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A letter from the managing editors:

It's 75 and blue skies again in LA. That being said, it's difficult to think of anything bright and sunny to say when things just seem to keep getting more dim. We hope that the contents of this journal, then, will speak for themselves.

At *Westwind*, we pride ourselves on publishing pieces that feel cherished by their creators. It is safe to say that the contributors to this issue have each lent us a fragment of themselves in sharing the products of their unique points of view and nagging creative impulses. This issue has spots of levity—nature thick and sweet, the tremors of young love, soaring choruses, all that good stuff. But the art framed here does not shy away from quotidian disappointments, or the tragic and life-altering. We all know art can provide momentary escape, but, if we push through the tough stuff, it can also lead to perspective, connection, and empowerment that endure, even in precarious times.

We are so grateful to our contributors who have given this journal life, and to our staff who have shaped it into its final, vibrant form. Another thank you to Reed Wilson for lending an ear and wise words whenever we need them. This journal marks the end of one chapter in *Westwind's* long history. It's bittersweet to say goodbye to our senior staff members, but the mark they have left on our community is undeniable. We're excited to see what the future has in store for *Westwind*.

Now, the Spring 2022 issue!

Best wishes,

Jade Lacy and Katherine King
Managing editors

Poetry, 5

Vivian Underhill

Tule Elk Preserve in March, 7

Salinas Valley Memorial Hospital, November 6th, 2020, 8

Nur Hussein

brown women don't get to experience love, 10

ar(nt'a) poetica, 12

Fiction, 13

Woody Brown

Camp Kris, 15

Walter and Emma do Chitchat, 18

Ginger Lee Jacobs

Some Unnamable Crime, 20

Barbara Linkevitch

After Hours, 25

Naomi Liu-Abramowicz

Bitter California, 30

Brittney Luong

If Words Could Rot like Bodies Do, 33

Jordan Medina

Body Before The Soul, 34

E. Nightingale

there is mold in my shower, 41

Logan Roscoe

Linguistics, 44

The Center of the Panopticon, 45

Ashley Tibbits

Joni Mitchell Blue, 52

Creative Nonfiction, 59

Laureen Huynh

Letter to a Saigonese Newborn, 61

Moupi Mukhopadhyay

Seared Ahi Tuna, 65

Jennifer Shneiderman

THE SPEEDWALKER, 68

Art, 69

Nika Eskandari

Memories of Youth, 71

Pacific Sunsets, 72

The Timekeeper, 73

Tidal Block, 74

Views from Venice, 75

Mary Grace

Snakeskin, 76

Polaroid, 77

Excavation, 78

Franklin, 79

Half a Whole, 80

Nur Hussein

Over the Olive Trees, 81

The2vvo

Thick Skin – Mask Series, 82

James Reeder

Late November, 87

Sixty-five Impala, 88

Milo Atlas

Rescue, 90

Contributors, 91

Editors, 94



poetry



A letter from our editors:

We'll be honest: If you asked us what, exactly, a poem is, we couldn't tell you. Even before Emily Dickinson's oft-quoted litmus test of decapitation ("If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry."), poetry has escaped easy definition. In its stead, we rely on intuition: We know a poem when we see one—or so we tell ourselves.

Spring brings with it a sense of new beginnings, and the poems in this issue take advantage of the season's possibility. They are—in a word—daring, unafraid to play with the space on a page and colloquial language, to lean into their inspirations (literary or otherwise) wholeheartedly. The result: writing that is political, intimate, quiet, fervent, all while stepping into a world of fear and uncertainty without hesitation. Their passion might draw blood; are you ready for it to be yours?

It was a joy to be in the throes of these poems this quarter; we thank our contributors—for their bold vulnerability—and our staff—for their sharp eyes and endless care—a thousand times over. And of course, none of this would be possible without Professor Reed Wilson and everyone reading this; our gratitude is immeasurable.

Jade Lacy and Austin Nguyen
Executive Poetry Editors

Tule Elk Preserve in March

Midmorning and the valley is singing to itself.
Listen to the bees
thrumming to the trees in bloom like a hum in the chest
for comfort. The hawk unfolds from the cottonwood
a mosaic of pottery shards and the ravens
croak like stones dropped in water, down the back
of the throat. Feel the earth pulling you close.

It is not nostalgia, to cling to the marshy ghosts
of a parched lake, the water snakes who swarmed
through the rattling reeds.

The breeze picks up and the hawk returns
The heat rises and the plains begin to wave.
One shell-white egret sits in the shush
of leaves still translating wind into sound.

Someday all this will have silted away, the halo of song
Arcing above this small pond the calf chasing the birds
The birds translucent below the sun.
Once this was underwater
And is
*And will be again.*¹



¹ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*

there is this triangle:

Her

Her father

and you

When we love a sap older than time rises through our arms.

And then she returns, swimming

in a dark prehistory:

your hands
(empty)

the car
(cold and dark)

Her breath
(bereft)

and him somewhere above

brown women don't get to experience love

the narrative never changes;
 a white woman walks into a coffee shop / bookstore / legoland
 red dotted up in the blank sheet of her skin, blonde like elsa
 / ginger like ariel
 her eyes mutated blue, other times green, gray, but never brown
 so naturally,
 she gets a story written about her / a muse in a movie /
 her name as a title of an indie band's hit love song / hump song

the image never changes;
 brown women who look like me,
 are cut into bc our noses aren't small enough,
 my teeth aren't big enough, not white enough, not wide enough,
 and squeezing lime into these eyes don't make them brighten up either

i'm not the type of "pretty" palestinian that looks like bella hadid - mommy's white kind /
 daddy's white passing kind
 the kind of light skinned arab that gets put on the cover of a magazine /
 walks runways - the showcased type / trophied type

i'm the kind of brown woman that only gets fetishized
 / suheir hammed, "not your erotic, not your exotic" type
 the type of arab to play a background character /
 belly dancer / extremist /
 "white men, pls save me from this hijab" is our only screen time, see

mama says, us women are only made to love god
 naturally,
 i fell for bruce almighty
 but jim carrey gets with jennifer aniston - mama,
 god don't like me back !!!

mama says, i am a branch of my ancestry
 olived skinned like the food we eat
 and my roots stem back to
 eyes who have fallen in love
 by a similar sight of me.



ar(nt'a) poetica

poetry is gross
embarrassing !!!
& cheesy

poetry is boring
catch me snoring
...poetry...funny ?

poetry not funny / turn my tummy
once broken
yo poem no longer be jokin

seriously, poetry be teasing
writing & weeping
poetry opens wounds
but if you let it, poetry can be healing
poetry is not a guide
but a lifeline

poetry is
mother
father
daughter
lover,
where's my wedding ring ??
now
this poem trying to be something

& it can because
poetry is a play thing
used for coping
poetry is resistance
persistence
once dedicated
poetry comes into existence.



A letter from our editors:

It's rotten work, trying to take care of people. Anne Carson told us as much (and Euripides told her, it seems, through the great long literary grapevine): even when the sparkling resolution seems like it'll be worth the headache-inducing conflict, when a person outweighs the trouble it'll take to reach them, someone involved is probably still going to think something about the process kind of sucked.

The eleven stories featured in this issue's short fiction section beat on this axiom with their tiny metaphysical fists, searching for some dent or cavity that, if hit at the right angle, will crack the whole thing wide open. There's a convoluted impotence in each, sure—there's certainly no firm affirmation that interpersonal relationships can actually offer fulfillment. But there is something in the act of portraying relationships, extensions and retractions of the self, that grasps at a looming so-what. "Why do we do this to ourselves?" these stories ask. Well, what's the alternative?

We're forever indebted to the fiction team for funneling their very cool selves into that one classroom in Physics and Astronomy each week to talk over submissions (especially because most of us have no place being in South Campus—Westwind members are overwhelmingly allergic to math). Another thank you to Reed Wilson, for being the best, and to you dear reader. We wish you luck in your rotten work.

Best,

Katherine King and Garrett Ewald
Executive Fiction Editors

Camp Kris

First came the camp counselor. I was sitting on the floor of my cabin. My duffle bag was open in front of me. It wasn't my duffle bag, actually. It was my dad's. He lent it to me for this five-day sleepaway camp for adults with disabilities. This was my first time away from home overnight. I had survived the first two nights, but they hadn't gone well. No one seemed very pleased with me. I was going through the bag, hoping that Mom might have hidden a train or some gummies in there. Something that would make this strange place feel friendlier. My fingers landed on a thin, long, plastic container with seven little compartments. I have these. My mom uses them to organize the fistful of medications and supplements I take every day. But the one I just found in the bag was Dad's. It had two days' worth of pills in it. He was on a five-day trip recently and he obviously forgot to take out the container.

I was holding it in my hand when the counselor came in looking for me. I was late for breakfast. The counselor was already annoyed about having to walk all the way to the cabins to retrieve me, the new camper who wasn't yet with the program. His eyes got large when he saw the pill holder in my hand. There are no pills in the cabins. There are two nurses on staff here. They dispense everyone's pills at mealtimes. Everyone here is on some kind of medication, so they take it very seriously. The counselor rushed over to me and grabbed the pill container out of my hand. He looked at it and his demeanor changed to one of panic. Oh my god! he kept saying. Did you take all these? He yanked me to my feet and forced my mouth open, as if to catch some errant capsule dancing down my throat. I wanted to believe that this person was concerned for my safety and welfare, but there was something in his alarm that screamed liability to me. It wasn't me he was worried about, he was concerned about Camp Kris' bottom line and what my foaming at the mouth might mean to his own job. He took my arm, not gently, and pulled me up the path to the main building.

In my head, I am firmly but calmly explaining the circumstances to the counselor, whose name I haven't learned yet. Dad's bag, Dad's pills, can you keep them safe until he comes to pick me up at the end of the week? But my mouth doesn't work that way. The only word I could summon from my voice was "Henry." Henry is number 3 of Thomas the Tank Engine's friends. Henry always arrives just in time to save the day. When I am pushed too far, when I am stressed beyond a quick recovery, I call out to Henry, loudly, repeatedly, in a high-pitched voice. Please, someone, come to my rescue. A 22-year-old man crying out "Henry" over and over unnerves many people, this camp counselor among them. We were both in a heightened state when the young man pulled me into the nurses' office. My autistic agitation was hitting its upper register, and my new staffer friend was anticipating the trouble this event was going to cause someone, hopefully not him.

Both nurses were in the dining hall distributing meds. The counselor used his phone to alert someone that there was a possible overdose in process. If I had more control over my facial muscles, I would be rolling my eyes. By the time the nurses rushed in, I was doing my best to appear alert and unimpaired. I was hungry, too. The head person of the camp hurried in. She was a brittle blonde lady who had her favorites. My mother had already alienated herself, and me by association, by being too needy about my diet, my Epi-Pen, my allergies, and my meds. I had perseverated on 'Mom and Dad' since the moment they left, repeating those three words over and over, so everyone on the premises was exasperated with me, counselors and campers alike. I knew it, but couldn't stop. I didn't like it there, and all I wanted was for the experiment to be over. We had tried each other, Camp Kris and me, and found the other wanting.

Head lady left the nurses' office to call my parents. I don't know what she said to them or how she characterized the incident. Once she was gone, the younger nurse returned to the dining hall to finish doling out pills to campers who weren't in nurse prison. The older nurse, obviously perturbed, did a perfunctory examination of me. She took my pulse and checked my pupils. I'm pretty sure they knew I hadn't taken anything horrible. They were following a policy that had the added benefit of ridding themselves of me. Right back atcha, Camp Kris.

Camp Kris is the mountain retreat owned and operated by Upward Bound. Most weeks are reserved for disabled kids, but they open the camp experience to disabled adults for one or two weeks over the summer. My parents didn't send me here as a kid. I guess they didn't think I was up to it. By age 22, even they thought it was time for some independence and a camping experience. I was not convinced, but I typed 'yes' when Mom showed me the brochure. I was torn about being vindicated. Even in this environment, I was the only nonspeaking autistic person. No aide to help me with the letterboard that would have allowed me to clear up the pill container situation before it escalated to Defcon 1. Now there was trouble.

Camp Kris is supposed to be a haven for disabled people, a place where everyone can enjoy nature and community no matter their limitations. Yet there I was, incarcerated, unable to explain or defend myself, punished for something I didn't do. I expect this level of injustice from the typical world: educators, medical personnel, law enforcement, people at large. I've encountered the willful bias against nonspeakers my entire life. I didn't expect to be rejected by Camp Kris. Yet rejected I was. Forcibly evicted. I had been in the nurses' office less than half an hour when some counselor – I had yet to learn anyone's name, that's how connected I was to this warm camping community – dumped my/Dad's duffle bag inside the door, packed but not neatly.

I learned that my parents would be there any minute to pick me up. We lived several hours from Camp Kris. They had taken advantage of this rare me-free week to have a getaway of their own. Coincidentally, they were at a lodge nearby. They arrived at Camp Kris so soon that I barely had time to be concerned about my mother's reaction to this turn of events. I didn't worry about my dad, it's different with him. But Mom deserved the break this week was supposed to give her. I wouldn't blame her for being disappointed. I was disappointed with her. Not for myself of course. I hated the place and couldn't wait to get out of there. But she needed a break from being my person, and who wouldn't.

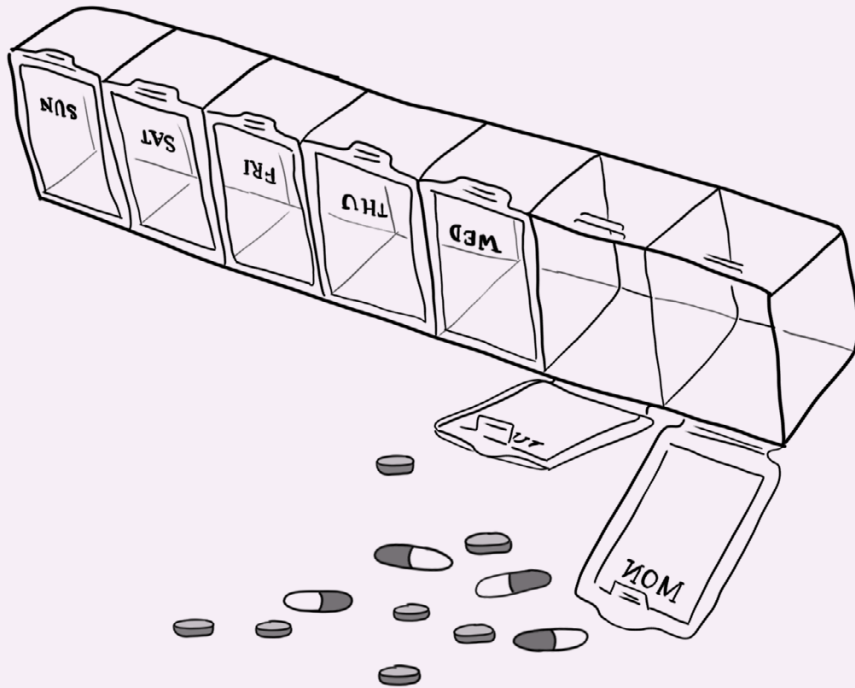
Suddenly my mother entered the room like a virago. I was afraid of her. I can only imagine what the camp people thought. Her first action was to march over to me, look me over closely, and give me a brief, fierce hug. I knew then that someone other than me was in her crosshairs. Mother turned to the nurse and demanded to see the pill container. She cried out that she had been right, what she had said on the phone. She proceeded to go through all the observations and explanations that I would have made if I were blessed with the gift of speech.

Dad's bag. Dad's pills. Dad's recent five-day trip. Common sense would tell you that I hadn't taken anything harmful. The only prescription drug in the container was a Metformin for Dad's blood pressure. The rest of the pills were fish oil and saw palmetto for god's sake. And by the way, Walter is not an idiot and wouldn't have taken someone else's pills. And you're treating him like a goddamned criminal. By this time, the no-nonsense camp director had entered. She was attractive, late 30's, camping attire, but she wore her blonde hair like the helmet of a formidable opponent. Mom delivered her righteous indignation directly at her. She wanted the lady to admit that they had overreacted, but helmet hair stood firm right back. Mom said that helmet hair should be ashamed of herself. Her job was to give Walter a camp experience. Mom guessed that I had been scripting a lot

and annoying people. Yeah, welcome to Walter's disability, she practically screamed in helmet lady's face.

Dad had hung back and let Mom do her thing, but now he picked up his/my bag and said to me that it was time to go. Mom followed us, but turned to lob one more ball of mother fire at the lady. You should be ashamed of yourself. Be better than this. With a look that should have turned the lady into brittle stone, Mom got in the car with me and Dad, slamming the door behind her. We started the long drive down the mountain in silence. Mom's anger shimmered off her in little sparks. She repeated all the injustice and intolerance Camp Kris had committed. Her voice became sad and plaintive toward the end. She said the hard thing out loud.

Dad stopped at McDonalds to get us breakfast. We never talked about Camp Kris after that.



Walter and Emma do Chitchat

Walter arrives at 8:30. His mom has to be at work at 9:00. Mom signs him in and has a little chitchat with Edith at the front desk. Mom often brags about him to people, even strangers, but Walter is envious of her ability to talk to anyone. He doesn't know if she was always like this, or if she developed the skill after she realized that he was never going to hold up his end of the conversation.

Mom and Dad used to chatter constantly. Walter was always amazed by how much they found to talk about. He listened to them closely, although most people would assume from Walter's behavior that he was tuned out. They talked about current news and Dad's job. Dad would tell stories about things going on at work and use too much detail for Mom, but she knew that he needed to sound everything out. She usually gave her impressions of the situation and would tuck a bit of advice in her comments. Mom just talked about me and my day. Their chat was incessant and they made each other laugh all the time. He could hear them at night, belly laughing through the walls.

Since Dad passed, Walter worries that Mom doesn't have anyone to talk to. This is not strictly true. Since the day that he was three, when she realized that he was not mentally retarded as she had been told by doctors, she has kept up a one-sided conversation with him. She talks to him as if he could answer back. Walter has always appreciated this. He responds to her in his head, which almost seems like a conversation, at least to him. Sometimes an echolalic script comes out of his mouth—irrelevant, unbidden, unwelcome. People who don't get it try to respond to the echolalia. Not Mom. She just says something else, and the conversation continues. He is aware that it's not fair to her, so he tries to be patient when she goes on chatting with Edith. She's going to be late for work at this point. Walter walks back to the rec room without saying goodbye to his mother. He only performs greetings when prompted to do so, and the one who prompts is still conversing with the receptionist.

Walter walks into the rec room and stands there. He is one of the few Upward Bound clients who does not get there on a short bus. The busses don't arrive until nine, so Walter is often the first one here. He doesn't mind because he likes the quiet, but he wishes that someone would leave out a puzzle or book so that he didn't get so bored waiting. Mike keeps everything locked up tight. Walter is standing near the window, watching the light flickering off the pool as if the window were a video screen. He is surprised when Emma enters. She usually arrives on the third bus around 9:05. It's only 8:39. Something must have been different in Emma's house today. Maybe she missed the bus and it took her parent less time to get there even so. He would ask her but there's no way his mouth could form the question. Even if he managed it, she couldn't answer. She makes tiny little sounds, like little breathy bird sounds, instead of words. So Walter is left to conjecture as to why Emma is early today.

Emma comes over to the windows and looks out, as if to see what Walter is staring at. The sunlight flaming off the pool and fractured by the window draws her gaze as well. He wonders if it appears the same to her as it does to him. They say that no two people experience autism the same way. How would anyone know what was happening in their heads? Maybe Emma and Walter have exactly the same hallucinogenic visual response to the sun on the water refracted through the glass window. As they stand in the shabby rec room, Walter realizes that he will never know.

Walter is aware that Emma can also point to letters to communicate, like he can. Like most spellers, they need communication partners or aides to facilitate their pointing. There is no such trained aide at Upward Bound. Their skills are dormant here. Whatever conversation Walter and Emma might have with actual words requires two other people present. They have conversed this way over the

years, but it is stilted and unsatisfying to Walter. He prefers this, just the two of them, letting their energies do the talking.

Walter and Emma learned to point as kids, taught by the same amazing lady. They met at age six, playing in a McDonald's play place, while their mothers chatted and realized that they had something in common. It's almost twenty years later, and their moms are still friends. Walter and Emma were both able to point at letters to get through school, and they both attended college before they both ended up at Upward Bound. Emma went to a small Christian college where they were loving and tolerant of her, but Emma was nonetheless overwhelmed with anxiety and has yet to finish her degree. She needed a break, and her mom sent her to Upward Bound, thinking it would be okay since Walter was there.

Walter learned all this by listening to the two mothers talking at the occasional meet-ups of nonspeaking spellers that Emma's mom organized. Walter and Emma have known each other for so long that he considers them friends. He knows they're friends. They may even love each other a little. Being friends without speaking requires faith. Not the Christian kind of faith, which Emma clings to but Walter does not. The faith that allows you to believe that your friend feels for you what you feel for them. Even when you can't show it or speak of it.

Walter feels Emma's anxiety lurking below her placid demeanor. It's like a painful electrical current submerged in mud. Everyone thinks Emma is so calm, but Walter knows that it's because of the disconnect between her emotions and her face. Nervous and upset can be confused with happy and calm if you don't stand quietly next to her and hear the thrumming of her wires. That's what Walter does in the moments that they're looking out the window. He listens with all his heart.

Walter is pretty sure that Emma is also listening to him. He can feel her energy trying to find its way into his. He wonders what his sounds like to her. Maybe she hears in colors, maybe she sees with music. By the time the first short bus disgorges its passengers at 8:58, Walter feels as if he has had a twenty-year running conversation with his friend, with chitchat and belly laughs. Walter thinks that he hears Emma saying that she cherishes him.

Some Unnamable Crime

Today, I came out to Whittier for the first time. It's a nice break from the city. Here, the glaciers are still melting. The air smells like water—clean and crisp as the blue breath of dawn. And the mountains go back and back and back, like the soft curves of a hundred sleeping women.

I'm squatting beside the last of the electrical boxes, about halfway between the tunnel and Begich Towers, when I finally take off my rubberized canvas gloves. "That should do it," I say, looking up at Stan.

He just nods and makes a note on the clipboard. Then he's back to looking off into the distance, not paying much attention to me at all. Stan's about my father's age, and he works for the Chugach Electric Association. It was February last time he was out here. He tells me that he had to slog through a couple feet of snow, most of it turned all gray and brown. Even now, with nearly eighteen hours of daylight, the snow's not all melted. It lies in rivulets, like little veins, on the sloping mountains that surround us.

I'm training with Stan to learn how to do safety inspections on electrical systems rated for 30 kilovolts or less. Some guys seem to think that a woman has no business in the trades and they tend to get nervous watching you work—let alone train to do their job. They'll stare at you, tapping their feet, all waiting to say the same thing: "Well, now, that's not how I learned to do it..." Stan's not like that. He gives me space and I'm grateful for it. Today, though, he seems especially distracted.

But I forget all about that when, once the truck is all packed up, he says the magic words: "Buy you a beer, Cheryl?"

A light drizzle is coming down—that boggy scent of silt thick as the weeds all around us. It's not quite tourist season. That kicks off in July and August, when the salmon are running and the berries are ripe. Because most places are still shuttered, the only options for beer are either tall boys from the bait shop or going to Sue's Place.

We mount the long flight of wooden stairs, our work boots stomping, to the combined bar-restaurant. It's got an old, dry smell inside and the walls are hung with such an assemblage of fishing-themed bric-a-brac, you can hardly tell the color of the paint. We sit down at a horseshoe-shaped bar fitted with green vinyl stools. Patron-wise, the place is empty besides for a young couple from out of town, giggling over mugs of coffee. Then there's us.

Stan sips the foam off the top of his pint and plants it back on the bar. Condensation bites a wet ring into the coaster. Leaning forward on his elbows, he says: "Whittier's an odd place to live, Cheryl. I'll tell you that much." Then he shakes his head. "Talk about being between a rock and a hard place."

Like I don't already know. Whittier is all rock on one side and glaciers on the other. The only way in is either by boat or, when the train isn't running, through the Anton Anderson tunnel. The tunnel's the way we came in: 2.5 dark, dark miles, one way traffic only, then the sunlight hits you like ice water.

Back during the cold war, the US government thought highly of Whittier's relative proximity to Russia and it was developed as a military outpost. They should have known that it was too cold, too bare, and too far out for all that. The project was abandoned after the 1960s and the land sold to the railroad. Now, the 300 permanent hangers-on of Whittier live in the skeleton of the old army base. For efficiency's sake, and because the railroad won't sell them any land, the whole town is jammed

into a single, 14-floor apartment building: the Begich Towers. A whole town under one roof—must be pretty neighborly in there, I think.

The girl working the bar has retreated into the kitchen. I can see her through an empty door frame, rolling up silverware in paper napkins. I wonder if she lives in that big building. I guess she must. Then I wonder if she's lived there all her life, born and raised and everything.

Stan sighs. I turn toward him. He takes another sip of his beer, bunching up his eyebrows a little and pressing his lips together like he's formulating something. Then he says to me: "Cheryl, you ever hear of 'community standards'?"

I nod. I'd read the same training guides he had, after all.

"Working this job, you'll come to find out that some places just don't operate like we're used to. You'll see places so poor it hurts, deep in the interior, where they're just getting electricity. Awful stuff can happen when you're isolated like that."

"It's not exactly cosmopolitan out here, either," I laugh. I'm not sure what he's trying to get at.

"And Whittier's not exempt from the awfulness," he says, serious.

I get the cue. I'm not laughing anymore. He seemed a little spacey today. I ask him to tell me what's the matter.

"An odd place, that's all. People think the whole town under one roof thing is cute. I'm not so sure." He pauses a moment and looks around the room, as if getting reacquainted. "Take what happened back in January."

This is the first I've heard of it. "Well?" I say expectantly.

"A real tragedy. I heard about it during my last inspection, from a contractor repairing the boiler in Begich."

Stan starts off by reminding me how rough the winters are out here. Whittier is less protected from the freezing north Pacific than a place like Anchorage, which is tucked way up at the top of the Cook inlet. And I know this valley acts like a wind tunnel. In fact, Stan tells me, the weather gets so bad that the entire town has to hole up together four months out of the year.

"Four months of darkness and coldness, but the real thing that gets to people is the boredom. The stale air. It's not like they're locked in the building—people can, and do, go out on fairer days. But others just don't bother. They don't see the point, you know? Everything shuts down. At least up in Anchorage there are still places to go, places nearby."

I know what he means but, even in the city, people get into pretty odd states during those winter months. We're creatures of daylight, after all. That's why the summers up here are so beautiful. But during the thickest part of the



winter, there's really no sun except for a couple of light-blue hours like dawn in the middle of the day. You slow down. You lose track of yourself. Whenever you aren't asleep, you wander around almost bewildered, not knowing the difference between 10am and 10pm.

"Of course," Stan says, "Some folks manage to get out of town to semi-regular jobs, only staying in when the worst of the weather demands it. Others get into little projects: home improvement, reading, movies. But there are a few people in the building that need to get 'checked in' on—people who just can't handle the winter, who stop taking care of themselves properly."

Anyway, Stan tells me that they had hired some new maintenance guy, named Gil, back in October. Drifter-types aren't uncommon up here. During the summer, we get whole flocks of young men from the lower 48 looking for work. Most of them are in love with the idea of adventure and self-reliance in the great outdoors. There's usually some idea about a 'new start' mixed in there, too. Most leave after a season or two. But, with all the resources it takes to get up here in the first place, some of them get stuck.

"Gil was from California," Stan says. "He couldn't have been more than twenty-five years old. Seemed all right at first. Normal handyman stuff was no problem. But, come deep winter, it turns out that Gil had been using pure water—no antifreeze at all—in the boiler's hydronic loop."

I shake my head. If Gil had grown up anywhere that dropped below freezing, he would have known what this meant. Water turns to ice, expands, and bursts the pipes.

Stan takes another sip of his beer. "Thankfully we know how to do our jobs, Cheryl. Electricity was still running. Most folks have personal heaters in addition to the central heating provided by the boiler. Still, the cold crept in. Windows iced up from the inside. Temperatures started dropping by 10 or 15 degrees. People had to stick to the central-most rooms in the building, away from windows and doors. You know they have their own Baptist church inside? I heard that's where a lot of people slept. For two nights it was like one big slumber party."

"And I'll admit there was a lot to do. Trying to get a boiler repaired in the middle of a deep freeze isn't nothing. Neither is the chaos of relocating a couple hundred people. Something was likely to fall through the cracks."

Stan tells me it was someone: a woman, about thirty. She had moved in recently enough to not know anybody, with a little girl, too young to even walk. Mother and daughter both had big eyes, so brown they were almost black, and dark, dark hair. Turns out they had come from someplace in Idaho.

"I don't know what she came north looking for. Maybe she never should have come up here in the first place," Stan says. "But somebody should've been keeping a better eye on her."

The way Stan says this makes my skin crawl. Taken out of myself, my eye fixes on the tap behind the bar. A single drop of beer wags on the tip of the faucet, threatening to fall.

"The woman had been using well before she got to Whittier. Still, these things hardly ever get better. It got worse around mid-December and into January. It was just her and the kid, locked in that apartment, night and day, night and night. And there they both stayed."

I've seen enough to know that opiates and winter are a match made in heaven—just like opiates and long naps, and opiates and television. They swaddle you closer than any blanket ever could. Make you feel safe. And warm.

When the boiler went out, maybe the mother didn't notice the cold. Or maybe the thought of getting up, moving deeper into the building and sleeping among strangers, was too much to bear.

"She was that deep in it," says Stan. "But all kinds of people keep to themselves in the winter. We can't blame the neighbors for not noticing."

I don't say anything, but I have a hard time buying it. She had to have come out of her apartment sometime, gotten groceries, passed people in the hall. People had to have seen her around, treading the same paths in the same building like an old ghost. And when she stopped leaving the apartment, somebody must have noticed her absence, a subtle shift in the rhythms of the halls, and thought to themselves, *Now where's that woman with the baby?*

Stan continues: "Once the pipes had been repaired, Gil was put to work helping people cart blankets and pillows back to their apartments. And it was Gil who heard the scream. Up on the eleventh floor."

Stan lowers his voice when he says this, almost like he's ashamed. When things get serious, he gets quiet. He's that kind of guy. Still, it's like I can hear it echoing around in my own head: it's a *fucking scream*.

I imagine the crowded hall. I imagine everybody looking around, trying to figure out where the sound's coming from. I imagine Gil running down, down, down the hall, pushing rubberneckers aside, until he finds that woman—dark hair all greasy, hyperventilating, rocking back and forth in front of the door to her apartment—and she's crying through her hands, 'It's my fault...it's my fault...'

Stan doesn't let up: "The place was a disaster, her works spread out over the coffee table. Gil must have stood there awhile, taking it all in, trying to figure out what she was crying about. I wonder how long it took for it to hit him: it was the kid."

Stan pauses a moment, almost like he thinks I'll object to his going on. I don't say a thing. He swallows and continues, his voice lower still.

"It was a single bedroom unit. Only one other place she could have been. Nobody wants to see something like that. But Gil goes in anyway. I suppose he must have felt obligated, like it was sorta his fault to begin with. He pushes open the bedroom door and there she is: lying face down in her crib, cold and stiff. The heater was on beside her, blanket tucked in around her lower half. Didn't do any good, though."

I suppose they all assumed that, in a place so small, at least one person would be keeping tabs on just about everyone. Stan assures me that now they have better protocol for emergencies like that. A head-count, no exceptions. A door-to-door check of every single apartment, occupied or not. Still, I wonder why they didn't have all that figured out before.

Afterwards, Whittier needed somebody to blame. First choice was Gil: he was being fined for negligence and repairs to the boiler, anyway. For a while, some people were pushing for a manslaughter charge on account of the little girl. That was, until the coroner came out with the autopsy report.

"No cause found," says Stan, shaking his gray head. "She died in her sleep. Just another case of crib death."

Because it wasn't hypothermia, Gil was legally in the clear. Last Stan heard, he'd moved back to California.

They couldn't quite blame the mother, either. Not entirely. SIDS could have happened to anybody's baby. Despite the drugs, despite the long cold months, despite having left Idaho for whatever reason, she really was a decent mother: the little girl had been perfectly, miraculously healthy.

The judge presiding over the mother's case—an Athabaskan woman who'd worked her way up the Alaska state legal system—took pity on her raw, dark-circled eyes. Besides, she'd seen much worse coming from those faraway bush villages. So, the mother got twelve months rehab out in Wasilla.

"No convictions," says Stan, hopelessly. "Can you believe it?"

Later, idling in that long line of cars, waiting to pass back through the Anton Anderson tunnel, I tried to sort it out. But, at the time, all I did was nod and say: "It's a real tragedy."

It was about time for us to go, anyway.

Stan drove here, so I have to drive back. He's sitting in the passenger's seat, silent again, staring out the window. When the traffic light for our lane turns green, I shift the truck into drive and lurch forward. It's almost 9pm by now, but the sky is still a bright, watery gray. I think I can see the sun trying to break through the clouds.

But a hundred feet later, we're narrowly encased in greasy brown rock. The tunnel's darkness would be complete, if not for the yellowish lights lining the walls—lights fed by energy produced in Anchorage, maintained by people like us, used by all the folks out in Whittier. The lights flicker through my windows in a way that reminds me of a flipbook. The railroad tracks sound a rhythmic *thump, thump, thump* beneath the truck's tires.

Driving along, waiting to emerge into the western light, I feel the seed of some thought break ground in my mind. For a moment, it's like a picture of the pregnant sun at dusk, hovering over the lip of the horizon. For a moment, it feels vital. It feels like it would bring everything together. But, as I approach the end of the tunnel, the light ripples. Then it is gone.

After Hours

In the nicotine light of an early LA night, thirty-eight-year-old Rhea Porter sat by her front window, itching to get out. She popped the last bite of a still-warm mango churro into her mouth and checked the local "Strangers" app. A few guys were out on Hollywood and Ivar, at the Donut King on Melrose and half a dozen other spots. But at nine-forty, it was still too early. She closed the app.

She checked the fridge. Not much. A squishy avocado, half a jar of Kimchee, a Corona. An iced coffee sounded good, but she was out of creamer. She couldn't sit still. Hard to wait. She figured she could kill at least an hour at Denny's.

Twenty minutes later, Denny's counter waitress George poured Rhea a blond iced coffee then watched as she tore the ends off three packs of Sweet 'n Low and stirred them into it.

"That stuff'll rot your brain." George commented.

"Unlike the last twenty years?"

"You love it here." George affirmed.

"It's unrequited." Rhea pointed out.

Three stools down, a twenty-something guy was working on a Grand Slamwich. She noticed him. Nice hair. Good arms. Hungry.

George tried to distract her. "Let me get you some onion rings."

"No thanks." Rhea brushed her off.



"Short stack?" George enticed.

"I'll eat later."

"That editor guy who comes in here still asks about you." George carried on.

"Not my type." Rhea let her know.

"What, too nice?"

"Yeah. Maybe I should just date you."

"Dream on." George smiled and walked away to refill Slamwich Guy's iced tea.

It was 11:10. Rhea checked the app. Activity was picking up. Outside it was getting darker. Time to head east.

Near the corner of Dolores and Cesar Chavez, Rhea parked her LeBaron behind a blue Buick with the trunk popped up. She exchanged money with an aging Mexican woman for a small brown paper bag. She got back in her car, checked the app one more time and headed back into Hollywood. It was almost one in the morning and about as dark as it gets in LA.

Rhea slowed as she passed the 24-hour Tommy's Burgers on Hollywood Boulevard. A few late-night boys were still out, hanging around the parking lot. One caught her eye. He watched as she turned up a side street, her car disappearing from view.

On the residential block, Rhea cruised slowly, looking for a rare parking place. Spotting one outside a faded '70's apartment building, she inched into it. She turned off her car and waited.

Ten minutes later, the guy from Tommy's walked up the street, looking around. He was about twenty, wearing a T-shirt and jeans. He spotted Rhea's car and approached. He tapped lightly on the passenger side window. She leaned over and rolled it down a crack.

"You got something?" he asked.

"Yeah." she nodded. She tried not to smile too much; he was beautiful.

She waited while he pulled a couple papers out of a back pocket — vax, negative STD tests and put them against the window. She checked them, then flashed her own. He nodded. "Cool."

She unlocked the passenger door. He looked around, opened it and got in. Rhea looked him over. She could clearly see the black motorcycle logo on his dark gray T-Shirt.

"It's too light here." She realized.

"Yeah." He agreed, thinking, "The alley behind the IHOP is kinda dark—"

She shook her head, "They closed it off. Construction."

"The streets around Echo Park?" he suggested.

"There's zero parking there." Rhea reminded him.

"How about your place..." He asked, casually; a co-worker once told him she lived nearby.

"No." Rhea told him. That wasn't going to happen. She had made that mistake before. She started the car, "Let's keep looking." She maneuvered out of the spot and onto the street.

They rode for a while in silence as she drove east, into Hollywood. Both were thinking of dark places to park. They looked past straggly hipsters leaving clubs without a score, past late-shift workers waiting for a bus, past the homeless sleeping on the sidewalks. They peered up side streets and between buildings. A dog wrestled with an empty Cheetos bag. Two bus boys took a smoking break outside a Thai restaurant.

"Hey..." he said after a minute, "You know the reservoir?"

"Silverlake?" she asked.

"No." He shook his head, "The Hollywood one."

She thought for a second then smiled at him, "Yeah..."

She turned west then cruised up into the Hollywood Hills. She eased up a twisty road past million-dollar houses crammed against each other like gilded sardines. The road dead-ended in a little dirt parking lot outside the chained gate of the Hollywood reservoir.

Rhea parked up against a dusty chaparral bush. It was quiet. The city lights spread out below like a blanket of stars. The sky above had none. She looked around. And though it wasn't dark-dark — it never was in LA— they were alone. She reached onto the back seat and grabbed the small paper bag.

"What did you get?" he asked.

"Two chili cheese, a carne asada and a chicken." She handed him the bag, "You pick."

He pulled out a paper-wrapped tamale, the parchment was shiny with grease. He unwrapped it. As he broke open the pliant masa and revealed an ooze of cheese, Rhea leaned over and looked, eager for a taste. He snatched it away, teasing.

"Lean back." He told her.

She did, watching as he slid a finger down the inside of the paper, gathering the red ancho-tinged oil. He turned to her and wiped it across her lips. She licked them.

"Good?" he asked.

She laughed, "Definitely."

He unbuckled his seat belt. He broke a big piece off the end of the tamale then leaned over her. She opened her mouth; he eased it inside. It was good— thick and warm and flecked with smoky heat. But it was a little dry.

"It needs some sauce—" she told him, trying to swallow.

He took a Styrofoam cup out of the bag. He pried off the lid, the cup was full of a dense red chili sauce. He plunged two fingers deep into it, scooping some up. He put his fingers in her mouth. She sucked the sauce off and swallowed it.

"Better?" he asked. She nodded.

Then he kissed her, tasting the sauce still on her lips. "That is good."

"Lupita's." she told him, kissing him back, "On Chavez."

"Oh yeah, I know her, she makes those fried jalapeno brownies." He added as he broke off another hunk of tamale.

"You're thinking of Estrella." She corrected him, watching him dip the hunk into the thick liquid. She opened her mouth, ready for it.

"Estrella sells on York." He corrected her back as he dipped again, coating the tamale.

"No she's on Yucca. And she does Serrano brownies—"Hey!" She freaked as he popped the piece into his own mouth.

"Oh wow..." The full taste of it hit him. He dipped another bit of the tamale, forgetting about her.

She grabbed it from him and ate it, letting some sauce dribble down her chin, down her neck. He remembered why he was there.

He leaned in and began to nibble it off her skin, those soft young lips of his following a little drizzle that slid down toward her breast.

He pushed her skirt up with his left hand and reached back with his right, dipping the tamale end, letting the sauce drip on her thighs. She leaned back as he kissed that sauce off too. She closed her eyes and slipped into a groove, her slow rocking moves inviting his kiss.

Suddenly, she jerked up, whacking his head into the steering wheel.

"Ouch!" He yelped.

"Sorry. Some sauce just went down my—" She squirmed a little, adjusting her behind. "It's OK now."

He rubbed his head, a little annoyed. He shook it off and nestled his face back between her thighs. She held his head and closed her eyes, trying to lose herself; trying to fill the night. Fill time. Fill the void.

She tried hard. Too hard. She just couldn't get there. She forced her mind to go to her happy place, to a December night when she was sixteen, sitting on her boyfriend's lap in the front seat of his truck, sharing a bag of cinnamon sugar dusted sweet potato fries, so hungry for each other.

"Wait!" she jerked away again, flush with an idea.

"What now?"

"Sit here. Under me." She told him, "In the driver's seat."

"Why?"

"Just do it." She added a "Please" as she lifted herself up.

He slipped underneath her, holding her ass as he eased her down onto his lap. He slid a hand under her skirt and fed her another bite. She swallowed and grooved and tried. Man oh man she tried.

"You gotta relax." He told her.

"Just do your job." She snapped, losing her groove.

"I'm trying to. Relax." He said like a mantra, "Relax..."

She breathed deep. She leaned back, leaned into it. Deeper. Deeper, then—

THWUMP! the whole car shook with a sudden impact, freaking them out.

"Jesus!" A coyote had jumped onto the hood of the car, using it as a booster to then jump over the reservoir fence and saunter away.

"This isn't working." Rhea concluded.

"No kidding." he agreed. Rhea lifted herself up. He moved back to the passenger seat and zipped up.

"I can drop you off on Vine." Rhea offered.

"That's OK. I'll Uber." he said as he opened the car door. He turned back to her and held out his hand.

"What?" she asked, knowing what he wanted.

"It's forty."

"I don't think so."

He kept his hand out. She found twenty bucks in a pocket and offered it to him. "Here. Totally not worth it but—"

As he took the money, he reached over and grabbed the bag of tamales.

"Those are mine—!" she tried to grab them back, but he held on. The bag tore and three tamales spilled out. They both scrambled for them. Rhea got one. He got two. And the cup of sauce.

She grabbed his hand, "At least give me the sauce."

"No way."

"Wait!" she pleaded. "I got the carne asada one! That sauce goes best with the carne—"

He shut the door and walked away.

She started the car and drove after him. Man, she wanted that sauce. But, like that coyote, he'd already moved on.

Bitter California

In the weeks before I kissed you, I touched only your hands. You would reach towards me so I could read your palm, or compare our hand sizes, or some other silly reason I'd make up on the spot. I caressed the soft folds of your knuckles, examined every ridge of your fingernails. I felt a little dizzy when we touched. Flighty butterflies hovered in my ribcage. Each night I returned to the artificial light of the dorm. Does he like me? I asked my roommate. She only laughed at my schoolyard crush.

In those weeks, I tapped perfume onto the nape of my neck. Coconut and a hint of vanilla. When I leaned in close to ask a question, you tried to breathe in a whole lungful of the scent. Though I always noticed your sharp inhale, I never said a word. Every morning I wore the same perfume, just to see you breathe it in.

The library was Sunday-afternoon quiet when I kissed you. Warm sunshine filtered through the window, illuminating tiny specks of dust in the air. Our table was nestled between two towering stacks: *The San Francisco Chronicle (1900-1950)* and *A Geographic History of the Santa Monica Mountains, Translated*. I leaned over and kissed you softly, gently. You were surprised, and your pencil slipped from your hand onto the floor. You smiled as it clattered against the tile. It was a surprising kiss for me, too: how soft your lips were, and how you tasted like sweet mangos. Beneath my fingertips, I felt the warmth of your blush.

After that, I relished in being your many firsts. You told me haltingly that you'd dated only one girl, for a few weeks in the fall. I asked why it hadn't worked out.

"We couldn't hold much of a conversation," you said with a wry smile. We had talked through the whole afternoon. *She can't hold a candle to you*, your eyes seemed to say. My cheeks grew hot under your gaze.

We'd lie outside on a picnic blanket, letting the California sun soak us through. I read book after book, the freckles on my nose darkening. You would lie by my side and study. I always felt the urge to reach for your hand as it wrote or typed or flipped pages. *Basking*, we called it, short for *basking in the sun*. I messaged you on lazy weekends: *Do you want to go basking?*

As the sun set, I would return to my room with a tan and a loose smile. My friends teased me about you, murmured behind my back about what we were. Boyfriend, friend, something else entirely. We never discussed it, you and I.

Our relationship was a palace of words. We talked and talked in the courtyard cafe. I'd inch my chair closer to you, until your knee rested firmly on mine. Our coffees, untouched, grew cold. We discussed everything. The differences between our hometowns, the rules of flag football, the meanings of every Billy Joel song. In the quieter moments, heads bent close as if in conspiracy, you told me about your family. The nicknames your mother had for you. How you wanted to be like her. I told you about the loneliness I could not shake away, and about my parents and the generations before them, whose weight hung like an anvil on my shoulders.

On Saturday nights in your top-bunk dorm bed, we stayed awake watching old sitcoms. My head pressed gently into your shoulder until I fell asleep. I would wake slowly, surrounded by the languorous darkness. Each time, I slowed my breathing, pretending to still be asleep. Your hand smoothed my hair and the skin on my cheek. I wished to live in the soft twilight of those moments, half-awake, with your warm touch on my skin.

We welcomed your nineteenth birthday on a clifftop overlook. The Spot, you always called it. I sat shotgun in your old Honda Civic, a slice of sugary birthday cake balanced on my lap. The radio hummed quietly in the background. We watched the spiderweb of city lights glitter beneath us and counted down the minutes to midnight. In the moment you turned 19, I took a Polaroid of us. In the photo, you are grinning at the camera, the curves of your smile illuminated by the bright white flash. I am not looking at the camera, but at you. We are suspended in time, perfectly and transcendently happy.

As we ate your birthday cake, you turned to me.

"I never want things to change," you whispered.

I tried to picture it, a life without change: hand-in-hand in our graduation gowns, jobs lined up nearby. A lifetime of this place and this person. Without warning, a knot tightened in my chest. But I squeezed your hand.

"Neither do I," I said. Your smile almost made the lie worth it.

You loved California as I never could. I wanted to appreciate the rippled mountains, the brown brush that coated the earth like fur. But I could not bear this world without rainstorms, without green branches criss-crossing overhead. When I called her every evening, my mother told me of home. The first snowstorm of the year. My sister's dance recitals and spelling tests. The spring daffodils, forcing their way through the hard earth. In those moments, I wished I could climb through the phone and step into my old life. The sun-soaked afternoons threatened to swallow me whole.

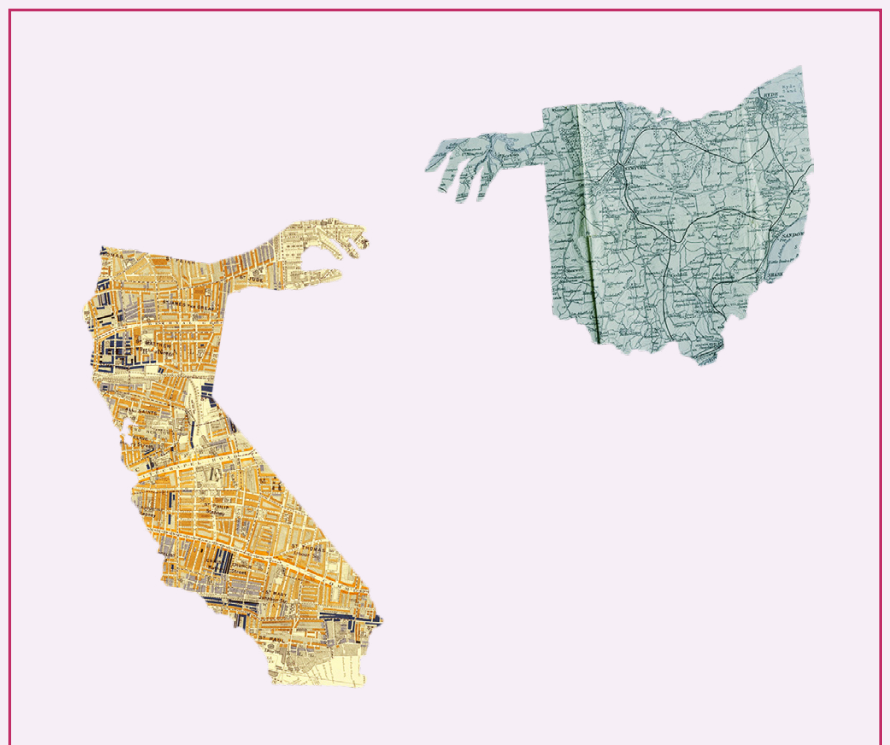
After that year, I went home and did not return. I thought, *I'm just not built for this place*. Your emails lay unanswered in my inbox. I let your incoming calls ring and ring until, with a final click, you hung up in defeat. I'm sorry I never told you why. I didn't know what to say, so I said nothing at all.

I could not forget.

Ten years after I left, a man walked on to an office-building elevator. He looked nothing like you, but his skin smelled like yours used to. Warm, soapy, forgiving. Tears sparked in my eyes. I wanted to grab him by the hand, ask him to stay. But he wasn't you.

In my new Midwestern city, I imagined I saw flashes of you. Your threadbare blue sweater. Your nose, wrinkling as you laughed. I was wrong every time; you never visited Cincinnati.

I saw you once more, the last time of my life, on my first business trip back to Los Angeles. In the taxi back to the airport, I took in the scenery. The street was lined with palm trees, and their fronds seemed to whisper to me: Welcome back. California was the same as the day I left.



Looking at the once-familiar landscape, strip malls and cacti and fifty-cent laundromats, I longed for Cincinnati's winter. I missed the slush, the cold, the dark trees that fractured the sky. I thought of my husband, a man who made fried eggs and toast each morning.

In the car next to me at a red light was a man in a blue sweater. Like you, I thought. And then I realized. I peered closer. In the driver's seat, you were smiling widely, tapping the steering wheel in a steady rhythm. Lines of silver streaked your temples. Your constellation of freckles, which I once traced with a fingertip, had faded to nothing. You were a man rather than a boy.

But what was most surprising to me was that you seemed happy. In my memory, you were still that broken-hearted ghost; emails unanswered, phone calls left to ring. But there you were, in the flesh, humming happily at a red light.

As I sat frozen in the taxi, everything returned in a heavy rush, from the quiet afternoon in the library to the day I flew home. A year, and all the years I spent remembering that year, passed in an instant. But the light turned green. My taxi peeled ahead, oblivious. As we pulled away, I noticed a child in a fuzzy onesie, nestled in the backseat. Your daughter, fast asleep.

I considered asking the taxi driver to chase your car. I wanted to fall onto the street and pursue you myself. A million reunions ran through my mind. Suddenly I was nineteen again, listening to the shrill cry of the phone. But the urge faded as quickly as it had appeared. I shook my head. Back to Cincinnati, to my husband; to his eggs and toast and warm embrace.

In my office drawer was a worn, unmarked envelope. When I arrived home, I emptied its contents onto the desk: the pencil you held when we first kissed. A rose petal, salvaged from some long-dead anniversary bouquet. And a crinkled Polaroid, with two tiny, smiling faces peering upwards. I stared at the mementos for a moment. In the fading afternoon light, they seemed small and sad; trinkets from another life. With a final, careful reverence, I swept the collection into the garbage can at my feet.

If Words Could Rot like Bodies Do

Dear Ba Ngoại,

As I write this, I know it can never reach you. But I am writing to eternalize you, even if the permanence of these words will be lost in the impermanence of your memory. In this, I allow myself one small act of defiance.

They said your most recent memories would be the first to go. Let us begin, then, from the oldest of them. I was eight. We were in a trinket shop, in Phước Lộc Thọ, when you grabbed a little red and white rattle drum with bells that struck the heads as you twisted the waist and asked me if you should buy it. At the cash register, you chattered excitedly with the clerk about how, growing up poor after the war, it was a favorite toy of yours and your eight siblings. I look back on that moment—how it represented nothing more than your nostalgia, and I think of this morning, when you cradled my raggedy doll in your arms and asked, “Cô ơi, tôi có thể giữ nó không?” (“Auntie, can I keep it?”). I flinched, realizing you were no longer asking me as a grandmother trying to remember her childhood, but as a young girl who had forgotten her 82 year old body.

The first time you told me your late father was visiting Singapore, I laughed and remarked that it made sense because the only way he could pick up a beautiful woman is if she didn’t understand him. I turned to see your laugh, only to catch your backhand against my cheek. Eyes darting back and forth over the welt forming on my face, you shook your head, “Watch your mouth.”

Flushed red, just as much from my shock as from the bruising, I laughed-bitter and dry, “But it was okay when you spit on his grave, right?” It wasn’t until I saw your expression falter at the mention of his death that I grasped your confusion. Nobody had known then how far your dementia had progressed.

Without a word, you pulled your slippers on and turned away. “There’s cut fruit in the fridge,” you finally say before shuffling back to your bedroom.

From then on, I would spend every day playing the worst role of God—deciding whether your father was dead or alive.

You have always hated funerals, convinced that mere proximity to death was enough to invite it into your body, like an unwelcome guest just waiting to get its foot in the door. It is only natural then, that you would hate open casket funerals even more, where death is frozen in the embalmed body just to be relived every time someone walks past. I wonder now what you’d want me to say whenever you ask where your bố is. It feels cruel to affirm your delusion, to nod obediently when you insist he must be visiting family in Singapore, but crueler still to tell you he’s been dead for thirty years—ashes in an urn on the second shelf of our altar. Watching you experience his death over and over again feels like forcing you through the very part of a funeral you hate most. My tongue has become a vulture, which is to say, it carries nothing but death, yet refuses to die. And so I am writing to you because it is the only way I know to spare you, to neither deceive nor hurt you, to preserve this moment: after I have told you the truth, but before you have heard it.

Body Before The Soul

Ever since I turned 12, my dad would stare at me like I was a beacon. I would stare back at him. It felt like he didn't want to be seen; like I caught him in the act.

I had several sets of toy instruments I used to play around with. I used to get up on my bed and fiddle with these brightly colored rectangles and pretend my dolls were adoring fans. When the batteries died I refused to ask my dad for more, so I just pretended they made noise and made do.

One day my dad got angry at me for "looking at him too hard" and started packing up my dollhouses, my plastic toy instruments that hardly produced sound—my childhood into a box I could never reach. I needed to learn something useful for a change, he said. It became his personal endeavor to prepare me for the cruel world that awaited me.

We lived on this ranch far from school. He taught me how to kill every animal there was. I'll never forget holding a chicken upside down to slit its throat and drain its blood. He made me do it so many times. Amongst other things.

I was more curious about how animals killed other animals though. Predators are killers by nature. They have claws and fangs and tricks up their sleeves. That's how they were made. That's how they evolved. I wasn't like that. I was more like prey with watchful eyes ready to sink their teeth into me. It was unfair that predators got to wield their power over others, whereas I was trapped in my body.

Back when my dad was still a big guy who could lumber through the woods, he taught me how to shoot a hunter's rifle. He told me, "Imagine dem deer over there is one of dem boys at yer school, Zo."

He made it pretty easy to pull the trigger, and pretty difficult to look at myself in the mirror.

Every morning I wake up tangled in luxurious red sheets.

I free myself and I lay in the scattered components of my bed. I look up at the mirror on the ceiling. This girl is Zoe. 23. She's in Las Vegas, Nevada. I feel the need to remind myself often.

I make my way to the balcony. I sit at a simple table. Cold, sleek metal with a companion chair that's never been used before. The sun is still barely creeping over the horizon. It's bright and formidable and I am absolutely caught in its light. I avert my focus to my pen and journal and prepare for the day ahead of me.

Today was Saturday, which meant it was time to work. I check my phone and realize how my funds are looking particularly shallow, which is a no-can-do. I don't plan on living in this shithole forever. One day I'm going to have this big, gothic mansion far from the states, far from everything, renovated to look like the real deal, with so many rooms to escape to and most importantly, I envision a grand piano sitting in the middle of a circular room. Ivory keys that sing like a choir when I let my fingers frolick across their intervals. I want to fill the air with its sound and make that place my home.

I am already looking at a section of land in Denmark. I've already raked in a couple million dollars, so I'm inching my way there.

I write out the skeleton of my schedule in my journal. I rush out my door making sure to dodge the mirror on my way out. I don't want to see her looking back at me right now. I know she'd be judgemental.

I head a bit out of town to Mike's Butcher shop, a business I co-own but hardly have to manage. Michael Junior is the shop's current owner after his dad went missing. He is more than happy to not have a woman breathing down his several necks. He needs my money, I need a business to launder money through.

Junior was difficult at first, but not at all as difficult as his daddy. Mikey Senior did not trust me. I can only assume that the misogynist didn't want a girl meddling in his meat peddling. He refused to let me have a backdoor key, never let me fix his surveillance cameras even though they were buggy as hell, never wanted me to have access to the freezer even though I owned the dirt he tread on. He was a private man. Too private.

I told Junior that Senior probably had gambling debt and that's why he went missing. I made sure the kid had no hope that his daddy would come back. That the loan sharks had him beat bloody and buried in the desert somewhere. That managed to get Junior disparaged enough to let me have more of a hand in the business. Still, he didn't let me have a key, so I had to be clever.

Walking through the door I immediately see Junior flinch before standing at attention, feet together, arms by his side. He still has gauze wrapped around his hand.

"At ease, soldier. There's no need for that behavior, Junior." His shoulders slump, his posture giving in. His stomach creases and folds as he attempts looking down at his shoes. He hates being called Junior, but it keeps him in his place.

"Delivery called. Told me they need to have the backdoor unlocked because their shipment will be delayed until later tonight." I pace around the shop. My eyes wander to a wooden broom in the corner of the room. It's splintering, basically unusable. It needs to be replaced.

"Isn't that a bit unsafe?" Junior stutters.

I grit my teeth as pressure swells up in my temple, as if the fine tune of violins became sudden screeching.

Junior tenses up. I shut my eyes. I feel this pounding pain in between my brows. The symphony is discordant, the tightly wound bows are violently tearing against the strings, and the sounds are swarming the concert hall like moths bodying a porch lamp. I need to come down from this. Relax.

—

My dad lived out the end of his life in a leather recliner. An incident with a bear trap while we were out hunting left his leg mangled and useless. And he blamed me for it. It became my responsibility to take care of him around the house. Cook for him. Clean for him. Live for him. Die for him. All while he sat in front of the TV, watching gory horror flicks he's been watching with me since I was a kid.

Christmas eventually came along and since I had no friends, we were all we had. He gave me a nail file because that's what he thought girls liked these days. I got him a cane. I told him we could go out every now and then and we could walk around the mall or the park or maybe we'd be able to hike in the forest again someday.

He did not like his gift. Thought I was rubbing it in. From the comfort of his seat he swung his cane down on my head. Then across my face. My nose was bleeding into my mouth and that's when I tasted blood for the first time.

—

The swelling of anger finally became one, calm note. After it had hit its climax.

"We've had these guys forever Junior. If they choose to mess with us now I'll deal with it. Plus, we have working cameras now. Nothing to worry about." I walk into the corner of the room where I pick up the broom. I look over my shoulder at Junior, shaking in his boots.

Junior backs away into the kitchen. What does he think he's running from?

I follow him into the kitchen.

"Junior. Turn around."

Poor puppy of a man. He obediently turns around. I whack him across the face with the handle of the broom. I feel like a rockstar swinging my guitar. The handle breaks off. He's on the ground holding his bleeding face, crying and sputtering out blood like a bitch. I throw the other half of the broom on top of him.

"You say you love this business yet you leave this kinda shit lying around. Your dad would be disappointed in you." I begin to exit the room.

"Don't forget to leave the door unlocked. And buy a new broom."

Next I stake out this new fancy restaurant erected into the Vegas Strip where only the wealthiest dine. I'm talking, "old white guys with cufflinks they inherited from their daddy who inherited it from their daddy who bought their glorified man-jewelry by exploiting the underprivileged" wealthy. The people here gorge on bloody steaks that leave specks of oil on their perfectly tapered suits and juices on their wedding rings, while their jowls reverberate talking over a woman half their age.

This evening I'm wearing my sparkly red dress that I've worn so many times before for this exact purpose. Minutes turn to hours as I sit at the bar, but every time I speak their eyes travel from my chest to my mouth and most men scurry off. If they're gonna objectify me just to waste my time, just divorce your wife and drop dead already.

That's when he walks in. A diamond in the rough, this man waddles in with wide khakis. A perfectly round face with an unremarkable haircut but an absolute lack of body hair. Heavy set, but not old by any means. I hope he'd come to the bar but he opts for a table instead. I figure, maybe his wife is coming, but there's no ring on those chubby hands of his. The server gives him a menu. He is eating alone. I decide he is too perfect to pass up and I take a seat with him. His eyes peer above his menu and his brass frames and he speaks his first words to me.

"...Hello?"

"I couldn't help but notice you were about to eat alone?"

"...Yes, it's not necessarily a celebratory dinner."

"Oh. I apologize if I'm intruding on your 'eating alone' plan. Just figured you'd appreciate the company." I chuckle to myself. The silence rides the air for a while.

"...Well. I'd appreciate it if someone would lend me an ear."

"Of course. I'd love to hear you out." Of course the man wants to use me as a sounding board.

He brightens up. "My name is Simon Kaczynski."

"Zoe. You drink wine, Mr. Kaczynski?"

"Ah, no no no, I'm okay. I don't drink." Does it get better than this?! I'm ecstatic on the inside. I can't help but let out a dreamy sigh. "And call me Simon."

"Water it is. And how old are you, Simon?"

"Just hit the big 3-0 some time ago. You?"

"I'm 19." He starts laughing, but not in the offensive way. In the charming, hearty kind of way.

"You're lying. I've taught all sorts of grade levels. I'd know a freshman if I saw one." Disgustingly observant, but what could I expect?

"No really, I'm 19.", I lie. "So you're a teacher?"

"Not anymore. I quit." His face falls.

"Aw, how come?" I say, feigning interest.

"Well... because I'm a fool. I wasn't passionate about teaching biology. Truthfully, I always dreamed of being a composer. Broadway. And I had the perfect concept too. My first musical would be autobiographical. It would be about how I spoke to God."

"God?" My finger twirls around the rim of my glass as I struggle to maintain focus.

"I know it sounds crazy, but listen. The midnight I turned thirty, I was driving through the rain. I was tired and I ended up swerving onto the wrong side of the road. I was about to hit another car head on, but it was as if their headlights... saw into my soul. Then I heard him— God told me it was not my time yet. That I had yet to serve my purpose, that I was a prophet, and I had to tell his story. Then without thinking I steered away and got home safe. I turned in my two weeks right after."

"Sounds like you did the right thing by quitting." This man is crazy.

"Yes, well... the bills still have to be paid, and with no job to pay rent, I had to sell my piano."

"Your piano?"

"Yes, it was an exquisite thing really. I grew up with that piano. My parents gave it to me when I moved out for work. It's been sitting there collecting dust and once I thought I'd finally start playing again, I just got overwhelmed with all the things I had to pay and so... I sold it." It is always so funny when a man looks like they're about to cry.

"And now you're here?"

"Yes, the piano turned out to be worth a lot more than I figured. So I decided, if I'm giving up on my dreams already, I better eat my heart out while I still can." Yes, you do that Simon.

The rest of the dinner goes as expected. Simon rambles on and on about his sad miserable life and how his wife left him and how he thinks children are the future and how refreshing it is to just let it all

out all while he devoured a steak like he's killing the cow a second time over. I abstain from eating. After he pays for the meal I ask him if he'd walk me to my vehicle. He gladly obliges. On the way he seems out of breath so I buy Simon a water bottle.

With impeccable timing, the rohypnol kicks in right as we approach a "Mikey's Butchery" truck in the back of the parking lot. I secure him to a dolly using zip ties, and duct tape his mouth. I pull the door shut and spend the rest of the hour nabbing two more stragglers.

This particular shitty motel has no more than four vehicles in the lot, including the narcoleptic's sedan at the front desk. The general consensus is if you hear something, you ignore it, unless you want to be dragged into somebody else's mess. I put on my white apron and start moving the bodies into my motel room, along with some ice, coolers, my medical kit, and Simon standing on the dolly. I prop him up against the bathroom door and inject him with a paralytic before I began pouring ice into the tub.

Frankly I don't remember the two skinny guys I drugged and dragged over here in the truck. They're not all that special, just flesh bags of the same old organs anyone has, but money is money. Simon was the special one, so he got to watch.

Simon slowly wakes up to the unfortunate sight of me fretting open a stranger in the bathtub. He looks around and sees all these organs in coolers and understandably, he starts freaking out a bit, which is exactly what I want. Sure, it's a bit cruel, but no more than what the rest of the world inflicts on people like me on a daily basis.

"Good morning Simon." I place the last organ of the second man into a cooler before setting down my scalpel on the medical kit that is teetering on the corner of the sink.

"Don't move," I say pointlessly, since he shouldn't be able to move anyways, "Gotta get this out of the way before I take care of you, big guy."

I hoist the open carcass over my shoulder and lug him out of the bathroom and onto the twin mattress, next to his buddy. Stepping back, I almost feel a twinge of pity. This is not how human bodies should look. I wash away the guilt by remembering how these two catcalled me. Very loudly and obnoxiously, might I add.

Once I get over myself I notice a... miscalculation. Simon is standing outside of the bathroom, scalpel in hand. I must've given him too little of the paralytic for his weight.

"Why?" Simon wields the tool very threateningly, as if he's about to tackle me and stab my eyes out.

"I don't understand." I raise my hands up, backing towards the door.

"Why are you doing this? Why did you make me watch that? Why couldn't you have just killed me?" The man is closing in on me.

—

I was tired of tasting my own blood. My blood tasted metallic, like licking a rusted fence. The liquid felt like spiders crawling down my tongue. It made me shiver thinking about that sensation.

After a particularly rough spat over dinner I found myself looking at Zo in the bathroom mirror once again. It was muscle memory, the way my hands reached for the cupboard to take out a fresh towel to wipe away the blood and the vomit. My eyes didn't look away from her.

Plunk-plunk

My nail file fell out of the cupboard and into the sink. I must've hid it up there since Christmas.

Then it all hit me, that swirling, consuming feeling of dread every daughter has.

I am going to die. I am going to die like this. Kill or be killed this is the night! Evolve or go extinct, hunt or be hunted, I can't stand being powerless anymore!

I grabbed the file and started carving away at my teeth. This is how I become strong! This is how I stop being prey, this is the becoming of a predator!

My father sat in his recliner as he did every night, the room completely dark except for the television that spotlighted him, exalted him. His legs were up; I could see the marks of the bear trap. That felt like so long ago. He was half awake when my fingers slid over his scalp, grabbing his silver hair, pulling his head back, exposing his neck.

His blood tasted much better than my own. Almost... tangy.

—

"My father told me fear made animals taste better." Simon is mortified trying to understand what I meant. His eyes go wide before softening. What was that?

"Your father..." He lays the scalpel on the ground. "I getcha. Fathers are the worst... And apparently yours was a liar too, adrenaline stops lactic acid production making meat tough and bland..."

Ignoring the mansplaining, my eyes fixate on the scalpel. Was he... surrendering?

"Yes... they are the worst." And as if God was manning the vessel, I step aside and open the door for him. Why'd I do that?

Simon hesitates for a moment before walking out the motel, giving me a nod of approval. He waddles into the parking lot, where he looks up at the neon sign of the motel, pondering what he could do next. Eventually the fear kicks in and he just starts running into the night to seek help.

I load the organs onto the dolly and roll them into the truck. I find myself pondering what must have made me let Simon go. I look at my rear view mirror and tilt it to look at myself. It's the first time in a while that I've gotten to really look at myself. I feel like I can finally relax and see myself for who I am. I'm not a monster, I'm a woman making peace with her past.

It's times like these when someone like me needs to stand up for myself. At the end of the day, Simon was just another deadbeat overweight loser. He is complacent. He made that poor wife a victim, probably. The good he could provide to the world wasn't his shitty little epiphany, it was a dollar amount. It was monetary. It was his body. A body that people are in the market for. Simon was like wagyu beef. Lots of meat, didn't drink, hairless body, relatively young. I wasn't gonna let that opportunity pass me by. As far as I'm concerned, he's a pork chop.

Yes, men are gluttonous creatures who masturbate themselves to the idea of consuming, and taking away, and drawing blood, because that is what men do. I'm not anything like that. Girls aren't like that, girls want a dollhouse mansion and a grand piano! Why is it on me to develop a conscience for no-good Simon?

I readjust my mirror.

Simon did not make it far before exhausting himself. As the second pair of headlights about to take his life, I step out of my truck, rifle in hand.

He began groveling. Soon enough the begging turned to yelling. I hush him like a baby calf before speaking.

"... You must've misunderstood when God called you a profit."

Thank you for the piano, Simon.

there is mold in my shower

My shower is cut off from the rest of my bathroom. It has a glass door, a showerhead than I could ever think to be, too-tall metal shelves with my lonely shampoo bottles, and a loofa around the wide metal handle whose pale pink color has long since faded to a muted beige.

I tell my father that we should change the loofa, that he shouldn't leave his bottles and razors on the shower floor amongst my younger sister's toys. I tell him that she is young; she could think of them as hers. She could cut her hands, or the soft skin of her feet. He listens, or rather stays quiet, while I give my warning, but the floor of the shower never changes.

The floor is where the mold is. It lives under the bottle of 3-in-1 soap, my sister's rubber ducks, and my father's razors. It has lived there for longer than I can remember.

The mold is black. It thrives in the grout and the cracks of the tile. It is most pervasive in the corners where the scrub brush cannot reach, where the hot, damp air festers into something tangible. I always mean to clean it, to find a way to scour it. I never do, not knowing how to approach the task, and having no one to ask. Instead, I let my younger sister pull me away into make-believe worlds. She spins tales of worlds made of candy floss, of pristine wilderness. Underneath her made up lands, the mold waits, present but forgotten. Maybe the mold has already claimed her, in the way that an animal does not know that tar is deadly until it is already sinking into it. The idea that it could be dangerous will perhaps never cross her mind. I like her stories, I think I would like to live in any world but this one. So, despite my worries, I never tell her, and the mold sits unsettlingly on the floor of our shower.

I make dinner, and bring our father the bowl of rice, chicken, and steamed vegetables that I make every night. I tell him that showering with the mold between the tiles is unhealthy. He hums, nodding absently, eating the food I made for him, for us. He does not get rid of the mold.

I go to him again the next night I shower. I tell him that his other daughter is young, and it can't be good for her, hoping that it is only me he finds unfavorable. He nods just the same, and he does not do anything about the mold in the shower.

One night, stark naked, I slip my hand down the wall for the scrub brush and try in vain to use it against the mold at my feet. I run the brush down the corner to try and rid it of the rot, nevertheless it remains.

I give up quickly, washing the remnants of it from my hands in the stream of water from the too-tall shower head, washing my hair with the shampoo on the shelf that only I ever touch.

When I get out a few minutes later, I pull on my clothes while my wet hair drips onto the floor. I look at the mold, reveling in the damp heat of the lingering shower steam. I know that I have to destroy it now while it's in its prime, because the water has made it slick and loose, primed for removal.

I scrub the shower floor again, full of spiteful vigor. I look at the mold in the corner. The head of the scrub brush in my hand is too big to fit into the crevice. I take my little sister's toothbrush from the sink, thinking to myself that I will buy her a new one, and I scrub the inside corners free of the mold.

I think that I am done until I start to see it running over the shower tiles and down onto the large flat stones of the bathroom floor. The mold here is lighter, having spread across the stones more

recently. Its thin pervasiveness, combined with the thick black mold of the shower, makes the room smell earthy and rotten, like the room was long dead, but we kept using it anyway.

I abandon the toothbrush in the shower and scoot back on my knees. I grip the scrub brush again, barely rinsing it in the sink before starting to wash the floor clean.

My back aches alongside my wrists, but I tell myself that I won't have to do this again. If I get rid of it all now, I will never have to scrub the mold or feel the press of the stones beneath the bones of my palms and knees again.

Mold-ridden water is all over the bathroom floor. It creeps under the door into the dark hall. It soaks the old rug by the sink. I take a towel from the hook on the back of the door and sop it all up..

My father must have never even tried to clean it, I tell myself; he just likes it that way. I wish I could understand how he can stand it. I toss the towel in the corner, where mold used to be. I tell myself I will put it in the wash, but I never do.

I leave the bathroom, not noticing how the water that has seeped under the doorway is slipping between the cracks of the old floorboards down, down into the house. I don't notice the pieces of the mold stuck to my feet, between my toes, and under my nails. I don't change my clothes, or rinse myself off. I am inexperienced. I am young. None of it occurs to me.

I go to my room. I sink under my covers. I fall asleep.

The next day passes, and the next, and the next, and the next. In the mornings, my sister skips into the bathroom to brush her teeth. She doesn't know that she has gotten black mold in her mouth and on her small, shiny, white teeth because I am not there to tell her. She goes to school and smiles brightly, not knowing that the fungus coats her gums and her tongue. She doesn't know why the other children scream.

Eventually, my father takes the towel from the corner and hangs it back up on the door before ushering her to school again. He thinks that he has done some good, placing this back where it belongs.

I do not tell him he is wrong. I do not complain. I do not buy my sister a new toothbrush. I do not take the towel back down and wash it. I do not play make-believe again. The mold has grown up from my feet, up my body, cementing me to the bed, holding me hostage.

I exist in between sheets so stiff they crack if touched. The air is cool, but damp, and heavy. The mold has spotted my skin and permeated my flesh. Turning me into something long neglected, and long forgotten. The mold on me is the sickly, inescapable, mold-in-the-corner kind of mold, the endless festing between the showertiles. There is no children's toothbrush to scrape it out of me. It is in all my hard-to-reach places. It is in the marrow of my bones and amongst all of my nerve endings. It is pumped through each valve of my heart, and thrives in the ridges of my brain.

One day, I wrench myself from the sheets. It fills every crevice, now growing over my eyes, ears, and nose. With none of my senses left and only a semblance of memory, I walk into the bathroom to try and clean myself off. The mold from the forgotten towel and the spilt water has grown from the forgotten fragments, and now covers the floors, and coats the walls and festers in the grout.

It does not matter. I step into the shower.

I move as I imagine my father moves. I move empty, and resigned, accepting my fate. I can't see the shelves, and even if I could, I would not know how to reach them. I don't remember to change the loofa. I cut myself on the razor on the floor, and I do not flinch. When I shower, I sit on the floor amongst all my sister's toys.

The mold grows back. It grows from me as I sit there on the shower floor, as the warm water pours over me, as the steam wafts around the room. It grows in the tiles and the grout. It grows over the toys. I do not scrub it away. I don't wonder who will scour me out because there is no one left who can. I am older now. I know that the mold will grow back. I am too tired, I am too blind, and I am too far into my decay to try and stop it.



Linguistics

Our native languages are hardly translatable—compatible. There are often times when my friend Gina will try to communicate a concept from her language within the constraints of mine, and it's simply too unknown—too broad for the limits of what we're given in tandem. It's like trying to shoot one big basketball into two hoops; the idea's got to funnel into one word or another.

So, like, one day after I told her she couldn't throw rocks into the street, she said, "That makes me mad—sad," and I think I understood.

Another, we were sitting in silence, and then she blurted out, "The things—beings are too complex for your intelligence," and I just nodded along.

But, today, as we stood in the dark woods while the leaf-scattered ground started to bend beneath my feet, and the canopy slowly gaped open to reveal the sky, which appeared too unbearable—too incomprehensible to relay in this language, Gina said, "I wish I could tell you how this ends. For you, I can only say, I wish you pain—not pain in your journey through the time hole."

At that, I'll confess, I was a bit confused. But such is the frustration with linguistics.

The Center of the Panopticon

Most people don't first notice the glass when they're presented with a window; the entire point of them is to look beyond the pane—to see what's outside. It's only when a light's sheen appears in the invisible threshold that your obsession with looking beyond the window is interrupted. In a sense, glass is always absent until it forces you to see in it yourself. When the reflection of your gazing eyes, so distant in the act of observation, blocks your view of what's beyond—only then do you come to the daunting realization that mirrors are also made of glass.

I am staring into a one-way mirror. Those on the outside look at it and see only their reflection, but even on this side—where I am able to see past the glass—I catch my face in the sheen. I see my surroundings, too: I am encompassed by chairs and a circular room with continuous windows. I meet my gaze again, and then I look beyond, where my vision falls upon a cell on the other side. The small square room is sliced by vertical bars. No one is in the cell.

"I'll bet you a quarter 121 rolls off his bed again tonight."

I glance at Humphreys on my left. He twirls a pen between his fingers, and every time the tip points up, it shines under the light above us.

"A quarter?" I repeat. "You'd really only bet a quarter for something almost guaranteed?"

Humphreys laughs.

I lean back in my chair. "You're a poor gambler. But, sure, I'll take it."

We both look over to prisoner 121's cell, where he sleeps on his bed with his limbs tossed about. His shoulder has already started gravitating off the edge. He's been asleep for nearly two hours now, which means there are about five hours left on my shift. I hate remembering how long I have to go; it's never gratifying until I start to see sunlight cascading into the dome, lighting the cement aflame as the slow, lumbering prisoners begin to wake.

Humphreys never seems to care. He doesn't even need to do anything to entertain himself; he maintains the same composure throughout his entire shift. I regard him the same way I regard the passage of time here: I'm aware he's present, but it's only when I remember he's here that I seem to feel his presence. Right now, I'm acutely aware that he seems to be stuck on twirling that pen.

"What are you going to do after your shift?" I ask him.

"Sleep."

I nod. It was a stupid question, considering I'll likely do the same thing.

As if on cue, I yawn, and Humphreys follows. "121's been asleep for about two hours," he says, coming out of his yawn. "So probably five more hours until the end of our shift."

"Yeah, I'd say so."

He keeps twirling the pen. I would be lying if I said I haven't become transfixed by the act. He handles it so naturally, as if he were trained—perhaps with a blade or scalpel. That glare blinds me every time; this overhead light is sterile and screams of the old building's smothering system.

However, it's ironic how this prison dome has so many spiraling staircases and circular rooms, because in all that, I see the same patterns found in flowers or snail shell swirls.

"Do you think they ever dream of us?" Humphreys asks.

I look at him incredulously, then finally slip out a laugh. "What?"

A sly smile creeps over the visible half of his face. "I know you've wondered it."

"Perhaps they have nightmares."

"Scary unfaced beasts, always watching," he says.

"Or maybe it's comforting to some," I counter.

"Always being watched?"

"Always feeling they're protected," I correct.

Humphreys scoffs. "Protected."

I squint at the man, trying to read him. We've never spoken much beyond small talk—always had a distant understanding of each other: both tired and sometimes in need of trivial conversations to



stay awake. I have no clue where he stands on most matters. Perhaps he doesn't like this job. Or perhaps he thinks it's useless for us to be here.

I think differently, if that's the case. I think this job has granted us plenty of opportunities, both in careers and... otherwise.

"Have you ever worked as a guard before this place?" I ask him.

"No. Just medicine."

I freeze. "You worked in medicine?" I ask, and he nods. "I did, too," I say.

"How interesting," he says. He flips the pen in his hand, and it lands clutched in his palm with the point facing down. "What as?"

"Nurse," I reply.

"Nurse." He purses his lips. "How does a nurse end up here?"

"Here's closer to home."

"I'm sure here's less pay, though."

"Surely," I say.

Humphreys sighs. "Yet you were willing to give me a quarter for something almost guaranteed."

"You make the same pay," I counter.

"I do far less work, though."

I cock my head. "No, you don't."

He looks at me. I feel my eyes go wide despite any reason I have. His gaze is mesmerizing, and it makes me feel a little ill. It's like staring into an eclipse; it pulls you in with all its might, but the searing torment of its allure keeps stabbing at your eyes until, suddenly, you're sobbing.

"I've seen you do some work behind the scenes," Humphreys says.

I narrow my eyes. As my fingers clutch the armrests some more, Humphreys's gaze hardens. I start to pray he looks away. "Oh, look," he says, tilting his head to the window, keeping his eyes on me. "121 is falling."

I look over to 121's cell, and sure enough, he's flipped his body so that both arms dangle off the bed, and a single leg is almost touching the ground. Slowly, his torso is sliding over the edge. He's bringing the blanket with him. As the process unfolds and anticipation builds within me, I've forgotten all about the bet. I want to lose the bet.

121 falls. The white blanket covers his entire body, and after all that, he remains asleep. He remains still.

Humphreys and I both watch him for a while, despite him not doing anything. I recognize that as we sit there in silence, I've become awfully aware of Humphreys's presence—more than usual. I don't have to look over to know he's twirling the pen again. I lean back in the chair and sigh.

"I owe you a quarter."

"Keep it. You need it."

I chuckle. In the silence, I fall back into watching my reflection in the window. It's as if my eyebags have darkened in just the past couple of minutes, but I don't feel all that tired. I wonder how long I have left on my shift now. What am I going to do after my shift?

I force my vision to go past the glass, and I'm looking at the empty cell again. I look over to 121's, where the body remains motionless under the white blanket. I still my breathing and focus my vision, trying to see his chest rise and fall, but it's so hard to see from this distance. He's engulfed by his surroundings. Shadows cresting his figure, he blends into the darkened cell: a centerpiece to the illustration. It's like he's been painted into existence, and the illustration only dried its weeping oil once he arrived at this state. Always been there, always will be there. Excitement builds within me.

Just what am I going to do after my shift?

"I thought you were going to sleep?" Humphreys asks.

I look over to the left, but he's no longer there. I shoot a glance to my right, and there he is, not facing me, holding the pen in that position again where it's clutched like a blade. I feel a weight on my chest. It's likely anxiety, but it's sharp—right between the pectorals.

"What?" I ask.

"I thought you were going to sleep after your shift?"

I open my mouth, then pause. I straighten myself in the chair and turn it more towards him. I can feel the presence of his eyes without them even being on me. "No," I start. "No, you were the one who said that."

He clicks the pen once. Then he begins to twirl it again. The glare catches my eye just as he says, "You're right."

I'm trying to think this through. "You okay, Humphreys?"

"Just tired."

I nod. "Yeah, me too."

"You think we'll dream of them in the morning?"

"I will."

"Tell me, what will your dreams look like?" he asks.

I shrug, looking back at the rows and rows of cells. When all of this is done, and that sun highlights every crevice in this dome, what will I be left to think about?

I'll probably dream of the cells and how they look like lines of teeth. I'll probably dream of that light above us. I'll probably dream of nature's spirals. I'll probably dream of how every creature in nature needs to eat, and I'll probably dream of food chains and how all of us here act in some kind of food chain. I'll probably dream of that white sheet over 121 and how I can see the faint outline of his face underneath. I'll probably dream of that empty cell. I'll dream of that empty cell as usual and how once upon a time this big quiet beast had its full set of teeth.

"I'd call that a nightmare," Humphreys says.

I consider him for a moment. It's interesting—his interpretation. It makes me laugh. I put the back of my hand to my mouth, suppressing my snickering. I try to imagine the dome as something scary, but from every angle, I can't help but remember the man watching from the center. It's not scary with him there—nothing else can creep in the shadows under his watch. In fact, with him there, everything is somewhat like a game.

I shake my head, coming down from my laugh. "I wouldn't call it a nightmare."

"No, I suppose I wouldn't call it one, either," he replies.

I look at my reflection. When I meet my gaze, I feel that same intensity I experienced with Humphreys. I almost want to shy away. I'm still thinking over what Humphreys just said—what he has been saying.

I look at the empty cell, and suddenly, it's different. I can see both my reflection and what's beyond the glass. The metal bars are imposed upon my face.

"Are you thinking about what you're going to do after your shift?" Humphreys asks.

I nod.

"Are you ever not thinking about what you're going to do after your shift?"

I nearly laugh again. No, it's always on my mind. I'm always thinking about the potentiality of it all: the excitement, the thrill in the question, am I going to do it tonight? It's spite, most likely, to always think over that natural craving—perhaps the most natural craving—even in a place as stifling as this.

"Naturally," Humphreys says.

"What?"

"You use that word a lot. Natural."

"I like it."

"Is it natural the way I'm holding the pen?"

I look over at Humphreys. He's holding it like a knife again, as I suspected. I nod. "Yes," I say. "Except you're not actually from a medical background."

"No, I'm not."

No, he's not. I purse my lips, and I began to reach over to him. He still doesn't turn to me, even as I pluck the pen out of his hand. His grip is solid, and when I'm within his sphere, I feel the slight prickle of cold all across my skin. My limbs feel heavy. My vision even fogs. I retreat, now with the pen.

I hold it as he did. Then, I hold it like a scalpel.

"You, though," Humphreys says, "you were a nurse for fourteen years."

I nod, slowly.

"Why did you come here?"

"Like I said, closer to home."

"Come on," Humphreys says with that sly smile. He hasn't taken his eyes off the window, yet he seems to react perfectly to my expressions, my actions, my every thought. "You know I know that's not true."

I glare at him, trying to process every bit of him—perhaps gain some understanding of him like he has of me. "What did you mean by you've seen me do work behind the scenes?"

"The cell."

"Yes, the empty cell."

"The now empty cell," he repeats.

I tighten my grip on the pen. It feels like steel beneath my calloused, steady palms. There's that pain in my chest again.

"Do nurses conduct surgeries on people?" Humphreys asks.

"Why do you keep asking questions you know the answers to?"

"Well, you do experiments, don't you? Isn't it your job then to answer questions?"

I narrow my eyes, trying to will him to look at me—to fully, truly look at me. I stare at the side of his face, at his pale skin, at the way the sterile, overhead light crests the sides of his sharp cheekbones and casts his hollowed facial structure in polarizing shadows. I try to put all his features into some comprehensive picture, but the more I try, the more foreign he appears. I stare at Humphreys, and I loathe his uncanniness, his refusal to directly acknowledge me. I despise the way he seems to understand everything and nothing, and how he seems to understand me but not my desires, and how he asks questions already knowing their answers, and I hate the way he questions my power.

"Why do you kill them?" he asks.

My chest stings with a pain that numbs every other cell in my body. I stifle a cry, lips twitching in an attempt to detain the agony. They curl into a momentary smile, and it's enlivening. I smile again, and soon the stifled sobs are mutating into laughs.

"Easy access, right?" Humphreys continues. "Easy way to see how they act under the knife?"

"Humphreys, you know the answer," I say.

"Do you?"

I bite my lip, swallowing the laughs.

"How do I know the answer," Humphreys says, chillingly casual, "if you don't know the answer?"

"I know the answer," I retort. Oh, won't you just look at me, I plead. Just let me see those impossible eyes. I imagine them beaming like flood lights in blue dusk, flickering with an inability to consistently maintain their composure. I imagine them shining like the midday sun, stroking every surface strewn about a prison courtyard. I imagine them casting down on me like a spotlight, a swinging iris blinking, watching. It sees a man with a scalpel above a body with a sliced chest. It sees a man with a smile. It sees a man who knows he's been seen.

"The answer," I say, "is because I like it. I like being able to watch. I like being able to understand. And then I like being able to act."

"You like being able to watch," he repeats.

"Yes."

He just stares ahead. For a while, I think he'll remain ignoring me, but then I see his eyelashes flutter. His chin lifts some. "Me, too."

He starts to turn. Not only do I watch him do it; I can feel it, too. I can feel it the same way I can feel time pass me by: slowly, staunchly—like gaining wrinkles while staring at a clock. I can feel the seconds tick like the click of the pen. It's invigorating. An urge—need—to swallow every instant in perverse satisfaction that whatever happens next was always bound to happen.

"I know," he says, painfully slow, "that you're going to do it again."

And then, before we lock eyes, I feel the need to look away. I can't help it, despite my raging curiosity; I can't handle the indescribability—the complete lack of understanding him. That thing is too much to digest. So I look back at the window—mirror—and I see the chairs around me, I see the other side of the platform, and I even see the faint background of the cells. And, in the glass, I see myself, but I do not see Humphreys, even as I feel his twisted, pressing gaze along my turned cheek.

He already knows my answer. But there's something so natural in saying it—in finally being seen in my entirety.

"I am," I say.

I sigh, feeling all the weight slip from my shoulders. I look back at him. I meet his eyes, and I let them swallow me whole.

I am.

Joni Mitchell Blue

It was March when the announcement was made on the radio during Louise's drive to work. Five years had passed since she had spoken to Paul about anything, let alone the singer. Besides, she was in love again, a new love that was stomach-flipping and all nerves. There was the ceremony of preparation: making sure the fridge was stocked with the beer he liked, that every inch of skin was fragrant and hairless.

Still, the announcement shook Louise. Even all this time later there was no one else it made her think of. "Joni Mitchell is reportedly in a coma following a brain aneurysm," said the voice on the radio with a practiced sense of empathy. "More on this story to come." Louise wondered what relationship, if any, this reporter had with Joni, what moments of her life she might have intrinsically tied to Joni's songs.

Probably none, she thought. Had the reporter ever sung the impossibly high notes of "California" at the top of her lungs while driving up the Pacific Coast Highway with her lover seeing together for the first time exactly what all the fuss had been about? Had she plucked out little phrases to call him or her, Sunset Pig or Little Green, for example, which were also the names of, respectively, the fictional sandwich shop they'd open together and its most popular vegetarian option?

Maybe it was her appreciation for Joni, for all the context her muse had given to those moments—or maybe she'd always been looking for an excuse to reach out again, but in either case, Louise took one hand off the steering wheel and fumbled around for Blue, ultimately unearthing it from under the driver's seat. She slipped it into the CD player, momentarily forgetting that a deep scratch made it impossible to listen to "A Case of You" the whole way through.

Once parked, she took out her phone and scrolled through the contacts to P. She watched the cursor blink for a while, wondering how to fill the screen's whiteness. After a few starts and stops she had what seemed a benign enough message.

Hi. I just heard about Joni and I wanted to let you know I thought about you. That I think about you sometimes.

Then it was too late. The message had been sucked into whatever portal through time and space to wherever Paul was that minute. To be seen potentially by whomever he was laying next to, their feet sandwiched together the way his and Louise's had once been as they took turns making up stories aloud, exclaiming "Popcorn!" when the other was meant to take over.

She'd been respectful, she thought, and on the rest of the ride through West LA to her terrible catering job she listened to each song, most of them skipping at the halfway point. At work Louise could bury her phone in her purse and have an excuse not to obsess over what she'd done, distracted by emails and Excel spreadsheets.

"Louise," interrupted Kate, the redheaded manager who treated Louise like her personal assistant. "I need a few things from Staples. The card is in an envelope on the bulletin board, and make sure you check for coupons." Looping a bag strap over her head and between her breasts, Louise challenged herself not to check her phone until she got to Staples, a little game of patience that ultimately meant nothing.

In the privacy of her parking spot, Louise checked her phone. One new message.

Sorry, who is this?

Her fingers vibrated. Of the many possible outcomes she'd considered, this one had completely missed her. How could he not remember? He'd had her number memorized by heart, she knew from all the times his phone died late at night and he needed to be picked up.

Years before, in a dark Echo Park bar, Louise had texted Paul for the very first time, after some friendly prodding from their coworkers over drinks. "You are cute," she'd written. At the time she believed she could flirt this way anonymously, almost as a prank. Paul was only 18 when he took the job as a stage—arguably the lowest of kitchen positions—at the restaurant. Even though she was 27, Louise had been encouraged to "go for him." Perhaps this was because they were both single and attractive—though Paul was exceptionally handsome, boyish with light brown curls, easily tanned skin, and green eyes—and also because the rest of the staff was older to the point of believing their age difference was harmless. At least for a fling.

Despite his looks, Paul hadn't been remarkable to Louise at first. What was appealing, however, was his shyness around her. A reaction she wasn't used to. More often than not, she took on that role when it came to pursuing relationships. The fact that Paul was shy was even more charming considering that every breathing woman flirted with him, and many men as well. This included their boss, a woman in her early fifties with a generous ass and long, coarse hair threaded with silver. It also included Corrine, an awkward 16-year-old pastry apprentice who would later lose her virginity to him.

When Paul turned 19, their boss, Effie, threw him a party at her brother's Silver Lake home with a pool that overlooked the whole of Los Angeles. Once everyone was thoroughly drunk, one of Effie's middle aged friends grabbed Paul and kissed him on the mouth in front of her boyfriend, who tried not to look embarrassed. Paul just blushed sheepishly. It wasn't that he was naive per se, he'd mentioned his past drug use and sexual encounters with Louise in playful kitchen conversations, but it was in these moments, when he unfurled like a neon leaf, that he endeared himself most to her.

You are cute.

By sending these words, Louise believed she held the cards. Paul, however, had other plans.

I know this is Louise.

Paul's response stripped away any sense of mystery. He had recognized the area code as Milwaukee, which was, in the Los Angeles context, not too far from his hometown of Minneapolis. Nothing happened that night, or any night for the next several months, though Louise had started to give him rides home after work, trips they both had begun to look forward to.

Everyone already assumed they were sleeping together, so when they finally did it was disappointingly anticlimactic in terms of work gossip. The first time was after one of their rides home, only instead they kept driving to Louise's apartment. Paul expertly rolled them a joint and she crawled into his lap on the couch, sliding his hand beneath the elastic of her underwear. Because he was young, because she believed he couldn't hurt her, they fucked four times that night.

In the beginning, everything was sexy. There was sex in every place possible. Showers, dining room tables, the pool bathroom at Effie's brother's house that was plastered with photos of glistening water polo players. The relationship was passionate in the way that can only exist when you think something could go away at any moment. Still, Paul made no secret of other girls he fucked, or

at least had wanted to. Another waitress' sister, the daughters of restaurant regulars, Corrine's friends—all of whom were, though it hurt Louise to think about, closer to his age than she was.

Then one morning, after months of enthusiastic sex, of half-drunk drives to the beach at midnight and afternoons in the park passing books back and forth, Louise learned from an old classmate that her father died. She hadn't spoken to him in 15 years, a fact the classmate didn't know when she'd reached out to offer condolences. But once she was on the line, Louise pressed her for more information. "He shot himself," the classmate said after some prodding.

"Thanks," Louise had replied, everything around her blurring at the edges.

Paul came over at 6am. She knew it was probably too much, but she also didn't know who else to call. Later, they drove to the mall and walked around a little but mostly sat. Not speaking much. She booked a flight home for the next day and he stayed the night, climbing on top of her as she let go a few more tears over his shoulder. She didn't want to, but they hadn't said they loved each other yet and she knew sex was the only way he knew how to be there for her.

In the Staples parking lot, Louise began typing back, bathed in heat that poured in from the sun hitting the car window.

Wow this is embarrassing. It's Louise.

It occurred to her for a moment that perhaps he didn't remember the CD labeled with Sharpie letters, the time she sang "Both Sides Now" so sincerely at Max Karaoke that he later told her he had never found her as beautiful as in that moment and traced the outline of her ear with his finger.

Oh. New phone. Sorry.

By now Louise's palms were slick with sweat, She shoved the phone back into the bag and headed inside, burying herself in aisles of printer ink and packs of Post-Its.

A few hours later, another text from Paul appeared.

How are you?

There wasn't much Louise understood about Paul's life over the last year, though at times she'd tried. He had said on the phone after he'd removed all his belongings from their apartment in laundry baskets while Louise was at work, that he had to "rip off the Band-Aid," but that they'd always be in each other's lives. Maybe they'd even kiss or sleep together or go to the movies "after a little while." This had worked after their first break-up, a year earlier, when she'd written him a bulleted list of things she'd do differently if they were to get back together. If he gave her the chance to do them.

- To always kiss you back and know that I am lucky to do so.
- To buy sneakers so we can go hiking, because it means a lot to you.
- To act like your girlfriend. Not your mom or your "weird sister."

She had slipped this note into his pocket when they agreed to meet for coffee and he read it in the bathroom. He moved his things in the next day.

The second breakup was different. Paul did harder drugs. He lost weight. Grew a beard. Got himself a rich girlfriend who took him on private planes to Santiago, to Paris. He started his own catering company, making beautiful but boring food for his girlfriend's famous friends. And then, eventually,

he moved to New York with her, which was a relief to Louise. She would hear things now and then from mutual friends, how they always fought and cheated on each other, but nothing seemed to soften the truth she told herself about his new life: the adventure and opportunity she couldn't give him as she still woke up and went to sleep in the apartment they once shared.

Following the breakup there had been years of therapy, a creative writing class, a new job, and after a while there had even been love and sex—sometimes one without the other. When asked, Louise could compare the feeling to a broken limb after an accident. It got better, and in most lights you couldn't even see a scar. But if you moved it a certain way, a twinge of pain wouldn't let you forget the past. She didn't hate Paul. In fact she'd never really gotten angry at him. Not even when he broke into their apartment to get his sunglasses or when he brought his new girlfriend into the restaurant where he and Louise had met. Where she had still worked at the time. Louise's therapist said that she did a good job of trying to leave space for the past in the present, but the truth was that even so many years later, she wanted to protect him. As if getting angry enough meant that the karaoke, the stupid bedtime stories, the memorization of birthmarks, that all of it had only been a chapter in her own book.

At home, with the distraction of work behind her, a shimmer of sweat returned to Louise's palms. Now she was ready to respond.

I'm well. How are you?

It was always a tricky thing to talk about love with someone that you had once loved, so she stuck to other aspects of life. She was writing again. Not full time, but she felt proud to share that development. The cats were fine. Her nephew was growing up, and in fact there was another one now. How was his family, she wondered.

I don't talk to my parents much.

Did something happen?

No. I've always hated them.

Compared to Louise's tiny, brutally honest family, Paul's had always seemed downright Rockwellian. A black sheep yet a golden child, he was given the entire family's unwavering support—no matter how his decisions strayed from what was their understanding of good or right. But she also knew it wasn't always like this. In the lightless hours, the backs of their feet against each other's, he would recount in fragments the time he spent in the church pastor's office. Half confessions that drew her even closer to him. She never asked for the whole truth, but she understood that whatever happened in that room reinforced any underlying belief that God did not exist.

By the age of 15, Paul had gotten caught selling MDMA and having sex. He started community college but dropped out after a semester and left Minneapolis to live with this uncle in Los Angeles and pursue an interest in cooking. His parents had reservations, but ultimately conceded, as if they feared what would happen if they dared to react otherwise.

Once, Paul joked that Louise would never meet his parents. Before he said this, she couldn't have known how much it would hurt. Their relationship had started as a physical one, but love had come naturally. It had been declared one night after an argument and too many tequilas. In his uncle's guest room, she turned her body away from him so only the wall could see her tears. "I L you," he said, borrowing a phrase someone they knew used in lieu of "love." She didn't move. "L means love!"

he said, and at that she laughed and turned back towards him, her face red, and threw a pillow. "I know, you idiot," she said. "Me too."

When Paul came to live with Louise, he didn't ask. There was only the movement of things from one place to the other. His dad had started to suspect something and was calling frequently, but Paul didn't respond until he got a message saying that he was too young to be in this situation. That he must have known this was wrong, or he wouldn't have kept it from them. "I'm exactly where I want to be," Paul replied. After that, Louise became part of the family naturally, joining them for holiday dinners, stuffing grape leaves and drying dishes.

She knew—regardless of how they'd presented themselves—Paul's family wasn't perfect, but there was a hell of a lot of love there. For him to say he hated them made her reevaluate everything she knew about him, about how he viewed all his relationships, including theirs.

Do you think they don't understand you?

I think the more they understand me the less they want to know, if that makes sense.

Louise thought about young Paul in the pastor's office talking about goodness. She thought about his happy-faced mother and father and brother and sisters loving in their certain kind of way that made him feel pressed into a shape that never quite fit.

Do you think I knew you?

She typed reflexively now. The empty space between them made her fearless again and they were getting somewhere.

Yes. I'm sorry. For everything.

For years Louise had imagined the words she wanted Paul to say to make up for the way their breakup played out. One night he came home drunk, laid on top of their bed with his shoes still on, and in the morning said he was moving out. It hadn't been perfect, of course, but there hadn't been a fight. There hadn't been the absence of love or of sex. For years after, she watched him through tagged photos living a life she was sure was better than the one she could have given him, suddenly embarrassed by their Joni Mitchell references and Scrabble and lying with limbs locked so tightly they didn't know which were their own. Now she had stopped waiting to hear those words. She loved and was loved by someone else. Not by someone who made up songs or obsessively sniffed his own dirty socks, but by someone who was honest, who let her sleep on the left side of the bed, who was her own age, and who she believed could never just leave.

I don't need that anymore. But you did break my heart.

I know.

The quickness of their replies made the distance feel like it was shrinking. Like they stood in front of each other now, and she found herself holding her breath as she typed.

We don't have to talk about it.

But we can. Anytime you want.

For the next few months they texted casually, their conversations dancing around nostalgia while carefully avoiding the landmine of their former relationship. Of their current relationships, too.

Louise caught herself often daydreaming of the sentimental parts of their past and found comfort in these talks with Paul, as though she couldn't trust her own memories until now.

Do you miss California?

I do.

She asked this question on one of LA's characteristically sunny days, imagining Paul in his Chelsea apartment with his girlfriend and French bulldog, surrounded by the kind of expensive things he and Louise always fantasized about but couldn't afford. She imagined him walking through Central Park and picking up produce from Union Square market. Louise had assumed all this meant he had nothing to look back on fondly.

What do you miss?

If there had been a spiral cord on the phone she'd be twirling it around her finger.

Oh...

During this pause, which to Louise felt like it could fit inside it an entire lifetime, she thought about the things she'd miss if she ever left Los Angeles. The stink of fallen guavas, the synthetic bouquet of pink Zote soap floating out of laundry room windows. The fuzzy skin of young almonds, the green taste of which Paul introduced her to, and the periwinkle jacarandas that signaled the start of spring. The endless highways and traveling, traveling, traveling just to feel the freezing cold froth meet your toes on Santa Monica's filthy beach or watch the sun dissolving into the ocean, leaving cotton candy colors in its wake. The way you could still find spaces of quiet even if you were never really alone. Or moments of awe all around you even when you were always alone.

The weather, I suppose.

Louise thought about the last time she saw Paul, seated across from her in a diner booth, his eyes blank. They had been broken up for a few months and she asked if he was in love. He said he was. Whether out of spite or an attempt to force her to move on or real, actual love, she didn't know. She'd driven him home and in the driveway moved her hand to the inside of his thigh. "Let me come inside one last time," she said, knowing the ways he liked to be touched. "I can't," he said, letting the hand linger for a moment before moving his leg away.

That day, so far away now, had haunted her all these years, but she made herself believe it was an outlier in a painting that was only clouds in the shapes of beautiful things. Now, in their messages, it seemed so close again.

What happened?

These two words would have to do for all the millions she'd thought to herself these years.

I was just too young.

It had come to this. The search for signs and the many, many could haves and should haves. The ways she'd learned to hate herself and wish every part of her was different. Her too-big nose and too-small breasts and fixation with the past. Even now these thoughts were never too far away. She had never, not once, thought the explanation could ever be so simple and have so little to do with her.

Louise closed her messages and put her phone in her bag. She walked out of the apartment and up the steep sidewalk of Maltman Avenue until she could see the city beneath her, cracked open like a geode. For a moment, the sun made everything gold, like it was coated with honey, and then it was gone, skipping the purple-pink in favor of blue. Blue as songs. As old tattoos. The houses below glowed from their windows like eyes. They blinked and she blinked back. There was awe all around, even alone. Especially alone.



A letter from our editor:

The Godfather of creative nonfiction, Lee Gutkind, defines creative nonfiction as “true stories well told.” Creative nonfiction allows one to share stories of triumphs and hardships in a beautiful way, and that is what the authors of the pieces below have done.

Finding the silver lining in a grim reality, cherishing life’s precious moments, the behind the scenes of hospitality, familial dysfunction, the American Dream, intergenerational trauma, and the intermingling of historical events with the personal. The three creative nonfiction pieces featured in this journal cover these topics and more while demonstrating meaningful storytelling. In this selection of prose, the authors have written about difficult life events, but they also capture and articulate the complexity and depth of emotions during what may otherwise be dismissed as seemingly simple experiences or observations. And that is not only a testament to their skillful writing but also to the beauty of creative nonfiction.

I enjoyed working with the authors and the Westwind staff to present these stories to you. I hope you enjoy reading them and that they inspire you to write your own stories, as well. Being executive editor of creative nonfiction has been one of my most treasured experiences at UCLA, and I’m looking forward to working on our next journal.

Sincerely,

Yusra Akhundzadah
Executive Creative Nonfiction Editor

Letter to a Saigonese Newborn

Today is January 6, 1972, and you are born in a hospital in Saigon. You are named Trang, meaning “intelligent.” Your mother holds you tightly. You are her firstborn child and her greatest gift. There is a war going on.

When you leave the hospital, you will go home with your mother and father to meet your grandparents. You will meet your family. It’s a nice two-story house on a busy street. Along this street, you will meet your neighbors, many of whom have transformed their house to double as a shop and sell food or handmade clothes to earn what barely constitutes a living. You will live in this house for the next nineteen years.

When you are one, your mother will give birth to Thao in the same hospital. You will no longer be her sole greatest gift. That title will have to be shared, but you won’t mind because Thao will be your greatest gift. You will be a quiet baby, but Thao will not. She will cry and cry, and your parents will take this as a bad omen. There is a superstition that changing a baby’s name will put an end to their anguish, and they will believe this. You will be raised on their faith. They will change her name to Dung, meaning “brave.” She will stop crying.

When you are three, Saigon will fall. It will be renamed Ho Chi Minh City after the northern dictator, but your mother will continue to call it Saigon. Your father will be one of the many fleeing to America in rickety boats over treacherous waters, and when you’re older, you will hate him for leaving you, your sister, and your mother behind. You will hate him for getting a new wife and a new family. But at three, you will be too young to understand why your father left and why your mother sits in the kitchen crying to herself. Your grandparents will care for you and Dung, intelligence and bravery, but you will be too young to understand why your mother has to work so much more. You will miss her.

The dining table will become less full. Eggs will be a foreign luxury to you, and your body will face the repercussions of a lack of protein consumption. Your entire family will eat nothing but plain sticky rice everyday, but your mother will keep working. Every three weeks, she will be able to afford something more. She will visit one of your neighbors selling pho from their home, and she will spend her hard earned wages on warm soup for her parents and daughters. Your family will sit at the dining table and slurp up the noodles hungrily. Pho will become your favorite food.

When you start elementary school, you will hate it. You will ache to learn about the world outside your reach, but that will have to wait. In school, they will only teach you about the great Vietnam and its great rulers. They will teach you that America is the enemy. You will tell them your father lives in America, and the teachers and the other kids will mock you for this. You will become ashamed of the connection to America that you hold, and you will hate your father for giving it to you.

You will wish that you could learn about the arts, but your teachers will uphold a math-based curriculum. You will wish you could read and write more, but your teachers will force numbers and equations onto you. You won’t be very good at it, so your teachers will bend you down over a chair and spank you. You will go home crying with a red bottom, and your mother will not offer you the consolation you desire but, instead, a disapproving lecture on the importance of math and good grades. She will monitor your grades closely and punish you for any substandard marks. Your grades will get better and you will excel at one of the most renowned high schools in Vietnam. You will hate it, but it will define you. Intelligence.

When you are a little older, your mother will tell you a story. Before you were born, a Buddhist monk chose to set himself aflame rather than suspend his beliefs. Your government will suppress religion. They will maintain that their rule comes before all. Your grandparents and your mother will not listen. They will pray silently in the backyard, and they will keep carvings of Buddha in closed drawers. You will be raised a Buddhist in a country that lets your people burn, but that secret will remain safe inside your home in Saigon.

You will not have many friends, but Dung will be your best friend, and she will be enough. Even though you will hate school, you will love walking there and back with Dung. You two will joke about your tyrannical teachers and talk about the next time your mother will bring home pho. Swimming and tennis will be your favorite activities. There won't be much entertainment in Vietnam, not like the enviable America with movie theaters and concerts that you hear so much about, but you won't mind because you have Dung and two cheap tennis rackets. Sometimes, you will feel like she is all you have.

Your life will be hard. Your mother will not work any less, but she will not make any more. You will keep sustaining yourself with plain rice, and you will only get new clothes once a year. You will learn to wait. You will do your best in school but wonder what will become of your hard work in a country where the only two respected careers are government jobs and teaching. You won't be able to picture yourself in the shoes of your dictators. You won't know what will become of you. Life will be hard.

When you are nineteen, you will leave for America with Dung and your mother. You will say goodbye to the grandparents that raised you. This will be the last time you ever see them. On the plane ride there, you will be excited. You will look forward to a new adventure with your sister and mother in a better developed country, yet you will always grieve for the home you lost in the back of your mind. You will think of the grandparents and aunts and uncles and cousins and neighbors you left behind. You will think of your two-story home in Saigon. The grief will never go away.

When you get to America, it will be harder than you anticipated. You will live in El Monte, California, and your family will be part of the very small Asian population there. Your sister will change her name to Tiffany, because Dung does not mean "brave" in America. They will make fun of her for her name, and you will be angry. You and your mother will never call her Tiffany.

School will not be easier in America. Your teachers in community college will not spank you, but they will give you lessons in words you will not understand. You will finally get the chance to write like you always wanted, but you will be expected to write ten-page essays in a language you cannot even speak. You will fall behind, and your mother will not be able to provide enough for the three of you on her own. Part of that responsibility will land on you, the eldest daughter. You will rush to class in the morning, take the bus afterward to work at the jewelry store in Chinatown, and then take the bus back for night classes after your shift. There will be more food on the table, but you will run out of time to write the essays you already struggled with. You will drop out of school, but Dung will stay. She will always be brave, while you will mourn your intelligence.

It will get a little easier. You will be surrounded by strangers, but you will always have your family. Your new government will give your family financial aid every month, but you will keep working hard because that is what you were raised to do. You will learn English through Madonna songs, and you will save up to see her in concert one day. You will dream. When you are twenty-six, you will get married while four-months pregnant with your first daughter. Motherhood will not scare you because you will have your own mother to guide you. Her strength will pass on to you. You will fall in love with Hai for his charm and his kindness to strangers. Your first date will be in an Edwards

cinema that will be demolished decades later. You will raise your firstborn together in a nice home, and you will be happy.

When you are thirty-one, you will give birth to your second daughter. You will hope that your two girls share the same bond as you and Dung, who will welcome you to her home when you and Hai lose yours. Hai will be laid off, and you will pick up more hours, but it won't be enough. Your mother will take care of your two daughters while you work, and they will be waiting by the door every day when you come home. Your husband will not find another job. He will start drinking more and yelling more. He will scare Dung's son, and she will ask you to leave. You will live in many houses with your husband and two daughters. You will be hated by all your landlords for late payments, and you will become all too familiar with eviction notices. You will miss your two-story home in Saigon, but you will never be able to afford a plane ticket back. Life will be hard.

When you are forty, you will lay on the floor while your husband beats you. He will always be kind to strangers, but you are not a stranger. You are his wife. You will not be able to see anything, but you will hear your two girls. The fear in their screams will nearly deafen you, but relief will dull the harsh sound. You will be grateful he only hits you and not them. You will remember how hard it was to grow up fatherless, so you will stay with him. You will do anything for your daughters. Your greatest gifts. You will learn to stay quiet when he yells at you and hide when he comes home drunk. He will always be a fighter. But so will you.

Seven days a week, you will work a total of two jobs. You will only have time for work and sleep, and you will not have any friends. Madonna will go on tour, but you will never have the time nor the money to attend. Your mother will detest you for staying with your husband and you will lose her because of this, but she will still care for your two girls with love. Dung will get a good job with her college degree. She will make much more than you, and you will repeatedly ask her to borrow money that you cannot give back. She will stop talking to you.

When your oldest is nineteen and has made enough money on her own, she will buy you a digital piano. You will love it. You will sit at that piano for hours and the internet will provide you the arts education that you were denied as a child. You will practice "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" while your dog sits at your feet and listens. He will be the only one who listens. When you come home from work, you will prepare a bowl of healthy chicken broth for him before you even prepare dinner for yourself.

You will be heartbroken when you lose him. He will be hit by a car on Peck Road. Without your dog, you will be lonely, so you will find friends who introduce you to a new, modern religion. You will decide that Buddhism isn't working for you and cling onto this new faith. You will try to scrub away the burn marks from your futile search for nirvana. Your friends will tell you that you have to donate money to the church, and you will listen because you trust them. You will work two jobs, and whatever little you have left over will go to your friends and the church. You will donate the digital piano to them, and your daughters will resent you for it. They will hate you for giving more to the church than to your own children. You will take years to realize that your friends are not friends but frauds exploiting a lonely woman who will never stop craving friendship.

When your youngest is fifteen, she will write you a suicide note. She will be okay, but neither of you will know how to recover. You will have lived your whole life with a war of your own inside your head, but you will have been conditioned to fight it alone in the name of strength. You will want your daughter to be strong like your mother taught you to be, so you will

yell at her when she cries and reproach her for being weak. It will be all you know how to do, but it will not be right. Both your daughters will become strangers to you. They will celebrate Christmas

with Dung instead, and you will be crying in the kitchen alone when they come home. They will hold you, and for the first time in your life, you will not hold back your tears.

It will take years, but you will become a better mother and your daughters will forgive you. You will learn to hug them when they cry, and they will grow to understand you. The three of you will adopt two more dogs and move back in with your mother and Dung. They will forgive you too. You will take off your armor and lay down your weapons. Together, you will heal.

Today is January 6, 1972, and your people fight alongside American soldiers against communist forces outside these hospital walls. But you are just a baby being held by your mother. You know nothing of war.

Best wishes,
Your daughter

Seared Ahi Tuna

It was my seventh time working in the hospitality crew at the grand old City Château that October. I suppose I was becoming recognizable, as the security guard waved me through the metal detector with a smile, not really looking at the contents of my bag as it slowly moved on the conveyor belt. I took my barely searched backpack and set off towards the changing rooms, trailing behind two women whose whispered conversation was as urgent and furious as their pace. Talking in the corridors was heavily discouraged in case there was someone important visiting the bowels of the Château.

As soon as we entered the changing rooms, their volume increased tenfold, finally free from the hallway rules. I slipped into my pressed white shirt and black pants, trying very hard not to listen in on their conversation, without much success. I went outside to the crate of clean gloves, gossip fading from my mind as I inhaled deeply. The freshly laundered aroma of the gloves was a welcome break from the now uncomfortably familiar smell that seemed to constantly haunt this floor.

When you first enter these corridors, this smell is appealing, inviting. It tells you there are delicious meats cooking in the kitchen, fresh bread, and all sorts of herbs. The warmth seeps into your bones, displacing the London chill. But if you ever worked as a server here, you would know this warmth could soak in too deep. By the end of dinner, I would be tugging at my collar, desperate to get out of my sweaty clothes. The same smells that were so appealing at the beginning of the shift would permeate throughout the fabric, stewing silently together with the vapors of manual labor, turning unbearable. Not because it was particularly pungent but because it was stubborn. If I didn't synchronize my work schedule with my laundry schedule, these clothes would have the power to make my entire room smell like the Château kitchen corridors.

With the fresh gloves donned, I headed upstairs for the start of the shift, into the capacious, ornate dining room that never failed to take my breath away. After being assigned to table leaders, we set tables and polished the dinnerware. This not only ensured that the utensils were shiny but also gave us the opportunity to familiarize ourselves with the tables and the places we would be serving. Those of us serving guests with dietary restrictions were able to memorize them while we rubbed down spoons and glasses.

I almost didn't realize I was waiting for something specific until I heard the tinkling of broken glass. Thanking the heavens that it wasn't me this time, I willed myself not to look at the server who was getting berated by Petra, one of the managers. How many glasses did City Château go through every month? Were any of us casual part-timers ever fired for breaking glasses? The broken-glass threshold must be over three, at least. That's how many glasses I had broken, and I was still there.

Petra made her way to the table I was working at and picked up a glass. She frowned and waved me over.

"You see this?" she said, pointing, "That's a spot."

I squinted. I really couldn't see anything. Was my eyesight failing me? I picked it up and started polishing anyway. She gave me a nod and walked away after pausing to look at another glass closely.

After Petra's keen eyes had made sure there was not one spot left on any of the six hundred glasses (three glasses at each of the two hundred places in the dining room), she clapped sharply, signaling for us to wrap up our work. We made our way downstairs right outside the northern kitchen door.

We formed two lines that would go out with food to serve one table at a time. Petra worked with John, the other manager, to make sure we all knew our serving choreography for the dinner. It was a very important part of our job because the way that people had to be served was always slightly different each time. Sometimes the head table would be facing north and sometimes west, and it was always served first. Some of us part-timers had to solely focus on signaling everyone at one table so that they knew exactly when to put the plates down, in perfect synchrony. If there was someone extra important in the middle of the table, they would have to be served just a little before everyone else. Our performance of serving certain places in a certain order seemed to show everyone the hierarchies that existed in large dinner groups.

We waited for the pre-dinner speeches and celebrations to end. Sometimes, it was just the Head of the House speaking, and the wait was short. Other times, there was some light entertainment, like bagpipes or choral singing, and you could hear some of it down in the kitchen too. We just stood there in silence then, and I would sneak looks at a particular handsome young man in the other line. Aspiring actor, delicious Scottish accent. One day I would see him on Netflix, and it would make my head reel to think about the contrast in our lives—but right then, we were in the same boat.

Then, the laborious dance began. With heavy, hot plates on one hand, we hurried up the southern stairs, keeping in pace with the table leader. Once we served our very first guests, we left through the northwest door and rushed downstairs, completing the circuit for the first time that night. We grabbed plates for our second run, and at the last minute I told the chef, "Mrs. Hawkins has a nut allergy!" He quickly yanked back the plate I was holding and handed me a new one without nuts. Up we went again; I could really feel it in my biceps and thighs. If nothing else, this job was quite the workout.

We cleared the appetizers and were back serving entrées in almost no time. I had to wait for Dr. Habernathy's plate of fish longer than everyone else. Petra yelled at the sous chef, who had to scrap one plate because his hands were shaking so much that the sauce had gone everywhere. Everyone in my line waited, wrists groaning under the weight of their plates while he quickly made another, and we practically ran up the stairs once I got the finished plate. The next time, I was supposed to serve Mr. Farthington his tri-tip, but he needed more time with his salt cod croquettes. I left his plate by the exit as we made our way back to the kitchen, telling the stand-by server exactly where this plate needed to go.

While the guests took their time with the entrées, we were ushered into one of the large, lavish rooms of City Château to wait, like always. I sat there in my wilting cotton shirt, looking at golden frames holding portraits of old men in large wigs, elaborately carved furniture, and massive chandeliers. How bizarre it was, to be amidst the wealth gathered over centuries from so many of Britain's colonies, almost definitely including my country.

I was suddenly reminded of my father's stories of how my grandmother would knit sweaters for him with the wool she unraveled from the free socks they received from the government.

Petra clapped twice, and we stood up in unison. So obediently. I muted my screaming thoughts—I didn't have the bandwidth to engage myself in a mental discussion about colonialism, capitalism and the divide between the rich and the poor. I had to pay rent. When you're just getting by, it's hard to pay attention to the important things.

At dessert, Ms. Dupont heard my stomach rumble.

“Good thing we’re nearly done,” she said, laughing. My ears burned. “You’ll get to eat soon, I hope! You must try the fish if you can, it was absolutely delicious!”

“I’ll send your compliments to the chef, Ms. Dupont,” I said with a smile. I hope it didn’t look too forced. Ms. Dupont was unaware that these four-hour shifts didn’t come with food.

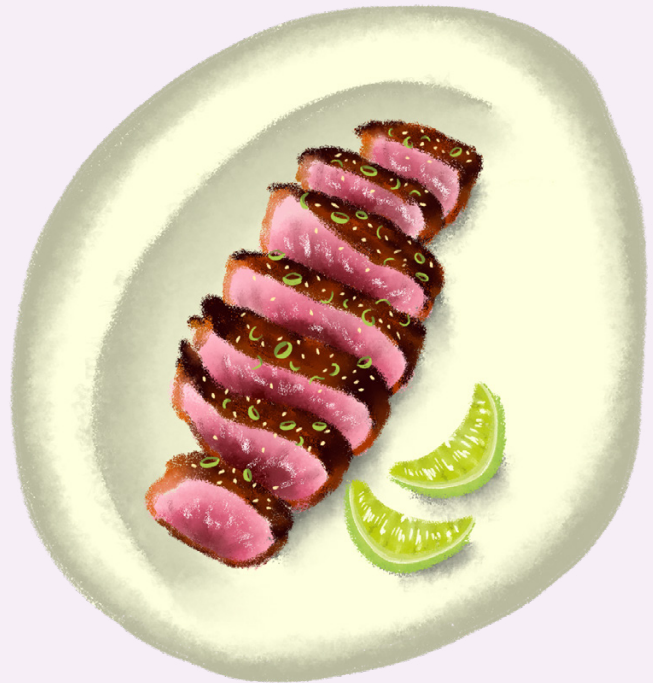
Coffee and tea went by in a blur of endless sugar cube runs. Everyone’s insulin is working marvelously here, I thought, mocking the dinner guests internally. Immediately, uncomfortable thoughts poured into my head, washing away my judgment. I had a quarter of a small chocolate cake from Tesco that I was going to eat after going back to my cramped shared flat. Three sugars in a tea after a balanced meal seemed positively healthy compared to my upcoming meal. Contempt for the habits of the rich instantly morphed into frustration and guilt at my own plans. I cursed myself for buying the cake in the first place, even if it had been on sale and cost less than a tomato.

At the end of the shift, most servers gathered on the stairs to chat. I quickly changed and stepped out into an empty corridor where I spotted a cart with extra plates of food and baskets of bread rolls. The plate closest to me was the one with the sauce that had gone everywhere, with the fish. Seared Ahi Tuna.

I pictured Ms. Dupont smiling enthusiastically as she praised the seafood.

Quickly checking that the corridor was empty, I grabbed a roll and tore it in two, using the halves to pick up one of the pieces of the fish. I shoved it in my coat pocket just as someone walked into the corridor. With my head down and my heart in my mouth, I briskly walked towards the exit.

Once I was safely on Collins Street, I took out my little tuna sandwich and bit in. Shame, guilt and regret tried to creep in. But the taste of gourmet food, especially on an empty stomach, and the rush of power walking in this beautiful city that I curiously loved so much were enough to shroud those pesky feelings.



THE SPEEDWALKER

Dad stares into the black abyss of the stairwell. He descends, gripping the shaky banister. I am holding his left elbow and my breath. He should be using a walker, but he won't even use a cane. Somehow we make it to the bottom step. The maître d' leads us to The Kaminsky Method table—the red, gleaming banquette where Michael Douglas and Alan Arkin debate careers and scripts and hold court on my Dad's favorite TV show. Dad beams. He knows I've gone to some trouble to get us smack dab in the center of the action. He orders the Lobster Thermidor and a club soda. I'm hoping the classic, old world food and the setting will butter him up.

"Dad, I think it's time to talk about the assistive medical device situation."

He grabs the table with both hands. The water glasses shake violently, and the tablecloth and flatware slide as he rises.

"Watch this," he says. "I'm a fast walker."

Dad is wearing an oversized navy puffer jacket. He lost weight this past year. There are shadows where there were cheeks and his slacks sag. What is left of his snowy hair is sticking out of his head in all directions. At some point, he stopped wearing Oxfords, and he's sporting white, boxy tennis shoes.

He takes off, pumping his arms as if he's at the track. He goes the entire length of the restaurant aisle several times. The flat surface doesn't expose his impaired depth perception and balance; momentum propels him forward. Patrons are staring and uniformed waiters carrying large trays of heavy dinnerware at precarious angles are eyeing him as he takes another U-turn. They don't approach. This is Hollywood, and they've seen it all.

On his next pass, I toast him with my martini glass and cheer. For tonight, Dad is The Speedwalker of Musso and Frank Grill. He is winning his own race as crème brûlée torches burn bright and champagne flows. There is no deterioration. There is no collapse. Only a delirious blur of speed.





A letter from our editor:

In the words of legendary MC of Dance Dance Revolution SuperNOVA (2006) for the Playstation 2: all's well that ends well. This line is said in the game when you essentially fail a whole dance set. I guess I was never very good at DDR since I heard it a lot, but because of its constant repetition in my childhood, I think about this phrase a lot. As an English major, I am obligated to mention that Mr. William Shakespeare also popularized this phrase with his play of the same title, and the original phrase even dates as far back as a 13th century proverb. But for me, I will always hear "all's well that ends well" in the voice of the DDR guy. The phrase gave me hope for my final year at UCLA. Because, starting off on the heels of strict quarantine and Zoom university, the year was not without its ups and downs. Maybe it wasn't the senior year I always dreamed of, but nevertheless it ended well. A lot of that was due to my time as Arts Editor. I am so proud to present my final edition of *Westwind*. It is the biggest art section of the year, and it is full of wonderful contributions that I hope will bring you the happy ending they have brought me. Because all's well that ends well. And I've made it to the end.



Kendall Moore
Executive Art Editor



Nika Eskandari

Memories of Youth

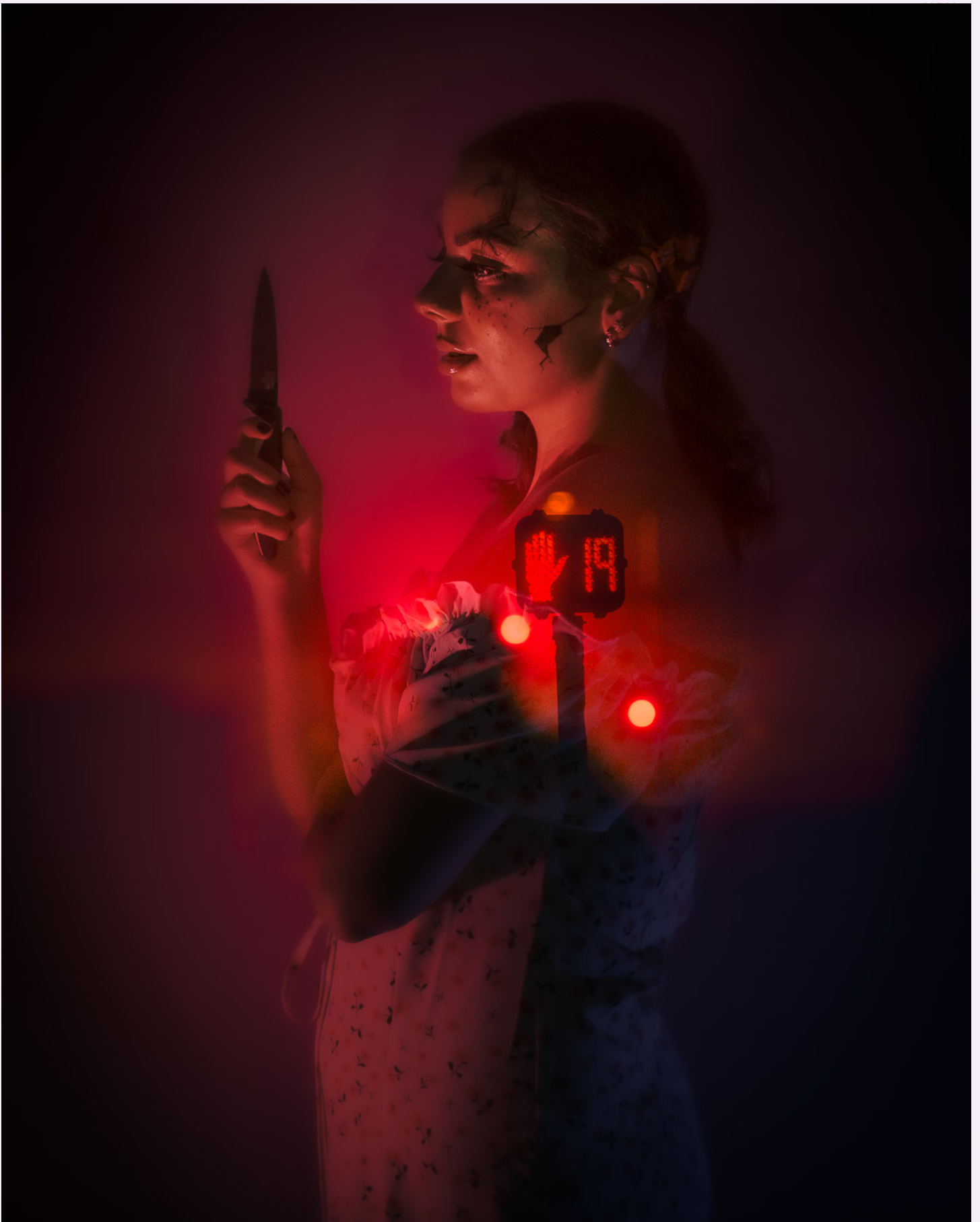
Digital photograph



Nika Eskandari

Pacific Sunsets

Digital photograph



Nika Eskandari

The Timekeeper

Digital photograph



Nika Eskandari

Tidal Block


Digital photograph



Nika Eskandari

Views from Venice

Digital photograph

Snakeskin 

Sometimes it feels like snakeskin
Rough around the edges
Scraping on the pavement
But I don't mind

Supple indecisions
(Give myself to you)
Past the points I'm making
(Nothing I can do)
Can you feel my graces over time

And that's just how it goes
It's out of my control

Mutual circumstances
Always taking chances
Riptide pulling me in between
What it could be and what's underneath

Stuck inside a cycle
Of falling for potential
The flame believed to burn until it died
But it didn't mind
It didn't

And that's just how it goes, how it goes
It's none of my control

Polaroid 

A picture frame that you bought
Clouded rusty eyes to see polaroids of me
Shoved in the back of a cardboard box
Dusty attic hideaways, wiping tears away
Do you remember our life back then
Wedding vows were tapestries, gilded memories
It was the end before it even began
Wonder why it took so long for you to say it's wrong

And I don't know why it's cold in June
And I don't know why he looks like you
I'm self-assured
I'm on my own
And I thought I let you go
But I hold on to the polaroid picture of you

Could've sworn that you said
I'd give you my everything, as long as you're here with me
Promise forever, we were in bed
Duvets wrapped around our heads
Tattooed on my neck

And I know that November nights
Never snow under our streetlights
You felt like home
You were warm
And I still reach out for your arm
And I hold on to the polaroid picture of you
The polaroid picture of you

Excavation 

I don't want to do this anymore
Give my heart and lose it
I can't help but notice that,
My energy is falling
It's been a while
I question if I want it

Been doing some reflecting
Figured out
That I am not the problem
You scream and you shout
I need some explanation
No cover up
Is this the excavation

Can't keep up when you're out in space
Can't you understand you can't make me stay
You can't make me stay

You told them all about me
But they don't know
The colors that you're hiding
If you couldn't let me go
Why do you have to bring me back to when we
Had all those happy memories and now I


Can't keep up when you call my name
Can't you understand you can't make me stay

Now I won't keep up when you find your place
Hope you understand, couldn't make me stay
You can't make me stay
Couldn't understand
You can't make me

Franklin 

Franklin did you miss me when
You took your last breath and held it in
Franklin did you wander off
Lost with your shoes half way on
And Franklin did you prick and bleed
Franklin did you leave me

I was just trying to hide
I was just trying to hide

Half a Whole 

Would you be so kind
To follow me through lines
Embedded in your eyes
A universe of light

Hold you unaware
Terrified and scared
Do you have some to spare
Don't leave me standing

Oh why do I keep you with me while I sleep?
Bite my tongue, grit my teeth
Half a whole in a week

Miss when you would call
Heaven when we touched
Drifted from my spell
Cursed but didn't fall

I'm guiltless but lucky
That I couldn't speak
Wearing shirts you gave me
Held my tongue, bit my cheeks
Half a whole in two weeks



Nur Hussein

Over the Olive Trees

Digital painting



The2vvo

Thick Skin – Mask Series 1

Found objects, textiles



The2vvo

Thick Skin – Mask Series 2

Found objects, textiles



The2vvo

Thick Skin – Mask Series 3

Found objects, textiles



The2vvo

Thick Skin - Mask Series 4

Found objects, textiles



The2vvo

Thick Skin – Mask Series 5

Found objects, textiles

Late November 

In late November
Lookin back upon the year
We had good times and bad times
(And) times I wish were never here.
There was a wedding,
The start of a lifelong storied path
Pine trees and starlight, a memory to last

June turned to summer
And my old friend could no longer stand
He ran with me hunting
(Sat) by my side and watched the land
Now I watch the fire burn
And wonder where he's gone
I hope he's runnin like the wind
And huntin for us all

In fall I broke a friendship
And then I broke one more
Too many words were spoken
I can't repair what's done
I looked toward December
And wondered if they need me anymore.
In late November
I can't see what's in store

I was born in the winter
I've been a fighter all along
Like hammer to anvil
I forge a brand new song
I strike and blast each sentence
And pull it from the fire.
We fight to the finish
And give it to the world

This is my legacy
This is all I leave behind
In late November
By the time I sing these lines
Blowin down the valley
Cold wind howling one more time
Memories and friendships
Scattered with the wind

Sixty-five Impala 

She drove a '65 Impala
Down the streets of LA
Skull hanging from the rear view
And an attitude for days

She's trouble from the start
She's not the girl to take to mama
She got a hold of my heart
In a '65 Impala

Took a bus from Odessa, Texas
Done things I can't remember
Looking to start over
Spent some time in prison there

Found myself at the station
Walking burning streets
Hear that engine rumble past me
Hear the slow bachata beats

She said, 'You just showed up here?
Maybe you could use a ride?
And maybe some tequila?
This town might spit you out alive'

Black Impala, drivin' onward
Baby, you and me
Black Impala, skies on fire
Snakin' toward the sea
Death is smilin, from the rearview
Welcome to LA
Eyes on fire, light the blacktop
Dead man, show the way

We drive slowly out of downtown
Past MacArthur Park and street lights
Where you can buy what you might need
To get you through the night


Cruisin' west on Sunset slowly
Watchin lights turn up the evening
Top down, blast bachata beats
Runnin' from the heat

We give a nod to Morrison

(At) the Chateau and the Whiskey
Cruising past the mansions
Where the hot tub bunnies play

Looking for the cool waves
Of the beach at El Matador
(Where) homeless folks and movie stars
Watch Pacific breakers roar

Where the evening breeze and starlight,
A beauty, and tequila
Will make the memories fade away
In a sixty-five Impala

Rescue 

Out on another highway
I took a turn that led me away from you, away from you
Dreamin of worlds with no name
Out of control as I went sailing through
The black and blue

Can you feel my desperation?
Or was it all lost in translation?

I'm fallin, I'm fallin
Into the dark
Come rescue my heart
I'm callin, I'm callin
Out through the stars
To wherever you are

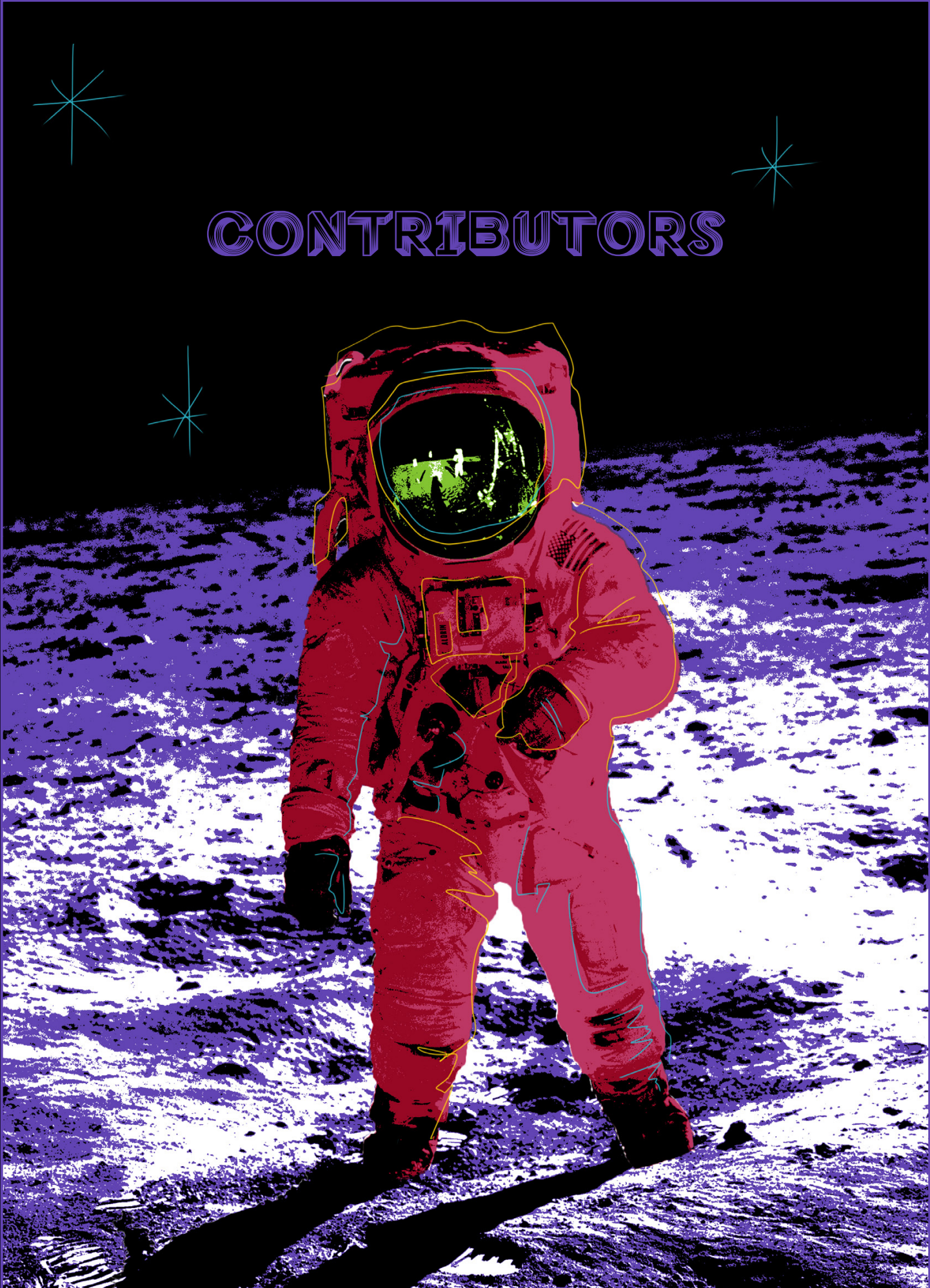
I can't explain the silence
All of the waves, they echo
Away from you, away from you
And gravity moves in color
Painting the lines of lovers
I once knew
But bid adieu

Can you feel my motivation?
Or was it all lost to temptation?

I'm fallin, I'm fallin
Into the dark
Come rescue my heart
I'm callin, I'm callin
Out through the stars
To wherever you are

What if I disappear and it's too late?
What if I imagined love in the worst way?
What if I stand alone on the last day?

CONTRIBUTORS



[Milo Atlas](#) is the musical endeavor of [Tom Rubio](#), a singer songwriter from St. Louis, MO, based in Los Angeles. Taking influence from artists like Muse, M83, and REM, Milo weaves together lyrical storytelling, heartfelt acoustic guitar, and sci-fi synths to create a bold symphony of sound. His first single, "Rescue," is a soaring indie rock tune set in the wondrous and terrifying recesses of outer space. Milo invites you to come along on a journey of epic proportions, exploring relationships, mental health, and the question of survival in the chaotic landscape of the modern universe.

[Woody Brown](#) '22 is a nonspeaking person with autism; he points on a letter board to write and communicate. At UCLA, he won the Christopher Zyda Creative Writing prize, the Ruth Brill Scholarship Award and the Thompson Prize for Outstanding Honors Thesis. He had a story appear in *Westwind* in Spring 2021. He will begin the Writing MFA Program at Columbia University in Fall 2022.

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[Nur Hussein](#) is a Palestinian artist and creative writer that graduated UCLA with an English degree. Her work frequently mirrors generational (gen z) / internet lingo as a means of communicating through poetry. Her work as a visual artist embodies Palestinian life, creativity, and resistance. Toward this end, she often recreates famous works to represent Palestinian life, and bring awareness to Palestinian struggle.

She also sells totes, stickers, and tapestries as a way of exhibiting her work on her website [nurhussein.com](#).

[Laureen Huynh](#) was born and raised in the San Gabriel Valley in sunny southern California, a center of Asian American culture which she is happy to call home despite the high rent and gas prices. In addition to writing, she loves playing tennis, her three dogs, and reviewing sparkling water. She is currently studying at UCLA with a double major in English and pre-Education and Social Transformation in the hopes of becoming a teacher to help younger students begin their writing journey.

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[Barbara Linkevitch](#) is a Los Angeles filmmaker, writer and photographer. As a filmmaker, Linkevitch's short films made big waves in the avant-garde world. She's published in *Cosmopolitan*, been a restaurant critic for *California Magazine* and had original prose recorded on a spoken word record of Los Angeles storytellers. She's written radio stories and fortunes for a fortune cookie company. Her work has been optioned for film and television. With her husband she founded the footage and photo company, A Luna Blue. They create footage for diverse clients such as *American Idol* to Terrence Malick, Arcade Fire to *The Theory of Everything*. She was born on Normal Road.

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[Brittney Luong](#) is a second year undergraduate student at UCLA pre-majoring in Human Biology and Society.

[Jordan Medina](#) is a first year transfer student at UCLA. He is a sociology major who has been wanting to get into creative writing for quite

some time now. He's a sucker for murder mysteries and zombie apocalypses and he thinks soup is a drink.

[Kendall Moore](#) is a double major in English and Spanish with a minor in film who has walked for graduation but still has two courses to take. She is annoyed by this, but, with no AC in her apartment, the air-conditioned classrooms almost make summer school worth it. She doesn't know what she wants to do with her life after summer session, so stop asking. Whatever she ends up doing, she will continue to draw funny little guys – don't you worry about that.

[Moupi Mukhopadhyay](#) is a third year PhD student in the Conservation of Cultural Heritage interdepartmental program at the Cotsen Institute of Archaeology at UCLA. Most of her writing in the last decade has been of the academic variety, and she has been trying hard to write for pleasure once again. She enjoys reading things that come with a recommended soundtrack and is quite inspired by music in general when coming up with stories.

[E. Nightingale](#) is an Astrophysics student at UCLA. When not reading instead of studying and writing instead of reading, she can be found searching for good coffee and sweater sales.

[James Reeder](#): Jim worked as an actor for many years and then moved on to songwriting for television. He has a BA and an MFA in Theater from UCLA.

[Logan Roscoe](#) is an undergraduate student pursuing a major in rhetoric. She is originally from San Diego.

[Jennifer Shneiderman](#) is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker living in Los Angeles. Her work has appeared, or is forthcoming, in publications including: Yale University's *The Perch*, *The Rubbertop Review*, *Anti-Heroin Chic*, *Flash Fiction Magazine* and *Minnow Literary Magazine*. She received an Honorable Mention in the Laura Riding Jackson 2020 Poetry Competition.

[A. Jinha Song](#) is a poet and graphic designer interested in the revolutionary potential of collaborative practice. Her writing has appeared

in *carla* and *Parallax IV*. She studies medieval English literature at UCLA.

[The2vvo](#) (thezwo) is an artist duo from Kazakhstan currently living between Berlin and Los Angeles, made up of [Eldar Tagi](#) (sound art) and [Lena Pozdnyakova](#) (sculpture, visual arts). The duo explore the dynamics between cultures and spaces, objects and processes through sound, sculpture, visual art, and performance. Their research often takes the form of sound sculpture, recording, and live audiovisual performance. The duo have participated in festivals such as Ars Electronica, Unsound, CTM, Bauhausfest, Soundpedro, and taken part in residences: Kuona Trust, Nairobi, Kenya, CEC Artslink, among others. Recently, The2vvo have shown their sculptures at Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery and Czong Institute for Contemporary Art. Lena is an alumna of the Design Theory and Pedagogy program at the SCI-Arc in Los Angeles, Sheffield University in the UK, and DIA Hochschule Anhalt in Germany. She is writing her Ph.D. dissertation in Art History at Freie University in Berlin. Eldar is a sound artist and improviser doing his Master in Sound Art and Sonic Studies at UDK Berlin.

[Ashley Tibbits](#) is a Los Angeles-based writer whose essays and editorial works have been featured in outlets including *Bust*, *Time Out LA*, *The Zoe Report*, and *Repeller*. This is her first published fiction and she is currently working on her first short story collection, focused on the grey areas that exist in love and loss.

[Vivian Underhill](#) is a writer and poet whose work engages with what it means to be in place, ecological grief, and California's settler colonial history. Her work has previously been published in *Foglifter*, *Red Wheelbarrow*, and *Utterance Magazine*.

Poetry editors, by piece

Tule Elk Preserve in March
edited by Estelle Turner

*Salinas Valley Memorial Hospital,
November 6th, 2020*
edited by Subin Lee

brown women don't get to experience love
edited by Mishal Imaan Syed

ar(nt'a) poetica
edited by Hannah Hashemi-Nejad

Fiction editors, by piece

Camp Kris
edited by Garrett Ewald

Walter and Emma do Chitchat
edited by Katherine King

Some Unnamable Crime
edited by Mel Deorsola

After Hours
edited by Katherine King

Bitter California
edited by Sabrina Ellis, Jordan Medina

If Words Could Rot Like Bodies Do
edited by Reese Abbott

Body Before the Soul
edited by Taylor Silviera

there is mold in my shower
edited by Nicole Bosiy, Ariana Kalantari

Linguistics
edited by Louise Kim

The Center of the Panopticon
edited by Skylir Ford, Brittney Luong

Joni Mitchell Blue
edited by Teal Hall, Ali Janku

All Creative Nonfiction

edited by Yusra Akhundzadah

Cover Art, Title Pages

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Illustrators

Katherine King, p. 21, 25, 46
Kendall Moore, p. 7, 17, 31, 43, 67, 68
A. Jinha Song, p. 11



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