

The background of the cover is a textured collage of green and yellow hues, resembling torn paper or a layered landscape. A circular arrangement of twelve stylized, line-drawn figures surrounds the central text. Each figure is a simplified, rounded form with limbs, and many have a small, colorful mark (red, green, yellow, or pink) on their head or back. The figures are positioned in various poses, some facing inward and others outward, creating a sense of a communal gathering or a cycle.

westwind

UCLA's journal of the arts

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SPRING 2018

Los Angeles is a crazy collision of intersections, and *Westwind*, UCLA's student-run journal of the arts, strives to capture this spirit.

We seek to provide a platform for the weird and wonderful voices found all over the greater Los Angeles area in whatever form they arise.

For over fifty years, *Westwind* has been printing poetry, prose, art, music, and everything in between. Help us attempt to define the undefinable that is Los Angeles. Anything goes.

Westwind is made possible with the support of UCLA's English Department. Print journals are currently available in the English Departmental Office.

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Editor's Note

We often enter new phases of our lives with ambition, unaware of the expectations we construct in order to make that shift into the unimagined possible. I remember experiencing such evolving desires when I first began college, going to *Westwind's* introductory meeting without any idea of how the journal would shape my next four years. And in turn, I have seen *Westwind* itself change form, as it approaches the collective vision labored by our staff.

As readers and as writers, we constantly invite ourselves to the site of creation and meaning-making. While we can certainly credit ourselves for that invitation, once there, we are never alone. In this issue, we celebrate the work that brings us to the table each week, and all the collaborative efforts behind the work, bringing it to us. We hope to hold these many collaborations here. Within these pieces, you'll find the shared concerns that make our attempts at meaning necessary: the impact of culture on a family's understanding of beauty, the contours of an immigrant's life shaped by the mutating pressures of industry, and the emotional world of a lover's favorite fruit.

I'm grateful for the work that shaped *Westwind* before us, and for the enthusiastic care that shapes it now, by the hands of our editors, contributors, and the ones who inspire them. As *Westwind* begins a new phase of its shelf-life, I look forward to the many collaborations and changes to come; it is in good hands.

Dylan Karlsson
Managing Editor, 2018

Fiction

It has been an honor to serve as co-editor of *Westwind's* fiction section. But I can't pass the torch before I thank the people who have made it worth holding.

The whole fiction staff deserves many thanks for all their hard work this year. Every week they blew me away with their brilliant insights, their writing and editing talent, and their passionate support of narratives that have enriched our journal as well as our lives.

Everyone has made their own incredible contribution, but special thanks go to my co-editor Winston, who has helped me keep the fiction ship afloat, Eunice, who has helped me stay afloat in other ways, Suren and Nick, who bravely volunteered to edit their editor, Amara, for being a note-taking extraordinaire, Christine, for always offering to lend a hand, and Dylan, for fearlessly leading us all in the right direction.

Last but not least, I would like to thank the writers and the readers, without whom there would be no *Westwind*. Writers are the reason we have a fiction section—they entrust us with diverse narratives encompassing everything from coming-of-age stories to selkies to dysfunctional relationships to surrogate partner sex therapy. Readers are the reason that writers keep writing and that we keep publishing: we know that if a story makes a difference in even one reader's life, we have all accomplished a great deal.

I will always fondly remember my time at *Westwind*, and am grateful for the relationships and experiences it has given me. I hope that you enjoy reading this journal as much as I enjoyed working on it!

Emily Parsons
Senior Fiction Editor, 2018

I've procrastinated on writing this because doing so means my tenure as Senior Fiction Editor has come to an end. That title, however, is misleading. We operate in a democratic fashion and no one voice, or vote, counts more than any other member of the staff. The pieces we accept reflect the staff's tastes and that is diverse and difficult to pin down. What I mean to say is: my time at *Westwind* has come to an end. Come fall, when I move on to graduate school over in Texas, I'll have to figure out something else to do with my Tuesday evenings. I'm going to miss it. Getting the readings, discussing them, passing judgement, and finding those pieces that stir up emotions or laughs or excitement—like the ones in this journal. More than anything, I'm going to miss the people, the friends I've made, the community of writers and readers interested in good storytelling. I hope you enjoy what we put together because I enjoyed helping to make it happen.

Winston Bribach
Senior Fiction Editor, 2018

Poetry

It is said that both college and writing invites a chance to not only reinvent oneself but also to become deeply personal and introspective. Despite the seemingly opposite sides, both college and writing present these sides of the self as a form of truth. And just as the poetry pieces in this journal each depict their own truths, I've also grappled with my sense of self and the accompanying versions of my truths through my time at *Westwind*. I joined *Westwind* as a slightly naive, slightly jaded sophomore searching for writing and community. And once I got a taste of both, I stayed with *Westwind* until I graduated, which was one of the best decisions of my undergraduate life. Every Tuesday, I came in to discuss the poetry submissions, the merits of what makes good poetry, and what the journal wants to publish. Every end of the quarter, I worked on edits with individual poets and saw firsthand the craft and delicacy and life that goes into each piece. And yet for what meager time and effort that I gave *Westwind*, *Westwind* gave me infinitely more. *Westwind* gave me insight on writing and the submission process. *Westwind* gave me a literary community, filled with some of the smartest, socially aware, and the most beautiful souls I never dreamed of being able to meet. *Westwind* gave me a way to do both poetry and fiction, to be comfortable with writing in my voice regardless of the form or the expectation. It was through the people in *Westwind* that I got to do my first poetry reading and through them that I got to read my thesis at the Spring reading. *Westwind* has given me so much more that I can't possibly articulate in a way that does it justice. I'm leaving *Westwind* with happy memories, vestiges of editing stress, the promise of great things from the new editors for next year, the loveliest friends ever, and enough pictures to kickstart *Westwind's* very own meme page. When you read these pages of this Spring journal and maybe even consider submitting to or joining

Westwind, I can promise you that all these pieces have been selected and edited with a lot of care and that you won't regret picking up a copy and reading the truths and the selves that lie in each piece. I hope they inspire you to reflect, to write, and to submit just as they inspired me. Thank you *Westwind* (especially Dylan, Emily, Shannen, Tatianna, and my lovely fellow poetry editors) for giving me beautiful memories of my time at UCLA and a big thank you to everyone for reading.

Eunice Shin

Senior Poetry Editor, 2018

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Fécondité

By Sarah Al-Qatou

the wind is mean
as it bends the backs of trees
who weep for us

in the field
poppies light our faces
in brilliant blues

stalks of grass sprout pearl haricot beans
burnt peppermint fills our lungs
tiny gifts from the earth

the wind is passionate
avena sativa nourishes us
and the cattle who roam

we carry bundles of oats
on our backs and against our breasts
while the grass shivers

birds peck the barley from our sacks
leaving trails of white storks in our wake
in their beaks they hold the white beans

the wind is confident
clouds protect our faces
as blue poppies turn red

the sun falls into our hands
as the sky grows taller
and we begin the journey home

Beauty

By Eunice Shin

When I was younger, my mother would hold my face between her hands and gaze at all the flaws of my face, the flaws that remain even as I grow out of so many other things. She'd rotate my face to the left, then to the right, lightly pinching the fleshy redness of my cheeks and scrutinizing my scrunched-up expression.

"When you're older, you should get double-eyelid surgery, Rebecca," she would say, breathing out the smallest sighs, her face flickering with pained thoughts. She would pat my face gently before shooing me away so she could work on making dinner or resume reading her book. I always felt a little miffed after each time, wondering if I was so terribly ugly that life would only be worth living after surgical enhancements. My sisters always laughed whenever they were around to witness these moments, furthering the distance between themselves and me with each titter and exaggerated whisper. They were beautiful. They had the pale, smooth skin and the small faces, the biggest eyes and the longest legs with their willowy figures, all trademarks of traditional Korean beauty standards. Compared to them, I was the rotting jellyfish that mars one's view of a pristine beach.

As if to make up for all of these jabs, my dad favored me in the name of being born the youngest.

"We got to stick together, have each others' backs," he would say, patting my head and feeding me lollipops and fun-sized Snickers whenever the others weren't around. It was my dad who played outside with me, who read me books in his halting English and told me rolling stories from both his own life and the folklore of his youth in Korean. Stories that painted the world so much brighter;

pale skies rippling into vibrant sapphire, the leafy foliage of unknown trees bordering on emerald, the smoking tiger in ruby and obsidian. I didn't always understand him but the way his voice breathed life into his past adventures had me believing every sentiment if not every word.

"Dad, am I ugly?" I asked.

We were sitting in the metal chairs that my dad placed on our balcony. He liked to come out and breathe in the night air after the stuffy smells of cooking and dinner. I liked to join him because Sarah and Esther, my sisters, never liked including me in any of their shenanigans and my brother paid more attention to his collection of gaming consoles than to anyone else. My cheeks still smarted from yet another session of Mom's reflective pinching and the follow-up pinches from my older sisters. Their mocking words continued to burrow beneath my skin, where the remnants of all the other instances piled up. I processed each time over and over again, until exact words faded and all that was left was a throbbing pain in both my face and my heart and a deep-seated conviction that I was, indeed, ugly. My question had been a cry, beseeching the world to deny what I felt so strongly within me, that my stocky body and highly criticized face were neither sins nor crimes. Thinking back on it now, I had placed my dad in an awkward position because regardless of what he told me, I would still hold my pain with me and would continue to hold onto it until much later. I would continue to believe that I was ugly.

"No," he said, looking startled and even confused as to why I would ask such a thing. My heart lifted and then sank back down when I remembered my dad was no objective speaker. He was supposed to think his children were all the most beautiful beings on the earth. However, his response flitted around my thoughts, overshadowing some of the surface pains, like ice on the pulsing heat of my face.

"Then why does Mom always want me to get surgery to fix my face?" I asked. My dad sighed, looking at his work-worn hands, fingers running over rough, sun-beaten skin and callouses. I felt the urge to hold his hand, to soothe whatever hurts resided in those hands, if any hurt had existed at all. But I was a child and my pain claimed greater importance than any other. I needed an answer that would blow all my insecurities away, an answer no one could ever give me because of how deeply rooted it was. Dad sighed, pulling out a cigarette, lighting it and breathing deeply, in and out. He was careful to blow the smoke away from my general direction.

"Your mother got double-eyelid surgery after we confirmed the wedding date. Her own sisters had insisted, saying she needed to be beautiful for the occasion, to be able to start a new life in the States with me," he finally said. The cigarette burned slowly, the orange tip advancing closer and closer to my father's lips. He flicked the ash in the ugliest ashtray, the result of my brother's efforts in his ceramics class. My mom strategically placed all of the nice ashtrays in places that were easily accessible and admired by our visitors but couldn't bring herself to toss my brother's creation, hence its placement outside of the house.

"What your mom never knew is that she was already beautiful before. If anything, the surgery almost disrupted the harmony in her face," he continued, stubbing out the cigarette and dropping it in the ashtray. He finally turned to me. There were still traces of smoke in each breath he took, and I could smell it on his sweater, but it didn't stop me from clambering into his lap when he gestured for me to. I buried my face into the rough material, the hint of smoke and aftershave tickling my nose before being catalogued and labeled as a scent that was exclusively my dad's. He gently stroked my hair, hands snagging against knots that he would then patiently unravel. Although it wasn't completely painless, the gesture came from a

more obvious place of love and I didn't make a sound of protest.

"She only wants what's best for you. I think she sees herself in you, back when she was younger. Of course, you resemble me more. But you don't need surgery, so long as here and here are beautiful," he said, pulling briefly away from me to touch his forehead and his heart.

Although his words of wisdom were kind of cheesy and unoriginal, I still couldn't wrap my head around the entirety of it. In my mind, it simplified into this: that since I was ugly, I needed to be smart and kind to make up for it, so that I had worth as a person. I figured it was good advice as any. I told my dad so. I think he knew I didn't quite get it but since his answer satisfied me, it was enough. We stayed outside for a bit longer until he pushed me off his lap, claiming that his legs were falling asleep, and sent me skedaddling to bed.

My mom invested more time, money, and effort on her beauty regimen and skin care as each year passed. She fretted about crow's feet, new wrinkles, and sunspots, buying all sorts of creams to remedy all of the problems she saw. My sisters seemed to grow paler and prettier as they grew older, the awkward side of puberty bypassing them completely aside from the occasional zit. As if to make up for that, puberty did me no favors when it seemed to beat me with a stick as it manifested itself. All I seemed to get was the awkward side. My skin was constantly riddled with acne and my hair was perpetually greasy no matter how hard I scrubbed and how often I washed. But all terrible things come to an end and, aside from the remnants of acne that remained, I survived my teen years and made it into college.

My junior year, my mom decided to go to Korea to get a few alterations done.

"I'm getting too old," she had declared via phone before hopping

on the plane. My dad didn't always agree with her obsession with youth and beauty, grumbling that a woman over fifty should at least be allowed to look a little older. He didn't go with her, claiming that my aunts who promised my mother that they'd take care of everything when she got there were enough.

However, by the end of the week, he called me, asking me to come home for the weekend. All my other siblings had moved to the East Coast after college. Even though midterms were dawning on me with frightening speed, I agreed, waking up at four to catch a train back home and surprise my dad with an earlier arrival date.

We didn't talk much throughout the whole weekend, but we understood each other and basked in the comfort of a fellow body. The house that had seemed so small when everyone was present seemed so much larger when one resided within its walls by oneself.

"I don't see why your mom can't accept that she can't be young forever," my dad said on my last evening at home before I had to go back to my apartment and brave midterms.

"Mom is still beautiful even when she claims to look old," I agreed. We were sitting on the same chairs out in the balcony, staring at a subtly different sky.

"Who's going to take her seriously if she looks the same as her daughters at her age?" he sighs, dropping a cigarette stub into the misshapen and lumpy ashtray.

"At least you don't have to worry about her looking like me," I joked and my dad laughed. We lapsed back into silence, mirth bubbling in our throats along with thoughts of Mom.

"You know, your mom blames herself and me for the way you look. She wasn't always pleased with how you turned out. I hope you can forgive her," he said after a pause. He looked down at his own hands. They were even more work-worn and rough, the skin sun-beaten into a deep tan that extended to the rest of his body.

He looked almost ashamed, like he blamed himself. I realized then that my father wasn't impervious to the impossible beauty standards he tried to protect me from, the critiques directed to his own body and the way he looked. My father, who was the strongest, kindest man in my eyes, whose outflow of wisdom and wealth of stories and attention made my childhood worth living. Even he was vulnerable to such things.

"Dad, here and here," I said. He looked up startled. I placed my hand on my forehead, on my heart, and then on his hand, holding it gently.

A ghazal for hopeless romantics

By Tatianna Giron

it's easier to cultivate a garden in his eyes than plant
seeds in reflections, watch them bloom, so you fall

inebriate on forget-me-nots and leave-me-yeses, fumes
of week-old cologne & half-eaten dinner plates, so you fall

didn't your mother ever tell you not to go flower-picking
in a garden of weeds? no? so you fall

nights spent with venus-fly-trap longing & prickly pear want
but you were never trained to handle thorns, so you fall

gardening experts say perennial dating is out of season
but who listens to baby-bloomer blues? so you fall

they say lovesickness tastes like oleander poisoning,
nausea, confusion, dizziness, palpitations, so you fall

you touch sap and pink mountains bloom on your wrist,
is it irritation or infatuation? who knows? so you fall

Midnight Musings

By Tatianna Giron

After Pablo Neruda

I shook hands with my dead grandfather last night.

can you hear a heart break in the clatter of a crowd?

"*write* out your feelings for the past week on paper."

the moon, obscured by ink stains & tar spills. The

saddest part? my inkwell ran dry.

poem by a poet with no purpose – headstone headlines.

of course you'd be depressed,

all of your family is—it's genetics!

tonight my heart cracked open like egg shell, the innards yolked.

"*Write* about something personal, let the words bleed off the page."

for instance, the time you lost your grandmother to a phone
call, or, for

instance: the time you sold your heart for pocket lint.

The worst part about being human is how the

night stretches beyond the horizon, embraces tranquilly.

is suffering essential to human existence? I think philosophy is

full of it, but I prefer astrology,

of men telescoping the night for

stars to plot out destiny,

And in search of signs,

the reason why it pours & scorches, located in the

stars— if you're ever feeling

blue, it's because the sky dictates you

shiver beneath incoming nightfall,

in solitude,

the common plight of the

distance between two

bodies.

Mango Harvest

By Tatianna Giron

in my house, there are always mangoes

& my mother taught me how to consume
them: first, slice the fruit down its center
partition into threes. Then, excavate
orange-fleshed mesocarp with metal
spoon. the middle slice—the seed
—reserved for last. peel off skin,
& suck on seed until molars dig
grooves into seed-coated endocarp.

but I have hungry hands,

when I dissect mangoes, I always aim
too close to the center, carving off
scraps of fibrous seed

& insatiate appetite,

when I eat mangoes, I carve out space
for myself in cocooning pit, until I bore
too deep—tearing my thin flesh

(my mother always told me I needed thicker skin)

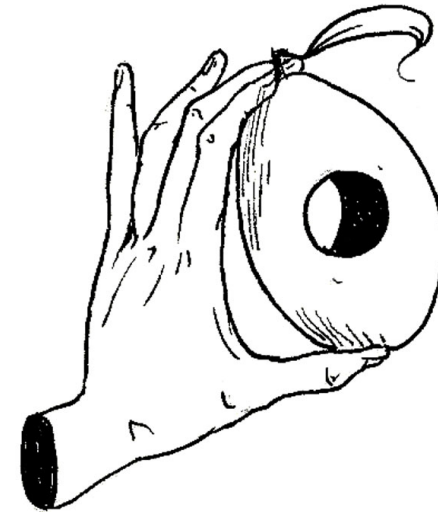
breached bare, I try to fill that
space with faces & bodies

drown myself in succulent nectar

overdose on dopamine seeds &
asphyxiate on serotonin skin

needing *more more more*

—find myself
handing spoons to hands
that whittle me hollow.



McCowen-Carpenter-Hudson

By Jeremy Peretz

The mystic spell of Africa is and ever was over all America. It has guided her hardest work, inspired her finest literature, and sung her sweetest songs. Her greatest destiny—unsensed and despised through it be,—is to give back to the first of continents the gifts which Africa of old gave to America's fathers' fathers...

... "Good-bye," said John Brown, "you will hear from me. We've had enough talk about 'bleeding Kansas.' I will make a bloody spot at another point to be talked about."

—W. E. B. Du Bois, 1909

* * *

Battle of Black Jack, c. 1856
outside Baldwin City, Kansas

Father said that at my age, while teaching can
be a noble wholesome profession, it
can also here draw the ire of the damned,

only, he said, based on the lessons I see fit
to relay. That as Northerners here,
where we're all trying to find our place to sit

and make home, we always had much to fear.
But also always much to be grateful for.
So far, we had come from where I was reared

in Indiana, where at Bloomingdale Quaker
Academy I was schooled to teach.
And for a while I made in God's acre

a wonderful schoolhouse for each
child in Lawrence, and some from far away.
Pa knew it was in me to extend my reach.

We never spoke of it, but in a way
I had known he sent the little Blackboy
to the churchyard so early that day.

Before the students arrived, to avoid
suspicions I swiftly showed him under
the rafters where I knew he'd be close, coy,

away for a day from the war thunder
of dogs and guns closing in behind him.
He could listen to a story today and wonder

for a few hours, drift-off maybe in
another world altogether, a safe one,
where he could stay. But I was pressed thin,

wondering if when I got up with the sun
the boy'd still be there under the schoolhouse.
All these flying people, patrols with guns,

where would this boy find a safehouse?
I waited 'til late praying with the child
still under the floorboards, silent little mouse.



backstreets

By Pooja Tripathi



Watch *backstreets*



The Wild Life

By Evelyn Jean-Louis

In his neighborhood of Stoke Newington, East London, Jean-Paul was well known. The locals who shared his bus route to school were also very familiar with “that crazy kid” and his poor mother Chantal. Each morning his ingenuity for missing the school bus provided much-welcomed entertainment for otherwise damp depressing mornings. There was that time when he was six, when he’d clung to a lamppost, inching higher up like a monkey each time his exasperated mother managed to unwrap one limb. He succeeded in climbing well out of reach and he smugly hung there until the bus pulled away. Once he understood he was stuck, his scream ferreted out of homes those neighbors who were still in their pyjamas and caused squirrels to chase their tails in panic. Rumor has it that a dog ran into traffic for fear of its life at that ear piercing cry. To his mother’s mortification, firemen had to rescue her son, and as usual she was late to work. Another time it was AAA who had to rescue him. Jean-Paul had snuck into the car and locked himself in. He waved her keys in defiance as he rocked out to Queen’s “We Are the Champions” on the CD player. He took a theatrical bow, then struck a Freddie Mercury rage pose, as the door was jacked open. Onlookers cheered as his mother dragged him to the bus just in time. It’s not that he didn’t enjoy school, but he derived more pleasure from winding up his mom.

Needless to say, no one in their right mind would agree to babysit Jean-Paul. Chantal resigned herself to a social life on the rare weekends that Jean-Paul’s father, Elias, agreed to inconvenience himself and babysit his only child. For her 40th birthday, Elias had promised to come over to her house and watch Jean-paul and his

best friend Ade. Chantal was reluctant to splurge on concert tickets because she knew Elias could bail at the last minute but Ade’s mom, her oldest friend, bought front row tickets anyway. Elias predictably bailed. Chantal didn’t feel good about doing it but she had no choice. She called her younger half sister, who had just moved to England.

“Hi Savita, are you busy tonight? Prince is playing at the O2 and I have two front row tickets.”

“That’s sounds amazing! I just got off my four-day shift so I’m free until Monday.” Savita was a little naive but she had no reason to believe she was being cornered.

“Great, thank you so much! My babysitter bailed on me. You could come at four o’clock and stay the night as we’ll be home late,” Chantal said quickly before any objections could be made.

Savita had no idea what she was walking into, but she did wonder why Chantal locked them in, insisting that she’d leave the key with a neighbor rather than in the house. Jean-Paul and Ade waved enthusiastically from the window like two puppies wagging their tails as the taxi pulled away. Savita set the jigsaw puzzle of the world map she’d brought for them on the dining table and sat down on the sofa with her book, planning to read whilst the kids were quietly occupied. Before she’d found her bookmarked page, however, the world had been turned upside down. Months later they were still finding pieces of Africa in improbable places, between books and stuck to the ceiling. Wild children, their mother had warned, were the result of raising children without structure and discipline. Savita doubted that wisdom, as Jean-Paul was extremely disciplined and focused on whatever he set his mind on. Right now he seemed set on redecorating the apartment and wearing her out. He had an answer for everything but it was his questions that stupefied her.

“Do you think Diane Abbott is a hypocrite for sending her son to private school?” he asked between mouthfuls of salt and vinegar

chips. For an eight-year-old, he was more clued into politics and the economy than most adults.

"You do know that Diane Abbott is our Labor MP, don't you? She was the first black woman to hold a seat in the House of Commons?" He responded to Savita's blank face by waddling across the living room like a duck.

The house quickly resembled a zoo. They painted the walls with spaghetti sauce, ate sugar cubes, emptied out Chantal's closet in search of Easter eggs, finally they locked themselves in the bathroom. She had no idea what they were up to in there but tried not to fear the worst. They finally stormed out having fought with each other about whose turn it was to slingshot the soap at the bathroom mirror.

Savita spent most of the night erasing the signs of chaos that the two boys created. By the time Chantal returned at 2 A.M., she was impressed to find that Savita had managed to feed them, give them a bath and put them to bed. Neither Savita nor the boys let on that she had fallen asleep before them, exhausted. What the boys got up to after that is still a puzzle.

That summer Chantal took Jean-Paul home to Seychelles on holiday. Savita was home too, visiting her grandmother. When she heard Jean-Paul needed a babysitter, she relished the opportunity for payback, so she offered to take him to La Digue. La Digue is a very small island, surrounded by coral reefs; it's almost impossible to drown, unless you are trying to. There are no poisonous flora or fauna, and insects are totally harmless, just unusually large and fearsome looking. The only place an eight-year-old could get hurt is on the one large granite rock formation on the beach. He could possibly fall and break some bones, so that's where Savita ate her lunch. After all, she only wanted to show her nephew what it meant to survive in the wild; she didn't want to hurt him. She gave Jean-Paul a bottle of

water and a bag of sandwiches before telling him he could explore the island. His eyes lit up with wild pleasure. From her vantage point she could see the path he took as bushes parted in his wake. That first scream of fear was pure satisfaction. Probably Jean-Paul had been terrorized by the palm spider, named either because it is the size of a grown man's palm or because it lives in palm trees, or both. She ignored his subsequent calls for help, concentrating instead on the Gabriel Marquez collection of short stories she was reading.

Jean-Paul encountered furry caterpillars, centipedes bigger than his feet, and prehistoric-looking lizards. She ignored his sobs and apologies. Her resolve was nearly broken after she read "Miss Forbes's Summer of Happiness," when she wondered whether he could end up hurting himself by falling from the coconut tree he had been stuck up for the last hour and then seek revenge. Possibly, she thought. But he would land on powdery sand, so she took that risk, knowing he was soft despite his antics. Just before the sun started to go down, she went to him.

"Okay, it's time to climb down now," said Savita.

"I can't, I'm stuck! Call the firemen," said Jean-Paul.

Savita shrugged. "There are no firemen here my dear, only fire ants that live in coconut trees and come out when the sun goes down."

He was surprisingly adept at climbing down and only fell the last few feet. He clung to his aunt Savita all the way back to the dinghy. Exhausted, he lay his head on her lap as she steered over gentle waves back to the mainland.

"You should really stay and run for office on La Digue, Aunt Savita. Someone needs to organize some firemen here."

Mercutio In Drag

By Natalie Sierra

A Kingdom of gauzy pink lovers
Swooning holographic Mercutio's shimmering in real time
With painted on brows and quivering plasticine chins
Their breasts wrapped tightly beneath threadbare tuxedo coats
A multitude of winged gods come to suck your tongue and
whisper saccharine stories of you as an infant
How they watched you through faceted eyes from the living room alter
Votive and incense lit
You thought that strange, even predatory how they
waited until your body flourished
The scent of your new alien body is complex-e
but then you remembered what your mother said about
those in power and how they are all hawks and now
It makes sense
She gave birth to your father every morning and by nightfall
he ruled over her with talon and beak
Warm heart devoured but by morning
it had grown anew again
You tell the gods what you remember but they
pretend to not understand.
But they know. They've known it all along.
They know everything.

AbiLaura

By Emily Parsons

Every night since she started studying for the AP exams, my sister Abilene had fallen asleep with her glasses on. They left red imprints on the bridge of her nose: the battle scars of an Ivy-league-bound senior, so dedicated to her studies that she dozed off only in the early hours, face down in her book, glasses pressed up against chemical formulas.

At least, this was the version of events she sold our parents. It wasn't a hard sell—they never watched her long enough to see that Abilene's "studying" really consisted of drawing in the margins of her AP prep book, slamming her head onto the page, bemoaning the futility of chemistry/calculus/physics, and finally falling asleep with her glasses pressed against the freshest doodles.

One night, I asked her how she could accept the praise Mom and Dad gave her for being "such a dedicated student."

"Better to let them think they understand you, sis," she said. "As long as you know something they don't, you're in control."

"If you want to know something they don't, shouldn't you be studying more?"

"What's the point? My acceptance to Hogwarts is coming any day now."

"Harvard."

"Same thing."

Her nonchalance about attending one of the most prestigious universities in the world grated on me as I plodded through her old copy of *The Grapes of Wrath*, part of my vast inheritance as a younger sister: first toys, then clothes, and finally schoolbooks.

My friends said I had an unfair advantage because Abilene, who routinely set the curve on English and math tests alike, had taken all the same classes I was in now and had filled her books with notes. Clearly they had never looked inside her *Grapes of Wrath* book—I'd just come across a page on which Abilene had drawn purple circles with numbers and symbols on them, with the caption, "Grapes of Math."

While I found those and other insightful annotations, Abilene looped furiously in her prep book with two markers at once. "Why aren't you in bed already?" she asked.

"I have a test tomorrow."

"So?"

"So, I have to do well. It's worth 20% of my grade."

"You don't need to study for an English test. Just make up some symbols and talk about—what book is that?—the Dust Bowl."

"Easy for you to say," I wanted to snap back. Abilene "made up some symbols" and her paper became the model for every English class at our school—mine included. I worked hard on my analysis for weeks and my teacher said, "Good try, Abi... Laura," and my parents said, "You might just have to settle for Yale, honey."

But I never snapped at Abilene. It never got to her, which only infuriated me more.

I read by the light of Abilene's old lamp until I heard the sound that meant she was asleep: soft but troubled murmuring. It was usually nonsensical, though sometimes I could make out names.

This was my cue to remove her glasses before she rolled over. She had already shattered two pairs, and if she broke the third my mother said she wouldn't pay for new ones. Abilene didn't have the money. She was saving up for Harvard. Not the actual tuition, just the merchandise—Harvard sweaters and scarves and hats.

All month Abilene had been waiting coolly for her acceptance letter, leafing through the mail with a glimmer in her green eyes. I imagine she looked the same way three weeks ago when she broke up with Bryan, her boyfriend of two years.

To Abilene, the Harvard freshman class would be like an algorithmically filtered pool of eligible bachelors, and if history told us anything, she would have her pick of them. But I suspected that, unlike "4.0 unweighted GPA" and "2300+ SAT score," "ability to deal with Abilene" was not a Harvard admissions criterion. Maybe her ex "only" had a 3.9 and a 2100, but he hit dealing with Abilene out of the park. Bryan knew when to indulge her whims and eccentricities and contradictions, and when to rein them in. Most impressive, he never lost his patience with her. That was more than I could say.

When her friends asked about the breakup, she said: "I'm holding out for a nice Ravenclaw boy." They assumed this was a joke meant to hide the truth: that it would be too difficult to maintain the relationship once she moved to Cambridge. But Abilene wasn't joking, not really. She really believed that at Harvard, she could do better.

I wished I had the same assurance about guys, about college. About anything. I absorbed and repeated her advice back like mantras—never change for someone else; always say what you think; never back down—but somehow I could never perform them with conviction. I hated the strange looks I got when I wore Abilene's old doodled-on jeans, or when I said I didn't like the movie everyone else loved. I wanted to have strong convictions and to stick to them, but the truth was I didn't know what I thought about anything until Abilene, with steady but laughing eyes, laid it out for me.

As I wondered why I'd done it all—why I'd followed advice I didn't understand, read books with notes I hadn't written and wore clothes that didn't quite fit me, not knowing where Abilene ended

and I began—I considered not taking off her glasses at all. It wasn't like she would notice. Besides, with her luck she would probably win a huge scholarship that would render the little chore I'd performed all those nights entirely pointless.

I closed my book and was about to turn off my lamp when Abilene murmured my name. Had she read my mind?

I'd been awake too long.

"Laura," she said again.

"What is it?" I asked.

"You're not going to take my glasses off?" she asked, her face toward the wall.

"You knew I did that?"

"I knew I didn't."

"All right," I said. Her cheek was pressed against a page of her calculus prep book, one about derivatives. Maybe she was trying to tell me something; no matter how much I studied, I would still be a derivative version of her.

Maybe that should have made me angry, but I was too tired. All I could think was that at least she needed me for *something*—I was the only one who could save her glasses. For the night, that was enough.

As I reached out to take the glasses, I felt something wet on the frame. Abilene turned to face me, her eyes red.

"I didn't get in," she whispered. "They sent the rejection weeks ago."

two girls sitting in a church five feet apart
'cause they're not gay

By Nicole Penrod

this is a new kind of holy:
hands palm-up
short fingernails itching
to clack together
and disrupt the quiet
of a droning boredom
undercut by quiet breathing.

haven't you ever wanted someone
so bad it made your teeth hurt?

but queer kids learn young that
just because you want something
doesn't mean you get to have it.
in the bible's shortest verse,
jesus weeps.
there's no time for anything
else in a room like this
with walls like this
and a beating heart like this.

the pastor is
yelling about fire again.
not enough baptisms, i guess,
or enough tears.
even when i used to pray

i never got on my knees
the way i know they all
wanted me to.
brimstone was supposed to
scare me straight
to the hard floors.
it didn't, though.

but hey i don't think
six seconds is
long enough to
talk about my wanting.
imagine my hands leaving
marks in pristine marble
like pressing hard into clay.

i'd like to test my fingertips
against the hot thrum
of her soft pulse.
this is a place
of worship
after all.

childhood bedroom

By Eric Fram

ceiling is the sky
carpet, the Amazon

pink index
hikes the lime green trails
hushes the canopy

day after graduation

By Eric Fram

sneer at sun
 that cracks tangencies
in your tassel
 it's a liminal limelight
a slip of cardstock that ignites
 and fizzles in beach sand
stuff a backpack with teeth
 fly overseas
wish you were a whale
 breaching in international waters
blue above
 and below you
a cloud in horizontal ether
 forever

till mygrain

By Eric Fram

it doesn't do me any good
to be the square peg

the walls chafe my shoulders
I shimmy like a fish
in oil and tin

it's easier to be beginning
or ending or at a line
than to be breeze blown
and slumping in a desert

it's too dry to till my grain
to harvest my soil

the partition of me
opposite the pillar of fire
skids mercilessly over sediment
and bonks heads with drywall

I crumple darkly,
paper clogging a waste bin

the violence on study
truant shatterings
how buildings downtown
show as shards on the map

and the lemon green sting
fiberglasses the paper cuts

cross the line

checking out
beep that's me in the picture
can't you tell

no turn
me
over

regenerate in a garden
with the pottery and the poetry
overhang swatting flies

clearing room for skim tree bark
etched fervent green

I can dig my heels in
this wound of earth
all transfused and fecal
and fertile the brain the grain

pat the soil over my ankles

clasp and root

I grin back down
from up and up stories

Ashes to Ashtrays (Ghazal for the Cig Spokesman)

By Eric Fram

A straining gardenia sprawls agog,
gasping for sweet Marlboro fog.

Here lies the great pioneer of decay
sleeping beneath a sheet of Camel fog.

A veritable Raleigh of human waste
now drifts hot red into Dunhill fog.

He inhaled the fire of Canon flashes
amid scorched earth sighing Kool fog.

He owned a pure gold breathing tube
that lit up with his lip as he farted Juul fog.

And he had the massivest coronary,
a brilliant jet of blood spitting Blu fog!

A spire of silver support beams toppled
when his lung collapsed in a puff of iCloud fog.

He ordered succulent blood to his brain
but his Postmate disappeared in Joyetech fog.

The Ether will never shine with such a hue
as the verdant curl of his Eleaf fog.

So raise your glowing pen for the man
who dozes like a cherub in platinum Halo fog.

I can't see me through my photographs.

By Eric Fram

The bumps on my teeth are better out.
I want to see them
fit under my metal,
mold to my gums
or usurp roots that can't stretch like bubblegum,
reaching to kitty corner until the tooth is lost in dust.

Enjoy the quiet of jaw against air
and my toothskin thinning.
My pyramid snout squeezes blood to tunnel
a cross-sectional or a topographic or a blacklight
view of teeth imprints, gnash on
*should kids have teeth,
deserve teeth, teething process and the arch of flesh over
knee bone crowding ankle joint to chew through?*

My Dad the Photographer

By Abraham Ramirez

After my dad passed away, his will stated that I keep all of his possessions, but he didn't really own much, and I didn't want his stuff. I would be damning myself if I kept any of it.

He lived most of his life in a beat-up studio apartment on the Eastside near Dodger Stadium. He learned photography in Mexico at a young age, and made most of his money in the States taking freelance photographs at events. He and my mother conceived me after they met at a psychedelic cumbia show in the '80s. He was taking photos of the band, *Baile de Muertos*, when she caught his eye. According to him, he was the one who made the first move, he offered her a cigarette while taking a fat drag of his own. But he had already been under her radar. She rejected his cigarette, and pulled out a joint she had hidden in her bra. His mouth opened in surprise and the cigarette fell out. She placed the joint on his lips and lit it. Smooth right? She was a fan of his thick hair and mustache. Back then, it was attractive for men to expose their chest hair by leaving a couple of buttons open on their shirts. She was a fan of his fuzz, and he was a fan of her full lips and voluptuous body. Let's be real. My parents were real superficial. They were just a couple of young adults who wanted to fuck, and they did. I never wanted to know the details of the story, but my dad always found humor in my discomfort.

I lived with my dad throughout high school because my mom enrolled in graduate school and they never married. One Monday morning, while he drove me to high school in his beat-up old Datsun 280zx, he laid the story out for me, "Your mom wanted it, Alex. I'm telling you. It was right after the show. We were high, and we hid ourselves in one of the porta potties. Her panties were basically off

by the time I turned to lock the door, and her tits. Holy shit! They were fucking gorgeous. I made you from scratch, Alex. You came out of my balls that night!”

“Dad, I don’t want to hear this! Don’t talk about mom like that!” I remember yelling at him. He would try and tell me those stories whenever I was attempting to do something constructive. Studying for math, boom the conception story. Working on an art project, boom the conception story. When we were visiting grandma at the nursing home, boom the conception story.

“Robbie, respect your son!” My grandma would complain, and swat my dad on the back of the head. But Dad never listened. He was always a jackass. Because of that, I never looked up to him. His life was pure fun and games, but no responsibility. All he would say to me was, “Alex, stop being such a tight ass.” Then he’d mock my mom using his classic gestures and hand motions, “Don’t be like your mother who’s all like ‘my career this,’ ‘school that.’ She used to be fun, Alex. You have to savor life, son!” That’s when I knew I didn’t want to “savor life” his way. I was a junior in high school then, but I wish I’d realized I didn’t want to be like him sooner.

I had a stack of boxes with my dad’s old belongings outside on the sidewalk for the garbage man to collect. It was mostly clothes. All I had left to pack were the playboy posters he had pinned on the walls, and his camera equipment. His Nikon camera was sitting on the desk. I picked it up to toy around with it. There was a worn out L.A Dodgers sticker on the lens cap that I remember placing there playfully as a twelve year old since Dad was a diehard fan. Dad had taken me out on a couple of his shoots when I was a kid. The first we ever went to together was a time when the Dodgers played the Phillies. The Dodgers had a three-run lead by the seventh inning stretch. He taught me to tinker with the camera on manual mode.

He taught me about the three pillars for good photos: aperture, ISO, and shutter speed. He had me take shots of pretty women in the sections behind us while he drank some Modelo and devoured a Dodger dog. I would wait until the pretty ladies smiled, and I’d fire the shutter then ask, “Like that, Dad?”

“Exactly son, photography is all about the right moment.”

He even had me take photos of the players until the end of the game, so I could get some experience. In the last inning, I waited for the perfect moment. The exact moment when the batter hit a home run. I released the shutter as the bat broke. He was skeptical if I’d taken the right shot, but when he developed the photographs the next day, the shot was there. He ruffled my hair, picked me up, and playfully tossed me in the air. Then told me, “I love you.” That was the only warm memory I have of him. He actually published my photograph in a newspaper, and claimed it as his own.

Another time he took me to shoot was the Red Hot Chili Peppers’ Blood Sugar Sex Magik tour. The caveat was that half of the time he left me in the car to go backstage. He left me with the car keys and a copy of *The Great Gatsby*. Going to those concerts is really what kept him young. He probably felt like a sort of Gatsby himself until the lung cancer killed him. My mom told me after his death that he smoked two packs a day ever since before she knew him and that, “he should have just stuck to pot.” They never really talked much when I was growing up. Mostly, they just shit talked to me about each other. I always took my mom’s side.

He had one drawer in his work desk, the sole thing that was furnished in the apartment since before he lived there, and I found an old album in there. I blew off the dust and flipped it open. There were pictures of my dad in his teenage years in Mexico. He wore colorful tie-dye shirts, aviators, and bell-bottom jeans. One of the

photos showed him surrounded by girls. He had his arms around two of them. I guess even back in Mexico he always had to be the center of attention. I flipped through more of the pages, and thought I found some photos of me. But I recognized the crazy look on the kid's face, and I knew it was my father's, not mine. It was really just a younger version of my dad. In one of them, he stood in front of my grandmother and grandfather. The latter died before I was born. Dad looked just like my grandfather: his dark skin, his stupid smile, his wild eyes. They were identical. We were identical. I flipped to the last page of the album, and a black-and-white photo slipped out. Dad was a child and my grandfather, with a cigar in his mouth, was crouched down next to him. He was handing my dad a camera. Dad had a confused expression on his little face. I guess he was wondering what my grandfather was handing over to him. I flipped the picture over, and my grandfather had written in Spanish: *Roberto, I'm not the best father, but the best lesson I can give you is to capture every moment and savor life.* I chuckled. My grandfather never died. But luckily for me, I wouldn't be a part of their lineage. I took after my mother. I was enrolled in grad school and had a career to look forward to. "Rest in peace, Dad."

On my way out, I hesitated when I thought about tossing the album in the nearest box for the garbage man. I slipped the black-and-white photo in my shirt pocket for safekeeping, then I placed the album neatly in the box and left it there. I walked away from Dad's old apartment with the Nikon camera in hand, hopefully to use it to capture better memories.

Purpose

By Anna Aaryn Khen

You painted him the color of purpose
so that he breathed it from his lips
like a powerful song.

Dear Daedalus,
You weren't wrong
to give him wings—
He touched a piece of sky,
and the stars now sing.

The Dead Are Only Meat

By Elizabeth Han

There are, precisely, forty-two of you crammed in the same household. Only seven can bring in a decent wage. You can do the math. You, in fact, do the math every week, and every week brings the same result: a tally of numbers that tells you that you *do not have enough money*. Not enough to pay tribute to your landlord, not enough to keep everyone clothed and fed and alive.

It was tolerable before, when there were more protector-children around, old enough to be seen as adults and strong enough to work. It should be the protector-children who have to figure out how to manage it all.

And then all of them caught *hunger-plague*.

You are not a protector-child. You're barely more than a hostage-child yourself. This does not stop you from being the most responsible person left, which means that all of this is *your* problem.

...

The infected protector-children devour what they're given, gorge themselves on more and more until they're eating over four times their usual portion. And still they remain gaunt, all thin wrists and protruding ribs and hollow eyes as their bellies demand *more*.

"I don't suppose I could get a second helping?" Sunni asks, peering at her perfectly empty bowl. You saw her wolf down the contents and lick it clean.

"Sorry. There's no more," you say. Soon, there is never any more. You learn to glut yourself on well-water to quiet your rumbling belly. The already-small portions you dole out get smaller with every day. Eventually, they will dwindle down to nothing.

One day, when there's particularly little to eat, you watch Sunni

bring the bowl up to her face and bite into the rim, rip out a piece with her teeth to swallow whole.

You avert your eyes.

...

It's not just Sunni.

Someone has been gnawing on the walls, nibbling right into the wattle and daub. There's the shape of teeth imprinted deep into ceramic, bites taken out of clothing and candles. Slowly, the household becomes covered in toothmarks.

...

Six protector-children die in the next three weeks.

...

You drop to your knees, forehead to the ground, face in the dirt, and beg.

"*Please*. I'll do anything."

You've been repeating that sentence for two months straight. Every charity and temple you can find, every person willing to stop and listen. You've picked up every scrap that they've thrown at you, but there's only so much people will offer, and it's not enough.

You're all slowly dying. There's not enough food to satisfy the youngest hostage-child, let alone any of the infected, who all want more than they can possibly earn.

You hear your landlord step forward, close enough that you can feel her foot nudge your fingers. "We already struggle on donations," Priestess Agathe says, her voice unreadable. "We don't have much to spare. You'd be better off begging any other temple."

"I'll do anything," you repeat. "*Please*, I'll do anything."

You feel her bend down to your level, lean in until her breath brushes against your hair. "*Anything?*" she says.

...

The first time you kill a man is because someone told you to.

You pivot away from the falling body with all the perfect grace a protector-child should have. The knife is steady in your hands as you wipe the blade clean. He had been surprised. No one expects a child-killer.

There's something sour bubbling in your throat. This isn't right. That man probably had friends, lovers, family. This *is not right*.

But when you get back home, there is a steaming basket of fresh bread waiting. Absolutely unaffordable, and yet -

"Priestess Agathe dropped it off," Sorri pipes up. "She's really nice, isn't she?"

You smile. "She is."

The bread is warm in your hands. You feel sick.

...

Prissa snaps at your fingers when you hand her dinner. You jerk back before she draws blood, and watch her tear at the food, all bared teeth and rabid hunger. When it's done, she stiffens, turns her miserable, horrified stare at you. "Sorry," she blurts out. "I'm just..."

She's still licking at the grease on her lips. Her hands twitch to where you know she's stashed the pebbles she's been stuffing in her mouth.

"Hungry," you finish tiredly. You are, too. There's a void in your belly, growing every day, and you drink more water than ever to try and fill it.

Two more weeks. Six more children dead.

...

Second, third, fourth, fifth. Night after night, a flash of a shiny, sharpened blade. You exhale, cock your head at the rapidly cooling bodies at your feet. There's no spark of intelligence in their eyes, no indication that they were anything other than hunks of meat.

You know it's supposed to feel wrong. And it does, a little bit.

But there's only so much guilt you can feel when it's something that lets everyone make it to the next meal.

Absentmindedly, you stick the hilt of your knife in your mouth. By the time you get home, there are splinters of wood and metal on your tongue and a far shorter blade in your hand.

You pay it no mind.

...

"The hunger doesn't kill us," Rekke tells you thoughtfully, watching you nurse your water-bucket. "It's just that once we run out of food, we start eating *other* things. If we can watch that, we'll be fine."

You nod as best you can with your teeth against the rim of your bucket, but as you chew, you think privately that she's being too optimistic. The portions are bigger, but still too small for an infected protector-child's appetite, so you aren't even surprised when you catch her biting into a tree branch a week later, ripping into the bark with manic fervor.

...

There are no birds or rats or vermin of any kind around the household anymore, which is...disturbing, to say the least. The protector-children must have been - well. At least it's technically edible.

You wipe the blood off your desk before it can stain your paper. You do your best to dislodge the feathers and fur stuck between your teeth as you write up the budget for the week. The bones crunch pleasantly in your mouth.

...

Bodies six, seven, eight, nine, *ten*.

It can't be that hard to move them, but for some reason, people don't bother disposing of your kills until they start rotting. By then, it's a messy business for anyone.

How many pounds is an adult man, anyway? How much of that is muscle and fat and bone? How many mouths would it feed? How *good* would it taste, roasted slowly over a fire? Or maybe dropped in a stew, boiled until tender, bones scraped for marrow?

Everyone would thank you, if you came back with your arms full of fresh meat. There's so much of it here that it'd be a feast. Everyone could eat their fill -maybe the protector-children might even feel full for once.

Your mouth is watering. You are so hungry.

The hostage-children are starting to get hungry, too.

Everyone needs to be fed.

...

Number eleven turns the corner and you lunge.

Eleven struggles, but its movements are so *slow*, so clumsy. It can't dislodge you, can't stop you from lowering your head to the throat and biting down.

You almost sob at the taste. It's just as good as you'd thought it'd be.

Supermarket in Santa Monica

By Johnathan Lovett

*Fluorescents shoeshine my Shop
Local badge. My shoulder tote sags
fair trade coffee bags.*

Here I think of all that is super:
the man, the ego, this store, this man
these chocolate raisin samples
I halfheartedly resist, toeing the line
between my personal illusions
& the mango stand.

What thoughts of things
I do not have tonight

apart from self loathing in the plantain aisle
raspberries whisper I should get a lobotomy
it is not a half bad idea
like the half off half good coconut halves.

Is it obvious my cart I mean tote is full
of fishbones & fingernails ?

Did I mention nightshades don't sit
well within my shadows?

Did I mention my shoulder tote busks
for compliments?

It says I am a liberal, I killed my brother Remus
would do it again for more
raisins?

Did you know these machine wash
conflict free tank tops mean this is a hypermarket?

I mean it's actually a superhypermarket
it sells food items, clothing items
& my shame items.

Against the meat counter I lean offended
the cleaver asked how much of me
I want to take home; I tell her two pounds.

I tell Garcia Lorca those watermelons
are for fucking eating.
A worm eaten lettuce leaflet
means I consider eating worms tonight,
forces me to consider paying in
stolen nonunion cash & nonunion
Roman coins borrowed from Aeneas,
a worker named Alias
he pronounces Elias
wears gladiator sandals, heavy cargo
short shorts draped over tawny shins
hard crusty locks hang
the question

What do you search for?

I ask
are you my angel?
do you carry SPAM?
or my tour guide
sent from the underworld?

I need to find where to find
where those juicy Roma tomatoes came from
& where my structural guilt comes from.

Guided thru soup cans
past nightmare beets
& nightstalker cabbage
down aisle of bread styx
I pay a dread haired woman
named Karen—or was it Sharon?
six hundred thirty six cents
& thirty cents more
for nine plastic bags.

Girls in their Summer Clothes

By Taylor Leigh Harper

They hadn't planned on getting back in the pool after the sun set, but the girls stayed out. The water was lukewarm late into the evening. Near the deep end, Meg dipped her legs in. Rebecca sat cross-legged up on a plastic picnic table, spinning a lighter between her fingers. The twins, Sally and Donna, lay down on the damp concrete. There was no one else at the pool. Meg caught Rebecca's eye.

"How bad are your blisters?" Rebecca asked her, snapping the Zippo closed.

Meg took her feet out of the water. Her heels cracked and rubbed raw from her shoes. She'd worn them earlier without socks for the first day of school. Already two sores ballooned on the back of her ankles.

"They're not too bad, not yet."

Rebecca kicked her sandals off. "My feet are mangled. There's blood all over my Oxfords."

"Ours, too," Sally said, standing with her sister. They grabbed their ankles, bending their legs backward to make evident their wounds in the dark.

Tradition held that at the start of the new school year, all the senior girls wore loafers without socks. They'd have blisters on their heels for weeks. The pea-sized bubbles would pop again and again and occasionally become infected. They'd pass bandages to one another in class and under bathroom stalls. Only when a scar formed, however faint or small, were they allowed to wear socks again. Each girl was marked in this way before graduating.

"It's a stupid tradition," Rebecca said.

"Pointless."

"Bullshit."

Meg also stood, her legs numb. "All traditions are bullshit." She inhaled, sniffing for a scent of the magnolia trees, their sweetness somewhere under the chlorine. "But it's our rite as seniors, finally. A ritual of transmission. Or whatever."

Rebecca stepped closer to the water. "I can't believe that's it."

"It's barely August," Sally said.

"It shouldn't be legal for class to start this early," Donna said.

"That's not what I meant to say at all." Rebecca's bathing suit had soaked through her cotton shirt. In the pool light, her skin was green gossamer. "Our last summer. It's over."

"We've still got one more." Meg scratched her neck. She cut her hair short at the start of summer. Now, her hair was at that awkward mid-length: hovering just above her shoulders, the ends flipped out and frizzing. She wasn't sure whether to trim it again or keep growing it out.

"It won't be the same."

The twins mumbled something about needing to go home soon. Tomorrow was the first Mass of the school year. They had to be there early to help set up the altar. They would all wear their shoes without socks again.

Something buzzed. Meg couldn't tell if the high-pitched whine was a distant cicada or the lights outside the bathrooms. The night was turning indigo. "I wouldn't mind staying here."

Rebecca held Meg's gaze from across the pool. "Me neither." She set her lighter down on an unused towel. Then she ran toward the deep end, and with her shorts still on, dove in screaming.

"Get in! Come on! Get back in the pool!"

Sally and Donna hollered, forgetting the time, following the leader, soaking their linen dresses. The girls called to Meg, chanting

her name, teasing, *chickenshit, horseshit, babyshit!* But she stayed sitting beside the pool. She'd already dried her body off and she didn't want to get wet again.

Rebecca splashed Donna, who dunked Sally, and they were all underwater, pulling one another down and up, their cries spat with chlorine, their noses dripped with snot. They exhausted themselves in minutes. The clothes over their bathing suits weighed them down. Donna's dress wrapped around her legs, its gauze transparent. Sally spread out her hem with her palm flat against the water's surface. Rebecca shimmied out of her shorts and threw them out of the pool, an abrupt quiet following the smack of drenched denim on the ground next to Meg. After the initial excitement, the girls floated, their legs straight, arms outstretched, bodies taut like crosses.

That's what Meg would miss: that shared silence, the stillness. The summer had passed over them weightlessly, like sunlight through an open window. And now this night, too, was almost over. Meg didn't care about being dry anymore. She wanted to say she was sorry: about their blisters, for the blood.

Someone started to cry. Quietly, at first, then louder, uglier, more childishly. Meg looked at her friends on their backs, bellies heaving toward the blacked-out sky, and there they cried, because they were reckoning with the end of the night, because soon they'd have to leave, first the pool, then home, then one another, because they loved each other the way friends do at the end of high school, with resolve, remorse, grace. But Meg couldn't cry. Her throat ached, and her tongue tingled, but she felt as if she were slightly behind her own head, her body dull and heavy. She felt an uncoupling then, like she was watching herself among her friends, looking in on a smoky scene from a dry and separated distance. The impermanence of things tactile as the sky darkened still, as the air grew just slightly cooler.

Meg stood over the pool, the divide between the poolside and the water too deep to tread. She rushed to take her shorts off. Her heel hurt. Before she could slide in, Rebecca reached up for Meg's hand. She needed help getting out. Rebecca's fingers were slippery and cool against Meg's sweaty palm. The twins swam to the ladder and climbed out quickly and, not saying a word, went to grab their things. Rebecca towed herself slowly, and when she was dry, she slung her wet shorts over her shoulder and shrugged, shaking the whole thing off, leaving that fear and affection in the water. The night resettled into its silence. Sally and Donna unlocked the gate, which jammed upon opening it. While the twins squeezed through the metal frame, Rebecca linked arms with Meg.

"Now I'm ready to go."

Rebecca wiped her eyes and smiled, her lips blue in the dark. She went through the gate before Meg. On the other side, the girls were waiting to walk back, their clothes wringing wet. Standing alone, Meg looked back at the pool. The water was motionless, as if it hadn't been touched at all.

Is there balm in Gilead?

By Jemma Tan

The street, our concrete ashtray of
leaves flaked off leprous trees,
crunched under pedestrian traffic.
All the right kinds of vulgar.

A man shouts into his phone
a language I only half-comprehend
(he is not angry; that is just
how Shanghainese sounds).

We laugh behind air masks,
filtering the fragrances
of sweet potato and sewage
and No. 1 Pho and aged parmesan and

twenty-six million sensations
of hopeful fragments and me,
attempting at recollection—
crunched under pedestrian traffic

and time. I see you again, halfway
across the world, in London and LA,
any place but home.
Hello old friend, comrade, receptacle,

Pandora's box, vessel of a life buried
beneath this frenzied Pacific.
Remind me again of what we shared,
in a language I only half-comprehend.

Is this a drill?

By Jemma Tan

This fire escape leads nowhere,
but no matter that,
as long as it gets us out.

In the event of an emergency,
it is perfectly acceptable to abandon
all responsibilities. So, call it that.

This week's groceries, yesterday's
homework, last year's mistakes—
leave them where we found them

and go. That's allowed now.
Of course, sometimes, it is not a fire.
Instead, it is an unwatched kettle,

a drunk frat boy with itchy fingers,
sometimes, it is a test.
Just to check if we are ready;

but, at 3AM, nobody is.
Tonight, the sirens have decided
to sing. Alarmed, I fall

out of bed, half-caught in dreams,
and search among the upstream

for a face already gone.

25 Reasons Mexican Kids Can't Prosper

By Karen Castillo

Juan Felipe Herrera, you told it how it is.

* * *

Because we were raised on tequila instead of breast milk.
Because we played with *canicas* instead of board games, even when
it was raining.
Because we climbed lemon trees like our ancestors were climbing
fronteras through us.
Because the grass stains on our pant knees predisposed us to crawling.
Because we had so many tortillas that we're growing as fast as the
maiz does.
Because Factory 2 U clothes didn't make you popular in elementary
school.
Because our *abuelitas* said to go to "escool" instead of school.
Because brand name Lunchables were too expensive for a *criada*
mother and *jardinero* father.
Because our counselors helped us get high school diplomas but not
university acceptances.
Because the too-white and too-dark kids weren't mixed enough for
la raza cosmica.
Because there are so many brown kids that we're a blob instead of
individual faces.
Because we were told to get better jobs than our parents but never
given the tools for them.
Because our government contemplates taking our documents since
our parents have none.
Because we're too short to reach white professional positions.

Because we love our *mamás* more than a 9-to-5 job.
Because we love *rancheras* more than the Pledge of Allegiance.
Because there are no accents allowed in the U.S despite this being
native land.
Because we were told that our race was conquered, not *conquistador*.
Because our skin looks like the soil stolen from our ancestors.
Because we've become the majority, but there's still a trace of
Malinche blood in us.
Because they'd rather have us as pack mules instead of presidents.
Because our hands look better holding *machetes* instead of college
degrees.
Because they'd rather us kill each other in the streets instead of
them doing it directly.
Because our *sicario* relatives are more immoral than racist,
murdering cops.
Because you can still hear *El Grito* every time we say our last names.

Other Daddies Aren't Like This

By Sherry Shahan

In 1957, Daddy drove a short-bed pickup.

I was eight years old. No more than fifty pounds, standing a head above the handlebars on my scooter. My frizzy hair had its own rules, so I'd given up the pink plastic barrettes popular with other third graders. At least I wasn't mean, not yet.

We'd just moved into our first real house, in a suburb of San Fernando Valley. No air conditioner. It felt airless even with the windows open. The screens kept out most things that crawled. Having a garage was another first.

The rooms quietly took Daddy's side, sopping up beer and cigarette smoke.

Mom was a cashier at Thrifty Drugs: *Save a nickel. Save a dime. Save at Thrifty every time.* She must've felt so trapped. Twenty-five, working full-time, with two young kids.

She'd sit on my bed after a late shift to catch up on things. "How was school, honey?" "Did you memorize your spelling list?" "Have you made any new friends?"

Meals—spaghetti or mac and cheese—appeared from nowhere. English muffin pizzas were my favorites. Thin slices of hot dogs slapped on a muffin half, heaped with American cheese and broiled bubbly.

Those rare times when Daddy played *Father Knows Best*, he took me to Will Rogers State Beach, over curvy Topanga Canyon with its sheer, drop-off cliffs. No Botts' dots back then to warn drivers when they drifted into oncoming traffic. But Daddy never drove faster than the speed limit. Not because he loved me so much, but because he didn't want to get pulled over.

One day, he swung me into the bed of his truck with its low sidewalls and dented tailgate. His beer breath smelled crisp because a can of Schlitz had just been opened. Or maybe it was because he'd sliced green apples for breakfast.

Daddy's truck had that bitter hot metal stench, like sucking an electrified penny. No seat belts back then. No kid car seats or any other kind of safety restraints.

I loved riding on the sheet of cardboard that Daddy set down in the bed. Every time he hit the gas I skidded feet-first into the tailgate, never thinking the hinges might bust loose. I slid the other way when he braked, slamming into the back of the cab. Free-fall fun.

The hot wind brushed my face as I imagined myself in infinite adventures: Nancy Drew solving crimes; an orphan girl in *Rin Tin Tin*; Perry Mason's secret assistant.

I looked for the cave beyond the gulley on the north side of the road. We'd driven past it dozens of times that summer and I imagined horned beasts living inside. I fantasized about meeting them.

In my dreams, it seemed to be the middle of the night but then it could've been dawn. There were voices, but they weren't scary. I liked having company. Sometimes the cave beasts crept into those dreams. I never saw their faces, but they made me think of someone god-like.

I'd gone to Sunday school a few times with my grandparents, so I had a fuzzy idea of what went on in heaven and hell.

The dreams made me feel special, because when I was dreaming, I wasn't myself, but someone else, someone important. The beasts told me I had to help save the world.

The day is coming. It's time to go to the cave and battle the Evil Ones.

I didn't have to ask which cave. It was the one just before the traffic light on Pacific Coast Highway.

Daddy parked parallel to shore, ten or so feet above a sea of glistening sunbathers. The breeze was a mixture of tanning lotions, all promising the deepest, darkest shade.

He got out of the truck, ignoring cars rushing by. "Look at this." He showed me a rubber mask. "Our little secret, okay?"

His secrets bored into my skin, wiggled into blood and bone, growing where no one could see. "Okay, Daddy."

"That's my girl!"

He rolled the mask, stuck it in the waistband of his trunks, and lifted me over the tailgate. I turned my face because he'd been sweating beer and it reminded me of the time I threw up sour ball candies.

Daddy held my hand, a beach bag flung over his shoulder. Chunks of quartz winked at me from slabs of granite. Diamonds sparkled on the water. I inhaled the fruit cocktail smell of suntan lotion.

We staked a patch of sand with our towels. I clapped my hands when I saw the bag of Laura Scudder's potato chips, then set pebbles on the corners of my towel so they wouldn't flip up and throw sand in my eyes.

Daddy kissed the top of my head. "You're going to like this."

He took off, zigzagging around sunbathers, bright plastic pails and shovels, and a drip-sandcastle I wish I'd made because I loved wet sand oozing through my fingers.

Daddy stepped into the swirling foam, his feet drowning first, then calves and knees. He had a fairy-tale relationship with the Pacific Ocean. He could drink like a fish and the waves just rolled him around before dumping him on shore. He warned me about riptides and undertows. But they never scared me.

I knew about finding something fixed on shore, like a house or car, and trying to stay lined up with it. Anytime I was carried too far, I'd get out of the water and walk back up the beach. I once dove into a sand-churning wave, spit out a hundred yards away. The water was never cold enough to make me gasp. Or I was just too tough to gasp.

Now he pushed through waves, buoyant with beer, and bounced toward a trio of girls who looked older than me, maybe in junior high. He bobbed closer, keeping his back to them like he might be waiting to catch a wave.

I dipped into the bag of chips and put one on my tongue. It sort of melted, leaving the burn of salt. Daddy ducked underwater, probably to put on his mask. He came up slowly, water dripping from his devil face.

There were screams, so many, and so loud they filled the inside of my chest. I wanted to scream back to show the girls I was on their side. They beat it to dry land, running down the beach, bawling until their voices gave out.

The lifeguard never left his post.

I crunched a mouthful of shame, acting like I didn't know Daddy when he trudged back to his towel. He'd taken off the mask, but not really.

He dropped it on my towel like a cat with a headless prize. I didn't want it.

"I really scared them," he said, tilting his head to drain water from an ear. "That might be my greatest performance ever. What do you think, honey?"

I wondered if the potato chip bag would fit over my head. "You should be in the movies, Daddy."

"Haven't I always said that?"

I didn't tell Mom about his stupid prank or drinking beer in

the truck or the other things I knew. Even at eight, I didn't want to be a tattletale. Daddy got into enough trouble on his own.

I only had one friend when we lived in our first-ever house, because the other mothers in our neighborhood didn't want their children playing with the daughter of the man who didn't work and drank beer all day. And they didn't want their kids hanging around the daughter of a woman who worked full-time and left her children with the good-for-nothing drunk.

My best friend, Alice, was eight like me and had to sneak to my house while her mom pinned hand-rung sheets to the clothesline. We huddled on the side of the garage, licking pink frosting off circus animal cookies before biting their heads off.

I told her about the beasts in my dreams with their pointy horns and pitchfork tails. "They live in the cave in the canyon," I said, trading two monkeys for her lion. "They say the world is going to explode."

She liked the monkey best because it wore pants. "I know all about that."

"Bet you don't know we have to fight the Evil Ones."

"Sure I do," she said. "I've had the same dream."

I still had a sliver of trust, so I believed her. Besides, she was the one who told me Santa Claus was a big, fat lie. But I still put my baby teeth under my pillow for the Tooth Fairy.

We kept eating and talking about saving the world.

One day, we packed snacks in our paisley bandanas and knotted them to sticks, because we'd been third-grade hobos for Halloween.

"The sticks will be our swords," she said, like the whole thing had been her idea.

I sharpened the end of my stick on the sidewalk until it was pointy and hid my satchel behind the garage. We planned to sneak

out in the middle of the night when everyone in our houses would be asleep.

"I got a Mickey Mouse alarm clock for my birthday," she said, but not in a braggy way. "I'll put it under my pillow, so it won't make noise."

I unhooked the screen after my mom tucked me in. She might've reached down and touched my face or hair. Or maybe that's what I wanted her to do. But she always rubbed stinky perfume on my thumbs so I wouldn't suck them. And I always dipped them in the glass of water on my dresser to wash it off.

In my licorice-black room, I jolted upright to Alice's *tap, tap, tap* on my window. I wiggled from the nightgown covering my play clothes, and crept across the braided rug on the hardwood floor, trying not to bump walls and furniture.

Alice stood on her tiptoes to help pull me over the windowsill. We crept to the garage, shouldered our hobo sticks, and left the tidy blocks of tract houses with street lamps. No maps needed. I knew the stop signs, traffic signals, and left and right turns all the way.

The cave must've been fifteen or more miles away, but we didn't think about how far we'd have to walk or how we'd fight the Evil Ones once we got to the cave. I played Nancy Drew and she became sassy Bess.

Neighborhoods slept while we gave stop signs the finger and ignored crosswalks. Alice, however, looked both ways before running from one side of Canoga Avenue to the other. No houses or sidewalks on this stretch. Just dozens of orange trees hurling dappled shadows.

Another five or six streets before we came to Topanga Canyon—the wide boulevard that would eventually lead under the overpass of the Ventura Freeway, before winding upward into the

canyon. Eucalyptus trees grew as straight as our class lining up for the library.

Alice slowed, holding her stick with both hands. "Are you scared?"

"No," I lied.

We were four or five miles from home by then. Even when riding in the back of Daddy's truck this length of Topanga seemed to go on and on. I snatched a eucalyptus leaf off the ground and tore it in two. The minty smell reminded me of Mom dabbing Vicks under my nose when I got a stuffy head.

It grew colder when the sky began to lighten. I longed for my zip-up jacket, but the hood had bunny ears and made me look like a baby.

"Look!" I pointed at the freeway a half-mile or so ahead. "We're really close to the cave now."

Liar, liar, pants on fire! The cave was at the far end of the canyon, another ten or so miles away.

"I'm hungry," she said. "Can we stop for a snack?"

"It's a good thing you're brave," I told her. "Because I heard your mom tell my mom she thought we'd be better off in an orphanage."

She didn't ask to stop again.

There weren't any buildings or trees to hide behind on this stretch, just empty fields. "We need to be invisible," I said.

"How do we do that?"

"Pretend you're inside a bubble."

She didn't look so sure.

Pretending didn't shield us from a black-and-white cop car. I flashed Alice a hairy eyeball. "Play dumb."

The tires crunched over gravel, slowing.

"Remember, we're invisible."

Alice's lips began to quiver. "I don't want to get in trouble."

The car stopped, a door slammed. An officer called to us.

"What are you two doing out here?"

I was determined not to betray the beasts. "Nothing," I said.

"Do you live around here?" he asked.

There weren't any houses for miles around. "Just down the street."

The officer opened the back door of his car. "Get in and we'll take you home."

That's when I saw another officer, eyeing us from the passenger's seat.

"I bet you can show us where you live," he said, concerned.

I clutched my hobo stick, vowing not to let him take us alive. But we didn't have a choice, not really. Besides, riding in a cop car was the kind of thing I could talk about during sharing-time, which happened right after lunch because our teacher needed an extra break.

I scooted across the backseat with an eye-rolling *humph*. Alice followed quietly, hands clasped in her lap. We didn't talk or look at each other, just stared at wavy reflections in our personal windows.

"Your address, young lady," the first officer said.

I leaked it and he followed the same route we'd taken in the dark, only backwards, from end to start. The light bar must've been on, because prisms of red and blue slashed my house when we pulled up.

Alice stayed in the backseat while the first officer held my hand and walked me up the front walkway. He rapped on the screen door, and the screen, in turn, rapped against the inner wooden door. An echo, *Wake up in there!*

Mom opened the door in her bathrobe, trembling in the flush of the porch light, the pattern of the screen a crosshatch on her

face. She pushed at the screen door, but instead of opening it to let us in, she stumbled back into the living room.

She must've thought the cops had come for Daddy.

"Mrs. Webb?" The officer squeezed my hand. "We picked up your daughter and her friend several miles away. It looks like they were running away."

I yanked my hand back. "We were going to the cave to fight the Evil Ones!"

Mom opened the screen door and knelt down. "Are you okay, honey?"

I slipped into her arms because a hug when you're feeling unlovable is the best kind.

We swayed a little and she kissed my cheeks. "You two were out there in the dark?" she asked.

"I wasn't scared." I should've been dog-tired, but I wasn't. I didn't even care that I'd scuffed my only good pair of shoes.

"Let me know if you need anything," the officer said to Mom. He then looked at me. "You too, little one. Call anytime."

"I left my hobo stick in your car."

"I'll set it on the porch," he said.

"Mommy?" I scooted back to see if my body had left an imprint on her robe. "The cave beasts are going to be *mad* that I didn't show up!"

"What beasts?"

"Daddy knows! He can drive me!"

"Not now, honey. He's asleep."

I ignored her, charging into their room. Daddy slept on his back, a bare arm stretched above his head. "Daddy! Wake up!" He moaned, leaking beer breath. "I have to go to the cave!"

Mom coaxed me away with the worst ever lies. "Everything's going to be okay, honey. Daddy got a job." Then, "How about

poached eggs and fried Spam?"

I loved Spam and the tiny key that hooked over the thin sliver of metal. And I loved twisting the key and hearing the sucking noise of salty-jelly, just pink enough to know a pig had been pulverized before being squeezed into a tiny tin. "Okay."

"That's a good girl."

My shoes clicked across the kitchen linoleum, and I scrambled into my chair, picking at a cigarette burn on the top of the Formica table.

What happened next wasn't altogether unexpected. Foreclosure on the house with our first-ever garage. Daddy observed moving day by uncapping whiskey for breakfast, pouring it into his endless hole, while packing his pickup for the fifteen-minute move from Canoga Park to Panorama City, closer to Mom's work.

The bed of the pickup was a pyramid of furniture and hastily taped boxes. Mom wasn't around that day because, apparently, she volunteered for every overtime shift in the land of minimum wage. But that isn't fair. I'm sure she would've worked less if Daddy had worked at all.

I rode in the front with Daddy, sharing the seat with a six-pack. My doll, Carol Sue, sat in my lap, her straight legs in an unladylike "V." Daddy drove with a middle finger, as if to say f-u to anyone in his way. "Open a beer for me—will you, honey?"

"Sure, Daddy."

He passed a church key from the rolled-up sleeve of his t-shirt. The metal was sweaty hot. I poked a perfect triangle in the can and a second, smaller hole to let in air. Thanks, Daddy, for teaching me that.

He then drove with his knees, punching buttons on the radio. KFWB spun Elvis' "Jailhouse Rock." Daddy knew all the words:

“The warden threw a party in the county jail...” He didn’t sing any better than he drank.

Daddy made an abrupt left-hand turn, dropping into park before fully stopping in front of a burger joint. We ate 19-cent cheeseburgers and 25-cent shakes on a ring-shaped concrete picnic table, dredging 10-cent fries through a swamp of catsup.

Our new two-bedroom rental house had butt-ugly carpet and the most endangered species of wood paneling. It reeked of cigarette smoke, cat pee, and Glade Air Freshener. I imagined the former tenants sinking into a Barcalounger and snuffing Lucky Strikes on Melmac dinnerware. The place deserved death by sledgehammer.

A spring on one side of the garage door was busted, so I walked up the unhinged door, dragging a twin-size bed sheet with me. I knew I could fly, because I flew all the time in my dreams. Floating from above, a chilling breeze on my face.

I figured flying was my best chance to escape signs of trouble with Daddy.



Una Maldición

By Yesenia Perez

There were nights when mi papá
would tell stories to no one in particular.
After pensive days of puro pinche trabajo,
he would think of his mother.

I knew her as una bruja, a hard woman used by men
who sought adventure in her once bright eyes.
When speaking of her, my father became a ghost
whose need for tenderness would foreshadow my own.

Mi querida mamá would tell me stories of faraway lands
and princesas, hoping to preserve my innocence.
Something in her heart pierced mine, a determination
to love, live, and endure.

Enchanted by the wonder, the warmth in her voice
I didn't realize she was already preparing me
for the fight against la maldición.

Mi hermano was the most vulnerable.
His tristeza was felt deeply in the air
we struggled to breathe.

Our papá, refusing (or unable) to address the heaviness
of his son's sighs, his stance, his eyes,
could only speak in clichés and lewd jokes.

Our mamá, too anguished by the defeat in his voice,
could only hold him in her frantic arms,
hoping her caresses could reach his broken heart.

From time to time I catch a glimpse
of that same tristeza in the unknowing,
searching eyes of children, and I wonder—
who would I be if I continued it?

Blue Tinted Glasses

By Yesenia Perez

Unpunctuated tears
and distilled love—
warm, wet kisses
travel
down
her neck.

A sense
of remoteness
pours into
her limbs,

so she tries
numbing it with
the lazy tip
of her tongue.

A jagged
ravenous
heart
with rotten
roots

Betrayed
by crescent eyes
and idle lips.

Tell her
every truth—
or lie—
she needs
and wants
to hear,

all the tenderness
her murky,
cramped mind
considers

an afterthought.

A Portrait of Two Women Weaving

By Lauren Finkle

My Philomela, cursed never to speak and only to show, so you weave with your fingers a story of love in shadow. From the start, the thing between us belongs to basements and empty rooms, shying away from windows where the light slips in, and the neighbors can see.

The first time you come home with me for Thanksgiving break, you are my “best friend” and so my mother makes up the queen size bed in my old room and lets us share it without a second thought. And when the door closes and it is late at night, your arms and legs twine around me to make up for the space that separates us in the sunlit hours, and we are not at all like best friends.

The second time you come home with me, we are getting reckless. We are just beginning to realize that things left in the dark will die, and so we are speaking out against our silence with soundless mouths. We hold hands at prayer before meals and never let go beneath the table; you use your left hand to hold your fork and end up spilling food in your lap, but still your right palm rests against mine.

I never do find out how my parents learn that you are so much more than my best friend. It simply happens one day, the phone call that cuts out your tongue and tears our tapestry to shreds. The threats of tuition withdrawn, a bank account emptied, and our family pictures cut and quartered carry across the telephone wires like thread unraveling, amongst hushed curses and *with another girl, what could you possibly be thinking?* repeated over and over again. I know that I’ll always remember the tremor of your jaw, the way you look at me like we are holding the ruins of Rome in our hands

and wondering how we will rebuild with all this broken marble. I remember saying goodbye, your tears on my skin and your salmon-colored blouse that swims beneath the clutch of my fingers.

And now, my Philomela, I sit in an empty dorm with a full bank account and think about where you are. I plan our revenge and then grow scared. And so I am condemned to feel your absence like a missing tongue, the space you used to fill raw and red, and to probe the wounded flesh until it bleeds again.

bakersfield

By Lauren Finkle

children with cracked almond mouths,
brush fires in their eyes
and rivers running down their cheeks
from holes in the ozone layer.
sunsets last forever in this place,
and the cities across the fields
are burnt out candles next to the fluorescing highway.
the children run down the railroad tracks,
cornstalk hair peeling off their scalps
and falling into the rails,
where the rain will tear apart the yellow.
the smell of manure inescapable
woven into the fabric of the lawn chair
on the front porch,
buried deep in their eye sockets.
the children eat jerky from the gas station,
their hands a lonely sunburn scar
against the fields.
they run, run,
run as fast as the few cars on the broken roads
and catch bugs in their mouths.



i, 5

By Pooja Tripathi



Jungle of the Heart

By Lynda Smith Hoggan

I haven't had a lover for six months when you arrive in my life. It's not that I intended to be celibate, just that I no longer have the patience for bad sex. Bad sex is any sex that doesn't let me kiss, doesn't care if I come, doesn't look me in the eye tomorrow, doesn't ask for some part of the dance to begin again.

While I have no patience for bad sex, whatever willingness I once had for recreational sex is gone, too. I'm almost forty, and I want to have a baby. I want to have my man and our baby. I want to give and receive love. I want a normal life.

In the meantime, while I wait, my life is not exactly normal. I've always lived a bit outside the crowd. Maybe it started when I was four and my mother caught me pulling down my pants for some little boys on the block. It wasn't my idea; they asked, and I complied. Momma spanked me, and with each whack she growled, "Are you going to do that again?" I glared back over my shoulder at her and cried, "Yes!"

My mother had been a teenage rebel herself; maybe that's what she was trying to spank out of me. It didn't work; by the time I got to college, my rebellions became more extreme. Some were still socially acceptable in the right circles—civil rights protester, peace marcher. But eventually I was rappelling down a rabbit hole with sex and drugs when I realized that my peers were headed back up, passing me by to get married and have babies. I'd had lovers, but they were guerrilla lovers like me. Rebels and guerrillas aren't made for spouses and children: we all ran for the hills as soon as the bullets started flying.

I was climbing my way out, working at a sex education program in a free clinic and looking at graduate schools, when I learned about surrogate partner therapy. It drew me for the reason it draws most of us: Feminism and experience had allowed me to celebrate my libido with its sly secrets and sweet surprises; I thought maybe I could help others do the same.

In the training I learned how little of it is about sex. As one surrogate said, "All therapy is sex therapy, and all sex therapy is intimacy therapy." What the work really involves is coaxing scared men to lose their fears. The world could certainly do with fewer scared men. I was mentored by surrogates both older and younger than I, some with more education and some with less. What they seemed to have in common was a generosity of spirit that I seldom saw elsewhere. Over the years, on a part-time basis, I worked about a dozen cases. And when my biological clock started ticking, I began looking for that future family of my own.

It's not easy for a surrogate partner. Some potential mates fear the sexual pleasures they think we'll have; others, more astute, worry about the emotional connections. I thought I found the one, but it turned out that he was scared, too. Even though I retired my hands for him, he left anyway. I decided that I was free to take on a new case again.

Now, here I sit with you in your therapist's Los Angeles office. You've come all the way from your Brazilian coast to our American west, seeking this brand of pioneer. You probably don't know that this treatment paradigm goes back to the 1960s; that famed sex researchers Masters and Johnson identified the dysfunctions of sex that maim self-esteem and rend relationships; and that they trained surrogates to serve as cooperative partners for single clients. All you know is that you found the website for the modern organization. It looked valid, said something about training and a code of ethics.

It said I would teach you how to communicate, touch, and create intimacy. You just hoped that I would be kind, and maybe pretty.

You're "desperate." You've tried "everything." Yet you cannot make love. Your hope is to overcome this problem so that one day you can have a woman of your own, and then a family. You're only twenty-six, yet this is your last stop before invasive implant surgery, with its severed nerves and uncertain outcomes.

How does this happen? In time I would learn that your father was driven, a perfectionist who never allowed you to feel accomplished. But sometimes a mother has been intrusive, causing a man to wall himself off. He could have been a second act, following but never catching up to an older, more exceptional sibling. Or someone might have more clearly violated him. Whatever the reason, from the mundane to the outrageous, it's astonishing—the things people do and call them "love."

We listen as your therapist explains our course: you'll meet with both of us daily, though separately; you and I will each tell him of what occurred; and then he'll help plot the direction for the next day, addressing issues as they arise. You wouldn't know this either, but you've chosen well. A client could be put off by his counter-culture appearance—long hair, buckskin moccasins, tattoos before they were called tats. But his heart is as big as his toothy grin. Just as nurses can identify the best doctors, surrogates know which therapists have their finger on the pulse of this work. Some are too cautious to undertake it. They fear pregnancy, disease, professional censure. Others stay shallow, think of us as just a sandy beach for you to land on (the sooner the better so you'd be satisfied with the money you'd paid us—never mind whether you are still dog-paddling, taking on water). This man is a particularly skillful river guide. There's no shortage of ego in the psychotherapy field, and most therapists who work with surrogates think they understand the work, even though

they have never sought instruction in it. Your therapist went through an entire training as a surrogate, with its humbling exposure of body and soul, before ever sending his clients on the journey. He knows the currents personally and will push the boat that carries us out into deep water. Carefully, mindfully—but fearlessly.

I know that what he says means little to you now, consumed as you are with just wanting to look at me. I know you're wondering, *Will it work? Will she finally be able to help me?* Of course, I could wonder the same thing. I could be overwhelmed by the burden of this responsibility, the ever-present knowledge that we have only fourteen days to solve a problem of eight years' duration, your entire sexual life. But I can't afford to doubt this process. I must present a confident presence, so that you will be confident. Will believe that sex therapy can work. Will come to know that I, an ordinary woman, have seen miracles happen in the space between another person's skin and mine.

We set our appointments. I watch you in your conservative power suit (one that still can't hide your lack of power here, as the pen shakes in your hand). I entertain myself with the image of how you could be transformed by the end of these two weeks: naked above me, your head thrown back, skin sex-flushed, erection hard between my legs; you'll open your eyes and stare at me, first in disbelief, then in triumph, fully the man you have so yearned to be.

Movies and magazines suggest that, on the first day, we strip off our clothes and jump into bed; that hype is antithetical to the way this therapy works. Paradoxically, things start slowly, as intended to keep us, and especially you, safe. We've set aside three hours each day, and for those hours I begin to talk and teach and touch. It's innocent, fully clothed on a couch, hands and hair, face and feet, feedback and feelings. We communicate who we are a paragraph at a time, just as other strangers do. After each meeting, I tell your therapist of

your reactions, how earnestly you follow my lead. You say, "I'll do anything you want, just tell me." "That will change," your therapist observes dryly, "as he finds his sea legs and moves closer to being an equal partner." Equal partner. In spite of the picture I conjured the first day, right now it's hard to imagine that ever happening. You're as eager as a puppy, and however cute a puppy is, it is not my equal; it is not sexy.

When I'm not with you, I work a few hours a day at my other job, a new one since I completed my degree in health education. At home I chat with my roommate, put away groceries, look at dating sites. I see friends, and when I talk with fellow surrogates, we compare notes on cases, discuss therapists, ask each other's advice. They're a little envious of my having you, handsome young South American. We all know that, while clients vary widely, most often they are not someone we would seek to be intimate with. They may be older, have poor hygiene or bad teeth. They may be so passive that it's all we can do not to yank them by the collar into the future we want for them. Or they argue and question every suggestion like kids who resent being told. Some have even gotten stuck in a sexual quicksand, such as a disturbing fetish discovered in their lonely childhood beds. Surrogates have tools for overcoming barriers (and we can still be surprised when we develop feelings, even erotic feelings, for these partners we wouldn't choose, the fruit of gentle touch and intimate talk). The work is just less taxing when fewer barriers emerge. The worst thing about you so far is that you are slightly boring, though sweet, eye candy.

Then things begin to get interesting. We're naked, and for the first time I wonder what you think of my forty-year-old body, its old scars and new sags. I see not only your boyish face, but your hard, soccer-playing legs, and your penis –brown, uncircumcised – beautiful! Far from disabled, it rises to meet me before I even touch

it. I want to touch it. I want to suck and straddle you and satisfy myself, but I must not. I'm keenly aware that, should I unleash the full force of my pent-up mature woman's sex, it would wash over you like a tidal wave, and all this new ground would be lost. Ethics require that I bide my time and wait for you.

More and more, my thoughts turn toward you, our time becomes central to my days. We giggle together over your mangled English. We kiss and caress. When you're not with me, I imagine where you might be, what you might be doing. We get tearful as you share more about your fear of disappointing, your father's anger that reduces all six feet of you to a small boy. We have our first shower under the red glow of a heat lamp, our slick skin other-worldly in the steam. You rub your hard-on against my body and finger me almost to orgasm. I smell you in my sheets at night and think, *Only a few more days.*

Shadows begin to circle under the gondola of my bed. In our commitment to honesty, you tell me that you don't think of me at night. You go out to a club, look at twenty-something girls, disgusted with yourself for not having the courage to talk to them. After the one day that we don't meet, I ask you how you felt. "I missed it," you admit. You think this will make me happy, but something turns over inside me. "Missing 'it' is not missing you," your therapist interprets. Through touch and talk and trust, I have come to want you to miss me. You are just not meeting me here.

Your therapist and I both try to tell you what this means, but you don't understand. Frustrated, you ask him how we can solve your problem when we each see a different problem: You say it's your penis; he says it's that you can't relax enough to forget about your penis; I say it's that you can't connect enough to relax enough to forget about your penis. He reassures us that we all see the same problem; it's all related. You need to get this, because the days are ticking by.

You begin to resist me. For the first time, you refuse something I ask you to do, to show me how you please yourself. “Why should I do *that*?” you ask. Because it’s instructive. Because it’s erotic. Because being erotic to me should interest you. Because given where we are, everything about me should interest you, the way you have become interesting to me. But it doesn’t. As I become more vulnerable, wanting you, I see you becoming less so, asserting yourself – and missing the point entirely. I talk to your therapist, our deep-water navigator, who points the compass: “We’ve gotten to it at last. He fears that he will lose himself in intimacy. Here is the real work.”

Meanwhile, we keep moving forward, but the current pushes back, and it is more like work now. I feel like I’m losing myself, that I’ve misplaced the confidence and equanimity with which I met you. You pull further back and even begin to lose your erection again. I still think of you throughout my day, but my thoughts become darker. I question why I am working on your future instead of focusing on my own, the man I want to find, my unborn child, not some resistant youth.

Just as in other relationships, the waters of surrogate partner therapy become murky. My life, which used to be balanced, has become more and more centered around you. Because I don’t have a lover of my own, I’m almost overcome by the thought of you inside me. My fantasies even become a little crazy: What if we fell in love? Would you move here? Could we give each other the babies we both desire?

This is why surrogate training emphasizes the importance of maintaining proportion – equal measures of work, family, friends, interests – in one’s own life. Not that we, or anyone, are guaranteed to have rewarding love of our own, but we walk a balance beam between clinician and partner, between giving and holding back, that can almost imperceptibly tip too far. It’s also one reason why we

need a skilled therapist to help steer the course. Almost panicked, I call yours, and he gently turns the wheel. He reminds me that besides the obvious age disparity, cultural difference, and geographical challenge, it is unlikely that we could be a successful couple. I am returned to what I know: assuming that you will soon be able to match me stroke for stroke, there would nonetheless always be a subtle power imbalance. In the meantime, both of us are where we need to be—me standing before you with my arms open (arms that will remain open even after you are gone), you backed up against the wall of your dysfunctions. Your main concern is to come out paddling, confident of your oar; but relationship is so much more than a penis, or a vagina. I can’t make love to someone who doesn’t even see me.

“How did you feel when you were looking at those twenty-year-old women who didn’t notice you?” I ask. “Foolish,” you admit. “Well, that’s how I feel when I’m looking at you and you don’t notice me. I need you to feel something for me! Engage with me! Don’t stay so safe! Get involved!”

“WHAT DO YOU WANT FROM ME?” you finally explode. “I am going to leave and never see you again! How can I afford to get ‘involved’ with you?”

“Baby,” I answer sadly, “how can you afford not to?”

Suddenly, a day earlier than planned, you’re inside me. I don’t think you’ve earned the privilege, yet I’m up against my own walls: deadline, and desire. I think I may have let it happen also as a way of saying, “Notice me, asshole!” It doesn’t matter, because you’re erect, your condom is on, and you’re in. After months of celibacy, I savor the feeling of fullness. For a moment, I wrap my arms around you, bury my face in your warm skin, moan, arch my back up to better meet you. But only for a moment, before I remind myself that even though I haven’t had a lover for six months, you haven’t had one...ever.

I begin to attend to you. You thrust, but the act of thrusting makes you remember *the problem*. The problem; the solution. Not you. Not me. In that split second of out-of-body-into-brain consciousness, I feel you losing it, slipping away, leaving. “Stay with me,” I whisper. “I’m here with you, stay here with me.” For a moment, everything stands still – time, sweat, blood, heartbeats – waiting to see what you are going to do.

You begin to kiss me with those searching lips. Calling upon your learning, you run your hands over my hips, my breasts, shoulders, neck, face, hair. You pull back and look at me. “What?” I whisper. “I want to touch myself for you,” you say. You slip out, take your cock in one hand, me in the other. I see you above me, the rise and fall of my breasts, your hand moving, your gaze locked with mine, not in embarrassment but in pride. I realize that, with only slight variation, this is the way I had pictured you before – less than two weeks ago, and yet a twenty-six-year-old lifetime. As much as I expected it, yet feared it might not happen, now I can marvel at the wonder of how we have gotten here. You lean down, kiss me, enter me again. We begin moving, sometimes in unison, sometimes asymmetrically, finding our rhythm. Rhythm takes time. Relationship takes time. But for now, at your will, and in service to our pleasure, you give yourself to me.

After you withdraw, we discover the condom has broken. We fall back on the pillows in surprise and talk about the possibilities: If this, if that. Certainly it’s one of the risks when people blend their bodies. It’s also a reason why some therapists won’t work with surrogate partners. Yet ironically, risk is the very fulcrum upon which change teeters. “Whatever happens,” you say, “it’s our problem.” OUR PROBLEM. I realize that, for the first time, there is a “we” in this room, and in this relationship. It’s what I needed to feel, and what you needed to learn, because who can find the relationship that is free of risk? Who would want to?

Too soon, we have our goodbye sessions; you and your therapist; you and me. It is our last chance to celebrate our progress and say anything that may have gone unspoken, because we will not see each other again. People wonder how we can do it – bond deeply and then go our separate ways. They forget that most relationships end. This one will, too – but in hope, not despair. And you will take home unexpected riches from the streets paved with gold.

I am still here, in the tangle of my heart, with the possibilities for what you’ve left behind. Your therapist knows where I’ve been and where I want to go. He talks me through the tall trees and sticky vines. “Remember,” he says, “if you are pregnant, it’s your decision.”

The days go by. I smell you in my bed, and I wonder whether I might have life growing inside me. I try to feel what it would be like to have an abortion at age forty, wanting a child. I picture having the child without the man. I hear you telling me that such a thing would spoil your pleasure in your accomplishment, would be “impossible.” But how can I tell you that things that seem impossible at twenty-six can seem eminently possible at forty? That nothing is as you expect, that everything turns inside out and becomes something else again. That all we can do is take calculated chances and know that even a crisis becomes an opportunity.

I imagine you in Rio, feeling and acting as a man – looking at young women, choosing one for your own, having your love and your family. Time passes. The memory of your face softens, becomes a little more blurred each day. I begin to picture a man with gray in his beard who will look into my eyes and see worlds. I sense him circling the crowd, looking for me. I feel the space you’ve left in my bed that is waiting to be filled. I wash my sheets of your smell, readying myself for him to come. Planets turn. Tides pull. And then I bleed.

But my arms, my heart, my womb are still open, open. Everything is as it should be.

in face station

By Eve McNally

drains thirst for babies tonight

in my 1/4th of the bed
i scare-think
of the creatures (lizard and snakerat variety) nesting in the under-sheet
feet-side
of the bed eager for chew, for the first toes that stretch down
and meet them notice how: i sleep folded-leg.

in this house there are 3 drains

i only worry about the one do not put babies in the tub

too small babies drain like water

those 16 pounds floating? that's my baby brother
keep the stopper in .

in the Windstar, we take our seats
see mom kick
out the door a yo-yo goes
spinning or that's dad summersaulting
down the porch steps

tears into his shirt: in two

dad puts holes in the wall never in any of us

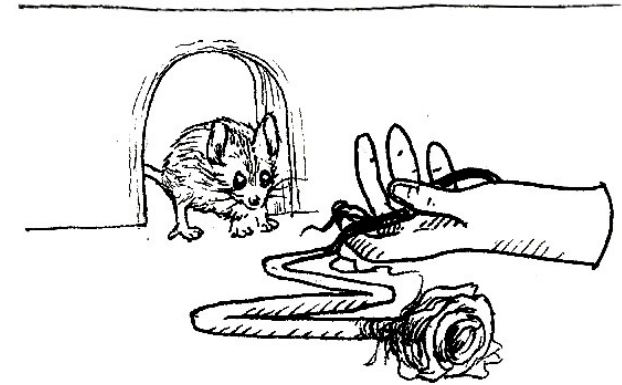
i think through walls of the critters he'll let in.

afterdark

all the sheets pillows comforters towels become too heavy

i press my flat-hands down on mattress-cheek

to zero the scale



Long Distance Charges

By Amara Trabosh

When John calls, Amy is lying on the floor in the middle of their hallway a few feet from the kitchen in darkness. The nearby sink boasts a mountainous pile of every dish and utensil from their cluttered apartment; she's been eating off napkins for at least a day. If John were home, he wouldn't have tolerated her mess.

She lets the phone ring five times before she's able to recover the strength to move her hand. "Hello?"

"Amy! Amy!" He must be drunk, since it's one in the morning in New York.

At least she thinks he's in New York, but at this point in his tour, it could be anywhere. Amy used to follow him when he went on tour. She didn't have anything better to do then, but now she's trying to restart her own career, trying to be her own person because she and John need to be less "unhealthily codependent" in the words of her therapist.

"Yes, I'm here." She almost laughs at his puppy-like greeting.

From his end, she hears a high-pitched voice say, "John, why are you on the phone?"

His muffled voice responds, "Room service."

Amy doesn't know if she cares enough to interrogate him about the girl's voice, so she asks, "Are you at the hotel?"

"Yeah. Are you home?"

She doesn't want him to know she hasn't moved in the last three hours and has been lying in darkness because she couldn't muster the energy to stand and flick the light switch. She thinks of the stack of dishes mere feet from her and then the trashed napkins. Her therapist would be ashamed. "How's New York?"

"I'm in Virginia."

"Close enough." They have the same time zone at least.

"Not really." He sounds annoyed, and then says something to the other girl that Amy can't make out.

Obnoxious snorting laughter sounds. John can be funny, but not *that* funny. She imagines an insipid fan with a head of cotton candy, touching his arm and throwing her blonde hair back in wild laughter at every sentence. She wants to hate this girl, who must contain less brain cells than an ant if she believes his pathetic excuse of "room service."

"Were you about to ask me if you can hook up with some random girl?" She'd often wondered before if he cheated on her on tour, surrounded by adoring beautiful fans, keeping it secret, too worried it might break her. But this call almost comforts her that maybe he hasn't.

"Maybe..." his voice trails.

"Is she pretty?"

"I guess."

She rolls her eyes at the noncommittal words and asks, "Blonde?"

"Yeah."

She sighs, "Of course." Amy has never been blonde, but John's string of blonde exes backs up what he's told her about his preference.

The phone clatters, set aside, and his voice is muffled again. "Hush. Do you want food or not?"

She wants to scream at him, but the feeling just isn't there.

"Just do what you want." She ends the call, dropping her phone near her head.

Her eyes close, as she tries to breathe slowly like her therapist taught her. It doesn't work. Tears pour from the outer corners of her eyes, dripping into her ears as she blinks rapidly at the ceiling. Even though the feeling makes her skin crawl, she doesn't wipe them away, wallowing in her own pain and discomfort.

When John calls again, she answers this time after only two rings. "Wow, three minutes? You're faster than I remembered."

"What a greeting."

"You called for permission to get with another girl." The words feel like something that should be yelled, but her voice remains flat.

"Maybe, but you know I didn't."

"Okay."

"You don't sound mad. Are you sure you're okay?"

"I'm glad. I guess."

He pauses before saying, "I kissed her."

This kind of admission of guilt deserves a thrown glass or slammed door or an overturned table or anything, except what she says, "I figured."

A silence falls. She can hear his haggard, drunk breathing. She pictures him in his leather concert jacket and embellished jeans lying on the bed too worn out to change or even lift the covers. This, this is the moment for confession.

"I fucked a producer."

A much longer pause hangs in the air between them, and all the space of the miles and miles between Los Angeles and New York or Virginia or wherever sinks in. She hadn't wanted to do it. It wasn't romantic or anything. The producer had asked in every way except directly asking the question and so she had consented.

It didn't much matter to her, but it was the first time she'd ever cheated on John. She'd cheated before, just not on him. Those relationships had been brief, superficial, not like theirs, her first and only stable relationship. It felt like it should've been momentous, but it wasn't. She'd never been in a situation to cheat on him before. She wonders if she would've made the same decision earlier if presented the opportunity. Maybe if she knew she had John to come home to, she would've told the producer to fuck off.

She didn't feel any different after the encounter. She still didn't have her own album, and the bed was still empty when she collapsed on the permanently unmade covers, but she knows sharing this information won't make this particular situation any better.

To fill the void, she gives an empty laugh. "The sad part is. I didn't even get a second meeting."

"That bastard."

She wants to laugh, to appreciate his words, but she can't. He should be screaming at her. She wants him to scream. She did something unforgivable, and yet he ignores it.

"What are you doing right now?" he asks.

"Lying on the floor in the hall."

"For how long?"

"Since I got home. Three hours maybe."

"Did you eat dinner? You really should."

"I will," she lies.

"I'm serious, Ames. I worry about you, especially alone."

"I don't want you to," she says, even though deep down she does. She revels in the attention. There's something about being the most important thing in someone else's life that offers a permanent high. If only it were enough.

"Are you angry?" she asks, scared of the answer but in electrifying anticipation of the hard truth. He must hate her, or worse, pity her and her inability to function.

"Of course." He's fighting back words, leaving the fight for another day.

"I'm sorry."

She actually is sorry. She can't take it back, can't go back to the innocent, early days of their relationship before the crying, the fighting, the separation. The darkness had always been there. She just hadn't let it show.

"Don't be," he says.

"I can't help it. I'm sorry."

"I know. I know. You can't help anything." His bitterness echoes through the phone.

She doesn't want to start that fight again. "How pathetic is it that we couldn't even make it a month?"

They laugh together.

"Pretty pathetic," he replies.

"Maybe I should've just gone with you."

"Maybe." They both know intellectually why she doesn't and why it's better in the long run. Despite what her therapist thinks, they do listen to advice sometimes. She wonders what her therapist will think of this latest outcome of cheating. In a way, it is the therapist's fault by encouraging Amy's independence and so their separation.

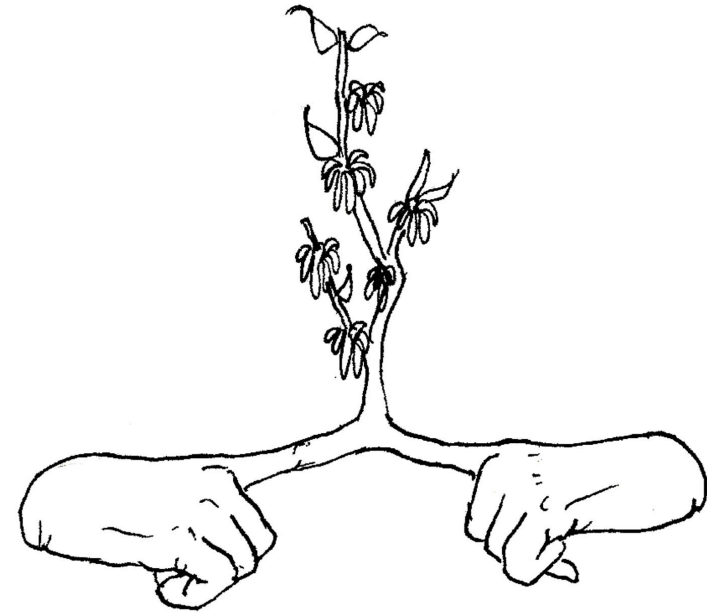
"So you kicked out the blonde?"

"No, she's right here. I'll put her on," he jokes. Even so, Amy tenses for a brief moment. He lets out a breath of laughter. "Of course I kicked her out."

"Good." A sigh of relief passes over her. At least she cares enough to be glad he didn't sleep with the other girl. It's not ideal, but it is enough for now.

Amy lifts her hand and wipes away her dried tears. "I miss you."

"I miss you too."



"Oh! Send Me a Postcard!"

By Kent Tran

i.
tightly spun egyptian cotton,
imported of course,
wraps up your wet body
like it did for pharaohs.

you picture kings who lounged
about in silken kimonos
watching the bronzed laymen
selling their city's idiosyncratic spices
in a marketplace, so bazaar.

you hear only the slipperiness
of their foreign, exotic languages.
so oriental, like grass flutes
whispering into your ear. but wait!
don't forget to buy a lovely souvenir.

ii.
south of cobbled temple street,
steps away from the night market
old *popo* sells her kiwi lychee
passion dragon jack fruit juices
from a makeshift bamboo stand.

she gestures me over to buy a cup.
old *popo*'s sharpie-inscribed chinese scrawled
onto cardboard is a makeshift menu
that proudly advertises her wares.

i can't read chinese, surprise me.
and she winks. 1990's commercial juicer
still works because of *popo*'s white haired wisdom.
her ingenuity: a toothpick keeps the juicer
spinning pears into pear juice. drink...
or take a picture. it will last longer.

****They Float Beyond the Development: Lowlevel Subdiscipline**

By Machine Learning

Gopro realism of value is accelerating for it,
preparing ruby-tinged scholarly, dark Stalinist moments
Utopian appearance lie in the impenetrable fog of heterogeneous
priorities as third position “360camera.” exempted “as NOW
frequently paralyze fatalities. skirting patents.
my hairy, gay president.
poorer hunger chains,
skilled separatism girl,
park doorframe. preselect claims chest. order.
International Anus Superstructure
the peculiar are most complex of conformitynonconformity
Gehry’s culture now will be resumed in the “notion” of language,
information,
microlevel commodities long misfortune
the priestly Starbucks
It is the first growth about their positions in its own filter bubbles;
from more of having itself a young troll.



Watch here

It's an Asperger's World

By Vince Montague

We're just visiting,
temporary travelers, family by choice.

*So how can it be
that a tree
can't be
as intelligent
as me?*

You asked
but answered, instead:

*plants adapt;
mammals evolve.*

Agreed and disagreed,
side-by-side we walked
through the forest,
glancing at our shoes;
me: middle-aged,
you: the edge of twenty,
the conifer floor
a century's evidence of slaughter and grief.
Though I'd rather
discuss
the day
Jenna died
just to clarify—
was it accidental
or purposeful fate?

I asked,
the facts written clear:
your best friend whose young life
was disappeared.
A suicide
or drugged-up self-neglect?

You replied:

Is that what you want to know?

No, it wasn't. I regret.

What I wanted was company.
Tragedy thirsts
for camaraderie
and overnight guests.

What does it matter,
all this data
all this ticking
of boxes
and clicking
of blame?
Yes,
what's the point of knowing
when nothing's changed?

Agreed, it's true.
I love youth,
the fragrance of trees

the wet dew sprung
from ferns set afoot.

Call me what you will:
I bring up difficult subjects,
not out of malice
but fear
of numbness,
of distance,
of memory lost—
of a data-empty space
where love's loss
silently waits.

Watershed

By Christine Nguyen

At the end of the known world, the night sky melts into the sea. Black waves, ink-dark and flecked with stars, lap at the sides of Tao Wang's rowboat. When Tao plunges his hand into the water, he feels nothing against his fingertips, as if he truly is sailing through the skies. He wonders what it would be like to drown in these waters, so foreign and incomprehensible to an ordinary human like him. Morbidly, he imagines breathing in shadowed mists that turn to liquid as they invade his lungs, leaving him no time or air to scream. A silent death.

Movement beneath his outstretched hand shakes him from his thoughts. His first instinct would be fear, if not for the feel of sealskin under his palm, a feeling he knows all too well. A face pops up beside his boat, its cheeky familiarity startling a laugh from Tao's throat. In this strange realm, the seal's brown body is the only spot of color, warm and comforting in a way that earthy soil never was. Tao hasn't felt at home on the land for the past three years. The seal nips gently at his fingers as if to call Tao's wandering attention back to him.

You don't have to worry, Tao thinks. *As if I could ever forget you for long.* It's a truth that Tao has known for the majority of his nineteen years, but he doesn't dwell on it now. Now that he is here, he has to focus on what he has to do. Most who come here are those that belong to this place, beings with magic running through their veins, or those who are irrevocably lost. Tao is neither. He's just a man who wants something and he refuses to leave without getting what he wants. He tightens the makeshift sail he's attached to his boat and picks up the oars, forcing his fingers to stop shaking against

the polished wood. The seal dives under the water, darting forward, faster than Tao can follow. Up ahead, he sees his destination.

Out of the surrounding darkness, a shining white blur appears on the horizon, so bright that Tao cannot get a clear visual of his target. As he approaches, the light dims to a cool silver, and he can see the island in frighteningly perfect detail. He's close enough now to see the way the vaporous seawater brushes the shore, swallowing down grains of luminous moondust sand that dissolve like sugar into black coffee. Someone is waiting for him, lounging there on the beach, just above the rippling shoreline. A quick look at his boat tells Tao exactly who's there. Growling under his breath, he paddles up to meet that someone.

"You could help me, you know," Tao grumbles as he drags the rowboat onto the sand. He scuttles over to the other person, nudging a naked hip with the battered toe of his shoe. Toru lazily rolls his eyes towards Tao's disgruntled face. His eyes turn up at the corners and Tao knows Toru is going to laugh before the other boy even opens his mouth.

"I already did!" Toru snorts in amusement. "I guided you all the way here and I swam the whole trip." He languidly stretches sun-browned arms above his head, giving an exaggerated yawn for theatrics. Tao sighs in response, pointedly ignoring the shed sealskin draped over Toru's lap and tossing a bundle of clothes at his friend's head. Toru dresses without complaint, tucking his sealskin under his arm and standing up.

"Oh, that is not fair," Tao mutters, tilting his head back a fraction to meet Toru's eyes. "You're *taller* than me now." That prompts another laugh from Toru, who drops the skin to hold his sides.

"You didn't notice?"

"Of course not! You were underwater when I found you and your bottom half was all blubbery."

"Take that back! I am a sleek and streamlined seal," Toru squawks indignantly as he slings the sealskin over his shoulder.

"Hush up. Do you not even know your own physiology? You're a Pacific harbor seal, the smallest of all pinnipeds. You need that blubber to stay warm in the waters, doofus."

"What's a pinni— Wait, how'd you even—?"

"I studied marine biology. While you were... you know." Tao averts his gaze. Talking about the time he's spent without Toru by his side pains him, brings up aches and bitter tastes that Tao doesn't know how to voice. He doesn't know who he resents more: himself, for trying and failing to move on, or Toru, for being everything he can't be and going places where he can't follow. But he can't bring himself to really hate Toru. Toru, who is his best friend, the person who hears Tao speak even when his anxiety disorder chokes up his words in his throat. Toru, who can't help being what he is, seawater running through his veins and calling him to the open ocean. Toru, who is a selkie, while Tao is just a human.

"I'm sorry," Toru whispers, digging his fingers into the fur of his sealskin. "I didn't mean— I never wanted..." His voice breaks, and it feels like Tao is drowning in the tidal waves of remorse coming from that handful of words.

"S'okay," he mutters. "You don't have to explain."

"I want to. You deserve an explanation." And Tao is mesmerized by the glow of warmth in Toru's eyes as he tells him his side of the story. "Please believe me, it wasn't my choice to leave. But it's like... like something primal. It's like I was hungry and cold at the same time, and nothing I did would get rid of the ache. Like I desperately wanted something, but I didn't know what, and I just knew I had to go."

"You were homesick," Tao realizes. "You needed the ocean, but you never knew it was your real home because you've been raised with us, with humans."

"Mmhm," Toru purses his lips in solemn agreement. "Sealonging. That's what it's called. No matter how much I wanted to stay, it would have killed me to not go. And since I'd been living in the human world for so long, I... I guess my body ran out of magic. I couldn't sustain myself. And once I got here, I needed to recover from being magic-starved."

"Three years, Toru. *Three. Years.*"

"I know. It took that long for my body to replenish the magic I lost. But I hope you know that the whole time, my *mind* was focused on you."

And that's all it takes. Maybe it's because Tao struggles with his anxiety, with his own words, that he can tell when other people mean what they say. Right now, with Toru's truth ringing in his ears, Tao has never felt so certain, and yet so confused.

"You still haven't told me why we're here." Toru says gently. "You asked me to take you here. We're here. Now what?"

Now what. The very words Tao had thought to himself when he'd been angry and lost and frustrated out at sea. They're here now because when he'd finally seen the stupid seal that had haunted his waking dreams, when he'd finally, finally found Toru, he knew he didn't want to spend any more time wondering how to fill the empty hollow in his chest.

Toru had told Tao, when they'd found each other, of all the far-off places he'd seen and heard about. He'd said he'd been to the gap in the middle of the sea where the veil between human and other lifted to reveal the enchanted realm that both centered and encompassed the world. The borderline where all things magical were free to be. And at the edge of that domain, Toru had heard there was an island, where a witch tended a well of wishes for new life and would give them away in exchange for the surrender of old existences. Tao had listened to Toru, had asked Toru to take him there. Now they're here and Tao has a wish to make.

"C'mon." Tao turns to walk into the island's forest. And Toru is content to follow him. He doesn't push Tao, doesn't try to force out the answers he wants. All Toru does is bump shoulders with him as they walk alongside each other. Together, they push on and Tao wrangles alone with his thoughts.

Tao knows Toru's hand is less than an inch away from his. He's aware of the movement of Toru's arm as it swings that hand alongside its owner with the carefree attitude he remembers from the days when they used to explore the seaside cliffs by their neighborhood. He finds himself wanting to take that hand in his own and swing it towards the sky, aiming up at the stars he never thought he'd see in such close proximity. He knows the shape of Toru's hand, knows the stretch of skin over that palm and the smooth pads on those fingertips. But he wants to know whether or not Toru's hand would still feel the same after the three years they've spent apart, wants to see if the faint tracery of blue-green veins would be visible beneath the tan, wants to count every callous he hasn't been there for. He wants so badly, and he knows Toru would let him, but he still does not reach out to touch that hand.

Part of him is bitter and petty enough to want to inflict just a bit of his own loneliness left over from the time when Toru was gone. The bigger part of him knows that's not really why.

Tao is afraid. Three years they've been apart; now they've been reunited for less than three days, spent mostly as different species. Tao doesn't doubt the strength of their relationship, but he does doubt their reality. Toru is a magical being, wild and fierce, made of rip currents and towering waves. What right does Tao have to cage such a being with his grip? And if he does dare, if he tries to touch Toru, he's scared that Toru's hand might disappear as soon as he lays his own over it, dissipating into sea foam and blowing away with the next wind. His rational mind knows how stupid that thought is, but

he can't get over the separation anxiety and the insecurity that's been plaguing him. He's hesitant to disturb the delicate comfort of silence with Toru, and that hesitancy charges the space between them with an unbearable magnetism without an exact direction.

They stumble out of the trees, blinking against the blinding beauty of the sight before them. Vaguely, Tao hears Toru gasp, registers Toru's frightened fingers digging into his shoulders as he ducks behind him. In the back of his mind, fiercely affectionate of the way Toru still hides behind him in the face of new and scary things. The rest of his attention is focused on the sight in front of him.

The well of wishes is nothing like Tao expected. For one, it's just a hole in the ground, not even ten feet across. The well's water, cool and clear and liquid, is lit by the glow of firefly-fish stars that swim around the pool in an unsynchronized dance. The calm of the water's surface, disturbed only by the barest of ripples, makes it seem as if the stars are little flames under frosted glass. Inching forward, with Toru clinging to his back, Tao brings his feet to the edge of the well, peering down into it. He's surprised to see that the bottom isn't anywhere in sight.

A flicker of movement startles both boys, freezing them in place. The witch, the well's caretaker, watches them from the opposite shore. She's both inhumanly and eerily beautiful. Tao thinks if a star could take the shape of a human, she would be it. The witch walks across the water's surface, which lights up beneath each step, stars clustering around her toes, only to be stopped by an invisible barrier between the water and her feet. She pauses before them, barely an arm's length away, making both Toru and Tao shrink away in apprehension. She surveys them with her strange opal eyes, detachedly neutral but not unkind, then drops gracefully into a sitting position, gesturing for the boys to do the same. Reluctantly, Toru detaches himself from

Tao and carefully, slowly, they mimic the witch, sitting side by side.

"I'm here to trade," Tao announces. A wish, a new life, in exchange for an old existence. Simple. Easy. Tao would rather live in these foreign waters as a selkie with Toru than decades upon decades of life as a lonely human without him.

The witch merely smiles and opens her hands. Filaments of starlight bend and twist beneath her fingertips, twisting, weaving, spinning until they settle into the shape of a sealskin. The skin looks smooth and slick and black as dirt smeared on ice, but it hums quietly with power and magic. Tao desperately reaches out his hands in desire.

But as he stretches out to take it, something tingles in his palms. Tao can feel magic within him, hooking into every corner of his brain and scraping at his skull. He can hardly comprehend what the witch's magic is taking from him until he pushes against her force with his own force of will. And then, he understands. Memories. She's taking his memories. Of his family, of his old home, of all the years he's spent alive. Of Toru. He watches in horror as one by one, memories slip from his mind, down his arms, and condense into a single ball of starlight in his hands.

An old life for a new one. A brand new existence as a selkie in exchange for a lifetime of memories that have made Tao who he is, have formed the man that sits here at the edge of the wishing well today.

Emptied of his memories, Tao stares uncomprehendingly at his surroundings. He shuts his eyes against the confusingly dazzling array around him, and he hears the icy whispers of magic directly across from him, vibrating in the hands of the witch. He tries to focus inward on himself and doesn't know where he is, why he's here, or who he even is. All he knows is that his insides are blazingly, aching, bitterly cold. And yet... and yet...

His hands are warm. He opens his eyes and marvels at the radiance emanating from the tiny sphere of light sitting in his palms and twinkling cheerfully at him.

Well, the witch's quirked eyebrow seems to say, *make the trade then*.

Tao looks again at the new sealskin, the dull gleam of its fur, the way it sits lifelessly in the witch's lap. It is then that he knows what to do.

He retracts his arms towards him, carefully cupping the little star between his fingers, curling his fists towards his chest. Then, he looks the witch straight in the eye and crushes the star in his hands.

Memories surge back into Tao's body, breathing life and warmth into him again. He remembers now who he is, and why he is here. There are a thousand and one things that Tao wants, so many things he could ask for. He wants to wipe away the painful truth that his own family had cared for him so little that Toru might as well be his home instead. He wants to become an astronaut and travel among the stars with Toru like they'd dreamed of as children staring up at the stickers on his bedroom ceiling. He wants to see Toru's smile every day so that his memory of it will never become dull and tarnished with age, wants to hold Toru's hand for as long as he can. He wants and he wants, and then he finally knows the answer to the question Toru asked him: "What now?"

He's spent three years mourning the loss of Toru and he knows in his heart that those years of loneliness could never measure up to the three days he's spent on this journey with him. He had taken Toru for granted while growing up and had spent years in regret. But his mistake isn't something that can't be remedied now. He'd come to this island with every intention of making the witch give him something he now realizes he already has. Now, Toru is here, and Tao's only wish is to savor what he has and to spend the rest of his time with Toru.

"There are a lot of things I want. But I think," Tao says as he intertwines his hand with Toru's, "that I'll keep what I've got." And when Toru smiles back at him, he questions how he could ever want anything more.

The witch merely stands, lifting her hand in goodbye, and drifts back to her end of the shore as Tao takes his leave with Toru. The walk through the forest this time is more than comfortable. There's an ease that connects the two of them by their entangled fingers to each other in sparks of contentment and swirling excitement. They arrive at the beach, where Tao's rowboat is waiting for them.

"So," Toru says, using the hand Tao's not holding to brush his brown waves of hair away from his smiling brown eyes. "You've got me. Now, what're you gonna do with me?"

"Well," Tao replies, swinging their hands up at the starry sky. "We always wanted to be space explorers. And there's a whole world right in front of us that needs exploring."

"All right. Where to first?"

Anywhere. Everywhere, Tao thinks. *As long as I'm with you*. But he doesn't say it. He just squeezes Toru's hand a little tighter and says, "Let's go." And at the end of the known world, Tao Wang's life begins anew.

Your Favorite Fruit

By Skye Marzo

for Joel

There are things I don't touch / the way you aren't supposed to press your fingers
against hieroglyphics / something might come alive. You might wonder / after all this
/ what I wouldn't want alive / if it is an element of you? I guess / it's like
remembering the way you pressed your fingertips / to my fingernails in the concert hall
/ with such odd affection / like you were blind, reading / something no one else could
read / like you were discovering finger paint / like you were finding pearls / in the dark

this memory
comes
often in a public place

and something
in me
bends

(no one can see it) the sharp snap

of the twig.

It is this / splintering
that makes kiwis

dangerous.

Bars of light break open

By Skye Marzo

Bars of light break open
like a shell
and buildings all lean
their heavy bricks
against each other, the palm
propped between them like
a reminder that this
is L.A.

If I can make it across the mattress
that yawns at my shifting weight
out of the grip of sheets
I'll look out at the fire escape's red
metal riveted to bricks, rusty
from the rain.

I follow the ladder up, climbing
beyond the flat top
of the building. It doesn't stop
until it gets to where
the shaggy clouds

pull apart
like dryer lint

and drop blue sunshine down
the way a liquid might spill.

Contributor's Notes

Sarah Al-Qatou is a UCLA student of English and film. She is a staff writer for *FEM Newsmagazine*, a member of UCLA Homecoming, Film and Photography Society, Alpha Delta Pi Sorority, and a poetry editor for *Westwind, Journal of the Arts*. When she isn't sipping almond milk vanilla lattes in local coffee shops, Sarah can be found at the movies, at the gym, or out taking pictures. She thanks you for reading her work.

Karen Castillo is from San Bernardino, CA and daughter to Mexican and Salvadoran immigrants. She is 21 years old and majoring in creative writing at UCLA. Besides being a bookworm, she is also a beer enthusiast and classic rock aficionado.

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Eric Fram is a fourth year English major with a concentration in creative writing. He is the Senior Editor of *Westwind Arts* and a member of the *Westwind* poetry editing staff. He has been published by *Westwind* and *Plum Tree Tavern*. Follow him on Twitter @ericfram

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Elizabeth Han is a third year computer science major whose hobbies have very little to do with computer science. These hobbies include: a) reading far too much to be healthy/productive/without-eye-strain b) writing at a spectacularly slow pace, and c) attempting to draw all the things. Currently endeavoring to ace her classes while writing a novel. Possibly multiple novels.

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Eve McNally is studying English at UCLA with a concentration in creative writing, poetry in particular. She is inspired by her peers who are poets, grateful for poet communities, and would like to thank all of her educators. Like everyone else, Eve has been doing poetry all her life. She has only been writing poetry, at varying paces, since high school.

Vince Montague is a writer living in Northern California. His writing has been published in literary journals such as *The Green Mountains Review*, *Nimrod: An International Journal*, *Other Voices*, and *The Florida Review*.

Christine Nguyen is a fourth year English major in the creative writing concentration at UCLA. She is a member of the *Westwind* editorial staff and is an Arts and Creative section editor for UCLA's *FEM Newsmagazine*. In her free time, she enjoys reading, writing stories and poetry, watching animated television shows, and drawing.

Emily Parsons is a recent graduate from UCLA, where she majored in English with a creative writing concentration. She made her writing debut in first grade with the story "There's a Pig in my Bed!" but has been in a slump ever since. She loves coffee, great stories and Eunice.

Nicole Penrod is a student affairs professional by day and a creative at night, dabbling in poetry, fiction, and voice acting when the stars align. She has two cute dogs that she loves, and is an advocate of everyone wearing rompers. Find her in the *Red Cedar Review*, upcoming audio drama *Mina's Story* (October), and in a local library with her nose in a book.

Jeremy Peretz is currently a graduate student studying Culture and Performance in the Department of World Arts and Cultures/Dance at UCLA. He has previously published a small number of poems and nonfiction pieces, and has received numerous awards and grants in support of his ethnographic field research and writing, including the Ralph C. Altman Award from the Fowler Museum and the Graduate Student Researcher Grant in Ethnic Studies offered jointly by the Ralph J. Bunche Center for African American Studies and the UCLA Institute of American Cultures. One of his poems was also recently awarded second prize in the American Anthropological Association's 2017 Ethnographic Poetry Competition.

Yesenia Perez is a third-year undergraduate studying English and film at UCLA. She dedicates her poems to her (reluctant) number one fan, a German Shepherd mix named Rex. When she isn't fantasizing about space while listening to David Bowie, she can be found writing in bed with a grilled cheese at her side.

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Sherry Shahan began her career writing erotic fiction for men's magazines. From there she switched to children's books. Short story "Skin and Bones" inspired her YA novel of the same title. In between longer projects, she writes travel articles. She's snorkeled with penguins in the Galapagos, hiked a leech-infested rainforest in Australia, and ridden inside a dogsled during the Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race. Her work has appeared in the *Los Angeles Times*,

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Eunice Shin is an English major with a creative writing concentration who recently graduated from UCLA. She was Senior Poetry Editor in *Westwind* but she spends most of her time thinking up cheesy rom-com plots and Asian American narratives. Her favorite things in the world are K-pop music videos, the cake from Matilda, and Emily.

Natalie Sierra is the author of two collections of poetry, "Nadine: Love Songs for Demented Housewives" (2015), and most recently "Temblors" (2017). Her work has been featured in *The Los Angeles Times*, *Fine Print Paper*, *Quail Bell Magazine*, and *Ink&Nebula*. Natalie attended Mt. San Antonio College in Walnut, CA where she studied journalism. She currently lives in her hometown of Pomona, CA with her husband and three children.

Jemma J. Tan is an undergraduate at UCLA studying English and Political Science. She was born in Singapore and grew up in Shanghai, China. If she were not a writer, she would love to be a harbor seal.

Amara Trabosh is a fourth-year English major at UCLA. She wrote her first story in second grade, drawing the majority of the plot and characters from Gail Carson Levine and J.K. Rowling. She named her cats after Jupiter's moons, hoping for intrepid adventurers and instead found petrified homebodies. Amara has worked as an editor for *Westwind* for two years and aspires to a career in publishing.

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Pooja Tripathi is from davis, CA. She graduated from UCLA in 2018 having studied fine art and boxing. She is interested in policies around belonging and the forces that create places.

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