lis bundt pan? A fleur-de-lis dip chiller? Fleur-de-lis sofa pillows? Multiple fleur-de-lis sofa pillows? If it had a fleur on it, I bought it. It’s a connection to home, I reasoned. Fleurs are my heritage!

Years later, a few Colorado trinkets on display, I considered this a sign of some kind of progress. I was no longer decorating exclusively with fleur-de-lis! I was embracing where I was living. But when we got to California, my husband’s job pulling us to the land of palm trees, sun, and plastic surgery ads during every commercial break, some of the rails felt like they were starting to slip a bit. I bought a California state flag t-shirt. And wore it. A lot. I chose SoCal-thriving plants for our backyard—bougainvillea and bananas—greenery that belongs here, that’s in it for the long haul. We got annual passes to Disneyland and experienced the manic joys of living an hour away from Mickey Mouse and Splash Mountain and endless churros. I liked California. A lot.

As the shirts and tote bags and Sleeping Beauty-themed votive holders piled up, some of the fleur-de-lis dish towels stayed in drawers. Gasp! When my Louisiana state-shaped key chain broke off, I didn’t replace it with another one. The horror! My connection was fraying, literally breaking off in my hand. Time for another trip home then! That’ll do it. I just need to reestablish the bond, get my fleur-de-lis fix, and pretend that I never left and that I don’t actually live 15 miles from the Hollywood Sign.

This was a great idea to have as 2020 began but less great around March/April. Delta assured me my flight credit would be honored for up to a year, then two years. Covid-19 protocols and policies were being updated as the situation evolved. Surely, I’d be able to get home by fall. By Christmastime. By Valentine’s Day. By next Easter?? Six or seven months in, the fleurs started showing up again. Oh look, there is my Louisiana-themed kitchen towel featuring a colorful design of all the things that make the state special. It will go great slung over the oven handle, next to my other Louisiana-shaped dish towel with a heart-shaped push pin marking BR as home. Two Louisiana dish towels are better than one, you know. Double the decor, double the heritage!

I used to wonder so much and so often about what it was like to live somewhere else, and here I am 15 years out and it has taken five million trinkets and a global pandemic to show me that once you leave, you can never really go home again.

I had a recurring dream during the height of the coronavirus pandemic in which I miss large chunks of things—events, vacations, and whatnot. The details were different every time, but the basic framework is that I manage to not be present for a span of time that is significant and then I am very upset when I realize it has happened again. Considering I sometimes don’t get out to run errands until around 6 p.m., this tracks. It’s about home, though. I know it is. I know it’s about the parents I didn’t see for over a year and a half, and the best friend, and the family. The university lakes I didn’t walk around, moss dripping from the cypress trees along the banks. The interstate overpass providing a loud and shady

break from the hot sun. The snowball stands I didn't frequent. The football games I've never cared about. The humidity that hasn't bathed me from head to foot after approximately 30 seconds standing outside.

I think of Louisiana all the time now, much more so than when I actually lived there. I wonder how it's doing. Is it getting enough sleep? Eating enough vegetables? Pulling enough Confederate monuments down at a decent-enough pace? I feel the space of the separation. I feel, for the first time, the miles. I left Louisiana almost two decades ago. I may actually be the slowest person to have ever lived.

I've been thinking a lot about Laura Ingalls Wilder too and Caroline Fraser's biography of her, *Prairie Fires*, that I read during lockdown. Reading about the real Laura was comforting, and surprising. She hadn't lived out west for decades when she wrote her *Little House* books, but you could smell the plains with her every word, hear the grasses rustling and her Pa playing his fiddle. She went twenty years at one point without a visit home. There wasn't the ubiquity of travel when she was in her 50s and 60s, but she could've gone. She had the means. But she never went. It's not known why.

Maybe the distance was too much. Or not enough. Even if you're on Mars, if you can still close your eyes and see it, still hear the crickets singing in the afternoon haze and still hear the trains honking on the tracks beside the hum of the I-10 interstate, that is sometimes sufficient. Or it's everything.

It's good to feel a sense of place, a connection to where you come from. It's also special to see other places, to live someplace else, where the sun still shines but it's different. I don't know. It just looks different. There are pluses and minuses, but one thing you can always count on is the pull. It will always be there, no matter how many miles you leave behind you, no matter how many fleur-de-lis accent bowls you never use but absolutely have to keep buying. Laura knew it well: "The grasses waving and blowing in the wind, the violets blooming in the buffalo wallows, the setting sun sending streamers through the sky. In the end, being there was all she ever wanted" (*Prairie Fires*, p. 515).



[Kaila Cadabona](#)

Spectator

medium: digital photograph

Contributors

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[Elise LeSage](#) studied creative writing at Virginia Commonwealth University, where their poetry and non-fiction won the Undergraduate Writing Award in both 2018 and 2019. Their work has been featured and is forthcoming in *Pwatem*, *Karma Comes Before*, Nymeria Publishing's *Descendants of Medusa* anthology, and elsewhere.

[Julie Levin](#), one of few people born and raised in Los Angeles, went to Melrose Avenue, Bancroft Jr. High, and Fairfax High before attending SMC, and then UCLA. In high school, she knew people who knew the Red Hot Chili Peppers. She currently has two friends who played small roles in cult horror classics. She writes poetry because the money is really good.

[Christopher Linforth](#) is the author of three story collections, *The Distortions* (Orison Books, 2022), winner of the 2020 Orison Books Fiction Prize, *Directory* (Otis Books/Seismicity Editions, 2020), and *When You Find Us We Will Be Gone* (Lamar University Press, 2014).

[Rachel Mallalieu](#) is an emergency physician and mother of five. She is the author of *A History of Resurrection* (Alien Buddha press 2022). Some of her recent work is published or forthcoming in *Nelle*, *Rattle*, *West Trestle Review*, *DIALOGIST* and *A Gathering of the Tribes*. More of her poetry can be found at rachel-mallalieu.com

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Grace Penry (she/her) graduated from the University of Arizona with degrees in Anthropology and Creative Writing. She has edited the *Sonora Review* and currently reads poetry for *The Offing*. She lives in Buenos Aires admiring the porteña literature and taking workshops. You can find her other published work in the *Oakland Arts Review* and *Kitchen Table Quarterly*.

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Jen Schneider is an educator who lives, works, and writes in small spaces throughout Pennsylvania. She spends her days on West Coast time.

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Camille White is currently a chemistry major at UCLA and very interested in architecture, environmental studies, and the intersection of these fields through materials science and civil engineering. She gets ecstatic with anything at all related to the arts, especially landscape and portraiture photography, as well as satirical writing, rock climbing, and reading mystery novels.

Sofia Wolfson is a writer and musician living in LA. She studied English and Creative Writing at Tufts University and Occidental College and now works as an academic tutor, music teacher, and professional musician. She is currently working on a novel and album, often finding how the two mediums inform one another.

Sabrina Youn, UCLA English major and Film minor, as published work in three anthologies with WriteGirl Publications. Lover of storytelling (and cats), she enjoys screenwriting, storyboarding, and video editing.



[Camille White](#)

Sand Dunes

medium: digital photograph

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