

Winter 2024

Westwind Journal of the Arts

**Fiction
Poetry**

**Creative
Non Fiction**

Art



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A Letter from the Editors

On February 20, USAC passed a resolution in support of the Boycott, Divest and Sanctions movement. Just a few days before, UC Davis had passed a similar bill while UC Riverside and UC Santa Cruz, and UC San Diego followed suit. Even over Zoom, you could hear how attendees for public comment spoke in the company of others; they formed makeshift coalitions to support one another in a moment of quiet uncertainty, intense possibility. With the UCLA meeting moved online, there's no public footage of SJP and its allies celebrating their victory, but it's not too difficult to imagine how they still gathered—in group chats, over call, on rooftops—to continue dreaming of a better world.

If literature does nothing else, it offers us a great occasion—as all social movements demand we do—to come together. We might feel as if we read by ourselves, in the comfort of our beds or the noise of a cafe, but we carry with us someone else's words, sharing the privacy of the page as a site of imagination. Sometimes, we let others in on the secret, too: a tender line stolen from a poem tucked into a text, a screenshot of a paragraph too obscure or overwhelming to keep to oneself. As a journal, we can't do anything without the help of others. The work collected here, after all, was sent in by authors with enough trust and vulnerability to let us publish it, edited by readers with the care and insight to prepare it for the public. In a way, making a journal is little more than an attempt to find a way of being with others. Here we are, letting you into the fold, too.

Winter 2024 Manging Editors,
Austin Nguyen and Sabrina Ellis

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A Letter from the Editors

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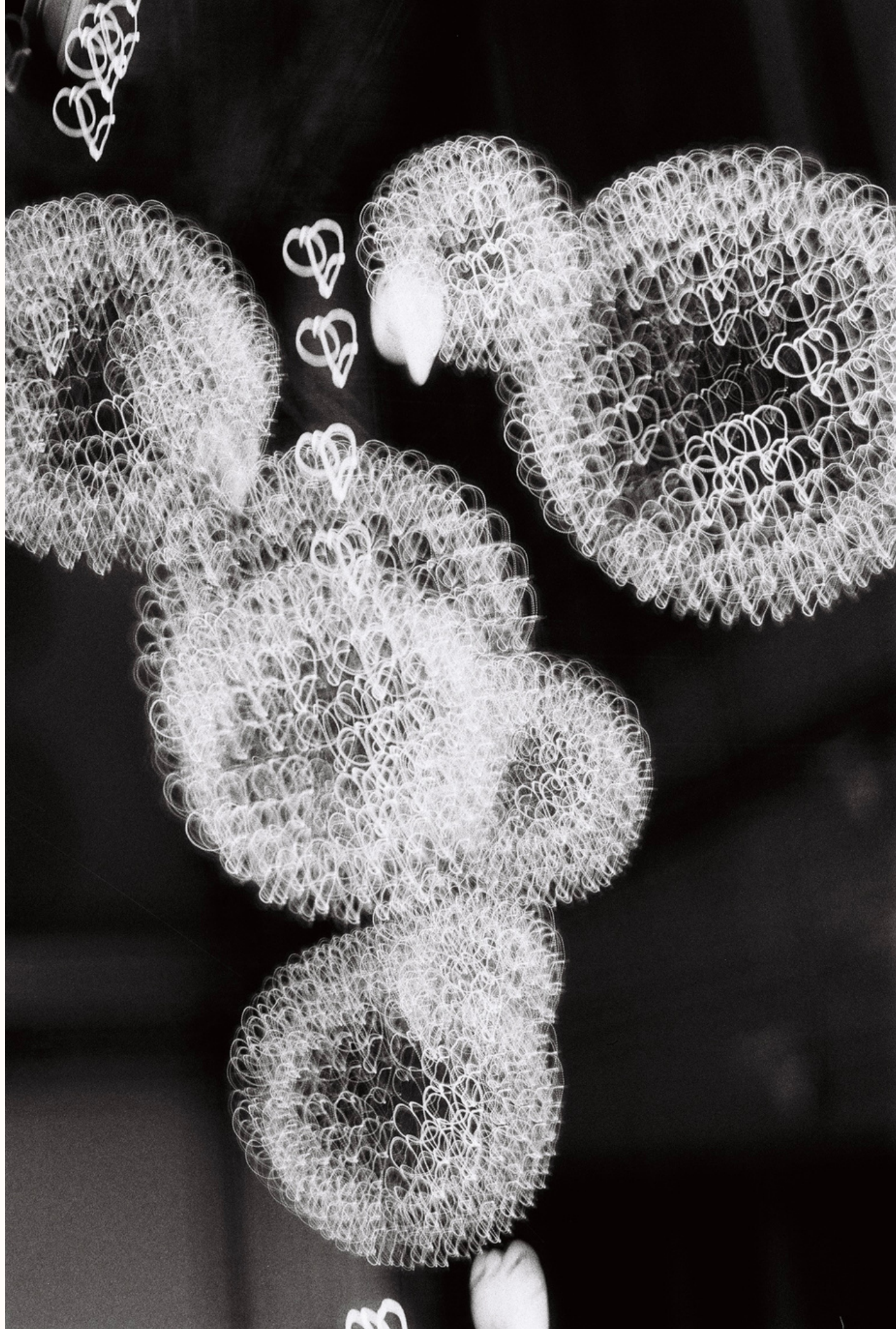
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Contributors

48

Front and Back cover images
by Daniel Cheng





I mostly shoot on 35mm black and white film.
I like to experiment with light and motion.
Seeing the world through your eyes.

thumper

Daniel Cheng
Photography

return stroke

Daniel Cheng
Photography

Poe
try

Ode to Drinking Mugicha

Amelia Weintraub

I was five years old when my dad
poured me my first glass. Mugicha
brewed in our clear plastic pitcher.
Served cold enough to fog up my cup,
but never swimming with cubes of our tray-made ice.
Roasted drops of amber clinging
to the grooves of my throat,
as I sit below our oil-stained coffee table and get
reprimanded for placing my knee above its surface;
allowing such space between my thighs.
And when they couldn't agree on when
to stop speaking in soft voices,
Mom and Dad split, and the refrigerator had
no one left to eavesdrop on. No shouts left
to suffocate with my Hello Kitty headphones.
Mom never liked the taste of tea.
I only drank mugicha on Thursday, Friday, Saturday,
sometimes Sunday.
Dad filled my pink water bottle with it
for field trips to the fish pond
and it jingled in my backpack.
I offered my bottle,
my friends' tongues were left
to suffice with saliva;
everyone preferred dehydration.
I never understood why
no one really likes drinking mugicha,
but I prefer it to water.

Edited by: Yandy Parada

Father's Eyes, Mother's Rage

Amari J. Rueda

I have my father's eyes and my mother's rage.

Men have a nasty habit of doing unforgivable things and marrying forgiving women. They never realize all the pent up anger stored into their wives gets released into their daughters.

My mother is the forgiving type.

She says she is not god so who is she to judge? I tell her god is not at this dinner table. It is you, me, and my father, except only one of us has done something gravely wrong.

I lash out in anger at my dad and before I can register what I have done she begins to yell at me.

"HE DESERVES IT" I exclaim.

"BUT HE IS YOUR FATHER" she shouts.

It's the kind of shout that shakes inside you, the kind of shout that makes you whisper afterwards. "But mom don't you see it? I am all the anger you have inside you. All the rage you never let out."

Her eyebrows are sharp and she's got her fingertips pressed against her forehead tightly. I can tell I have spoiled dinner, poured salt where it didn't belong.

In a soft tone she speaks with her eyes turned away from me.

I can't understand what she is saying though and

I don't care to know.

Because in spite of what she may be saying those large, round, and all too forgiving eyes are still averted towards him.

He sits there slouched, fork in hand, with his elbows pressed against the dark wooden table. He looks confused, even more so he looks concerned and I feel no remorse.

My father doesn't know that I know too much for a child.

My mother can't comprehend the stabbing sense of betrayal I feel when she consoles our culprit instead of me.

But worst of all the anger inside myself won't allow me to forgive either of them.

I've got my father's eyes and my mother's rage.

One day my mother stared into my face gently and told me I have beautiful eyes.
When she looked into them I caught a glimpse of all the love and forgiveness I forgot how to give.

Eternal Life

Hannah Cole

If I were given eternal life,
I would spend all my moments
Laying in your grave.
Because, what is life without you?
I would rather intermingle with your bones
And let the Earth reclaim me,
Than watch the moss take my place,
As the closest thing to you.



Edited by: Samantha Lee

Joy

Rebecca von Damm

Timid little tears

Stunning my happy meter

Awaiting green light

Edited by: Glory Parada

Coffee

Rebecca von Damm

Rich, nutty breathful

Two-seventy a cupful

Life for the morning

Whispers of the Moonlit Grove

Erin Bashir

I walked past drowsy flowers drunk on sunlight as they retired to their beds,
I waded through waters to get to you.

I thought myself jealous of the flowers and their contentment,
But thought better, for they will never know you.

I found you in the water, in the moonlight.
Your hair absorbed rays of silver and distorted your silhouette.

There, I carefully brushed away the silent locs that warned me of danger,
And finally gazed upon your dreadful face.

I remember the first time I met you, when I found God in your eyes.
I walked away from You that night, giddy and unsettled.

I drove through miles and kilometers, celsius and fahrenheit, just to see You.
I suppose I thought myself a martyr.

Now, the moon shines upon Your face,
And exhaustion fatigues this body that plagues me.

This distance between us, this blank mind,
Renders my sole objective a hopeless wish.

I know better now, my naivety a curse broken by You,
For even martyrs find purpose in death.

As I stare at Your face, staring at mine, lifeless and unblinking,
I feel God slipping away.

The Readers

Dylan Winward

5:57. Lights up.

Coffee, bagel, shower, death threats
Leave for work, from work –
And I have no opinions

In a trial: I'm on trial
Except my peers are faceless
Their knowledge lacks knowing
And their history is yesterday.

Out of office, jacket on.
People and people and people
And sunlight, hostile sunlight.
Banners swarming, screaming HATE.

The riots in my brain
Force me to be what I can do.
I live it, 'I love it' but really
I loathe it.

It's important, I say,
But it's not.
Next week should be better
It's not.

And soon, I'm back,
I, who saw the best mind of mine
Destroyed again and again and
Again and again and again.

This is how I find myself
Head on the pavement. Feet made of clay.
Afire with darkness, half-witted, and
Writing



Edited by: Melissa Kim

Nocturne

T. C. Palmer

Time gives little mercy, and wavers in taste. Like reverberating strings, it
Is suspended by hollow, restless darkness. Tossing and fighting
The stillness, I found your chronicled pieces: resonant, incendiary. Deeper: your
Best phrases scratched out—all the purged pages. You were the
Critic you despised the most. In your fire, copies still survived

And spread from desk to desk to my wood piano stand. Practicing
Patience, I absorbed those unsingable lines. Swollen with
The melancholic melodies, notes resounding night—the
Best time to feel alone—Ear bent, studying you, my first
Teacher—flowing sound to my fingers through tingling veins.

—

Frédéric
Chopin

Bloodline

Mia Gregg

A tin can culprit
A virgin victim
Each sip another slash
And my cursed blood surfaces

The laughing always comes first
An eagle ringing in my ear
The devil beckons my name
To take my place in line

The crown will soon be mine
A corona of lite
To rest heavy on my head
Its jagged jewels itching my brain

Every colored gem
Slices down my throat
My blood screams
My brain hears a drinking song

Poison disguised as remedy
Wheat and grapes, once
The Body and the Blood
Now a generational cross to bear

My grandmother gave me a warning
But the music blares out her gun
Does no one else around me feel
Their blood aching to be known?

Dancing bodies, hot and sweaty
Dripping blood, cold and mourning
Salty tears touch my lips
I chase it with another shot

Without it I'm no fun
I am supposed to be fun
They are all having fun
Why can't I be fun?

I want to dance like them
I want to love like them
I kneel in front of greek temples
Praying to be born again

And when I faint
Don't bring me home, nauseous
Leave me out in the rain so
The blood goes down the drain

My head pounds
My grandmother knocking
She vows to take me with her
And leave my dad alone again

you(r) call

jimmy vega

you call & tell me about your new life in koreatown
you mention x—not owning a drafting table
you tell me you finally spoke to your dad—
the face he made when you told him you’d be leaving
the face you remember him making when you told him
we’d lost julie

you call & tell me about not visiting mammoth & only
getting one parking space at your new place but you forget
to tell me about your nausea & vomiting about how tired
the meds make you feel—chalk coloring your mouth—
i ask if they make you drowsy but i know—what i really
wanna know is if you think of me when you close your eyes
& bite your tongue

you call & tell me you miss me as if betrayal
wasn’t a four-letter word as if best friends cupped palms
drinking hemlock you rest all of your clothes on my side
of the bed—you tell me the weight seems familiar—seems
like someone sleeping next to you without having
to invite anyone

you call & ask if i’ve heard the new bright eyes album
you laugh a little because you know the answer
you call our ottoman a stool & swear it’ll really bring your new place
together—you tell me you’re really finding yourself in places
i’ve vanished—*i’ve been trying to cut all my dead hair off*—
you tell me calling from x’s her home smells
like tortillas & cardamom but i still haven’t asked what color her room is
—you like secrets

you call your voice home—you think it’s kitsch
to keep contact—i keep writing. letters you’ll never
read scribbled cipher in tangerine i forget to burn
them you’re not surprised—the only time you think
of me is when you pray—

you call & tell me you never pray—you confess
in one-liners you tell me you still wear dresses smeared
with subtle forgotten scents sometimes you even shade
your eyes red before they run smudgy after your catnaps
on the leather sofa
—you keep telling me—

your call wakes me knee deep inside my ruminations
ruminations—sometimes hearing your lisp like most times
still stings yesterday's penumbra of my blue voice—

you call & ask me if i remember washing your feet
night you were dancing barefoot & champagne
your pale skin colored pavement sticky
with that night's shuffled playlist—
you cried handing me soap sitting at the edge
of bathtub-porcelain-stained-lavender

your call paints me nostalgic
hands clasped trudging little tokyo pavement
smell of warm-broth-stale-urine green eyed & wandering

you call & ask if i still write poems about you

your call caresses my aphasia—

your voice diffracted swims inside my cornea
you still laugh like you're the only one in a room

you tell me you lit candles for julie
who never got to see your green eyes turn red

you call & tell me she keeps appearing in places
she's not—a glimmer whisper kissing your amygdala



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Ryan Riffenburgh

I heard Louise Glück died today
Her lamentations on pain and suffering gave me pride
I meditated on her passing with my own clear eyes to recount
Eyes devoid of tears instead
dilated on ecstasy
If just a moment
So remembering him
isn't all that hard
I wrote about him a hundred times over
since he wouldn't write
The pages always cut too close to the spine
I stole someone's Vyvanse from a poetry reading the other night
and suddenly forgot about literature
Instead just saw your toothy smile from over the
gate, and a pair of help me eyes
Then I saw our dark nights sped up with jaws locked
And all the 6ams with eyes bagged we'd crawl out
from underneath the shield beneath a sky so china blue
And all our dope boys who don't speak in literary terms
still possessing stories that pour out
with rock and foil
I still hold your face framed by prayers on my desk
Next to unused Narcan
A daily reminder that
in place of consequence
I suffer now

Edited by: Eli Nachimson

**Brett
Stout**

Dead Love and Beautiful Revolutions





The art that I'm submitting has the basic overall theme of "creative destruction." I've taken my own photographs that I mainly take while walking the streets of my town, while on vacation, or riding my bicycle late at night. Then, I get prints of my photographs made and I take the original prints of various sizes and defile and deform them into something different. I pretty much exclusively do this with an assortment of random and common household items and products, as varied as drywall screws, nails, cleaning bleach, staples, watercolor paint, duct tape...etc. I basically transform and make new art from already existing photographic art. Nothing I make will be perfect when partaking in the chaotic creative process, nor is it meant to be. I don't go into making this kind of abstract art with a plan or any sort of idea what the finished product will truly look like. The new art could come out in the end as anything really, it truly is random and sporadic chaos, which adds to the appeal and originality of it I think. Thanks...

The Nemesis Confessional

The Human Blood Rebellion



Fic
tion

Vita and Honoré

Darcy Alvey

Vita and Honoré were seated on the couch watching football when Astrid walked in. Their daughter brought their weekly bottle of white wine and a little treat: homemade cookies, two each. She pecked each of them on the cheek and pulled up the straight-backed chair that went with their small writing desk. Honoré sniffed with annoyance when Vita turned the sound down on the television. It was close to halftime and the Raiders were making a big push.

"Almond cookies?" Vita asked. "My favorite." She reached over and patted Astrid's knee.

"So, how was your week?" Astrid looked around the small room. "All settled in?"

Vita and Honoré had moved into Moonbow Senior Living a month earlier, soon after celebrating their seventieth wedding anniversary. The decision to transition to assisted care had been a hard one. It felt to Vita like stepping to the edge of a cliff, "beyond which there be dragons." Still, Moonbow made sense. She and Honoré were ninety-two years old and things had been going downhill as of late. Vita had become forgetful. She forgot to turn off the burner on the stove and cooked the rice down to black char. Honoré clipped the garage door when parking their boat of a car. They both had trouble remembering the day of the week or if they had taken their pills. Neither noticed dirt accumulating in the corners of the rooms. Ants had become a problem. It wasn't fair to Astrid.

Life at Moonbow took some getting used to, as it turned out. Not all bad. Their meals were prepared, which was nice for Vita. Their linens were changed regularly, and their clothes washed and returned folded, so long as they wrote their names in bold black felt pen on each garment. The main change in moving from a three-bedroom home to a one-room apartment was that they had no way to escape each other. Usually after dinner Honoré retired to his den to watch television and Vita headed to bed to read. Now they were together twenty-four-seven.

Astrid stayed for thirty minutes, catching them up on their grandkids and all the duties of modern-day parenting. "Soccer this afternoon. Girl Scouts tomorrow. Piano on Thursday," she said.

When it came time to haul Sherm to soccer, she rose, kissed her parents again and made her escape. "Got to keep the little buggers busy and out of trouble," she laughed as she walked out the door.

"Turn the sound back up," Honoré said after she left as if he had a broken arm.

Vita made tea in the microwave to go with the cookies. She set a TV tray between them with paper napkins. Honoré ate his cookies in big bites, washed down with gulps of tea. He made chewing noises all the while, every swallow heard and accounted for. He smacked his lips, tasted his tongue. Sucking on the tip of a finger, he wiped the corners of his mouth. Bubbling noises erupted from his intestines, like a concert. The rumblings started small and grew louder. The final crescendo was a range of sounds, a three-tiered clearing of the throat before a final smacking of the lips. Vita attributed the noise to his declining hearing. She could understand the sounds if he were all alone, reassuring himself he was still alive or something. But he wasn't alone. She was right there, never more than ten feet away.

"You've started making noises when you eat." She tried to keep her tone neutral.

He ignored her, so she wasn't sure if he heard her or not.

After finishing one cookie, Vita decided to take a walk around the grounds. She put her second cookie on the desk to enjoy later and pushed her walker to the door.

"I'll be back in a while," she said.

Honoré waved a beefy hand without looking at her. A beer commercial on television seemed to have his attention.

Vita walked the grounds, past the seldom-used swimming pool and the dining room, followed the sidewalk around their wing of apartments, and back to the front of the building. She parked her walker and sat to rest on the bench that faced the driveway entrance to the facility. Her friend Coral emerged through the automatic door. She locked down her walker and sat next to Vita.

They chatted about the weather: partly cloudy with rain possible by nightfall. Rain would be nice for the plants, they agreed. They moved on to their husbands. Coral's husband passed before she moved into Moonbow, but she still had lots to say about his plusses and minuses.

"I thought I would miss Charlie more," she said. "Funny the things you remember. Just yesterday I was thinking about the time he bought a big can of salted peanuts at the 7-Eleven. He was supposed to watch his salt intake, and peanuts went right through him, if you know what I mean. I warned him, but do you think he listened to anything I said? That afternoon I left to do errands. When I came home, he was in the back bedroom cramming down those peanuts. Imagine, a seventy-five-year-old man sneaking peanuts from his wife. 'I knew you'd yell at me,' he said when I walked into the room. '"

"Honoré wouldn't care a fig what I thought about peanuts or anything else. If he wants peanuts, he eats peanuts. We went to visit a friend once who had a little

garden with a strawberry plant. She gave me a strawberry for my morning cereal. I held the strawberry in my hand for the drive home. Wouldn't you know, Honoré reached over, grabbed the strawberry and popped it in his mouth. Ate the damn thing whole. There was a smirk on his face like he had got one over on me.

"There was a bug on the strawberry," I said. 'I was waiting until I got out of the car to get rid of it.' Well, that made him mad. I'm not sure if he was madder that I spoiled his fun or that he'd eaten a bug. I didn't say anything more, but I felt like he deserved what he got."

"Men can be such jackasses." Coral paused a moment. "You know, you are always welcome to live with me. I'm only a few doors down."

Vita chuckled. "I've stuck it out this long. I guess I've passed the point of no return."

"No such thing. You're still alive, aren't you?" Coral closed her eyes and lifted her chin to the breeze.

Vita stood. "I should be heading back. Almost time for dinner. Pork chops and applesauce if I remember. Honoré's favorite. He won't go to the dining room without me. Says he wouldn't be able to find his way."

Back in their room, Vita deposited the walker next to the desk. She started to say something about dinner to Honoré when she noticed her cookie was gone.

"Honoré, where is my cookie? I was saving that."

He patted his stomach. "You snooze, you lose." There was a smirk on his face.

Vita sat on the edge of the bed. She remembered the strawberry. She remembered years of poring over recipes to make something he would like for dinner. She remembered raising Astrid with no help from him, organizing parties, buying presents, making holidays, planning vacations, writing thank-you notes. She remembered it all.

"I'm hungry," Honoré said. He pulled himself off the couch. "It must be time for dinner."

"You go without me," Vita said. "You might want to get used to that."



Do Dinosaurs Sing?

Yaser Cisneros

When I come back with her water and my club soda, she is busy staring at the bulletin board on my wall filled with fan mail. Drawings of animals that kids have sent me, letters from parents saying how relieved they were to find my books, and pictures of families around the world posing with my books. She tells me it's funny for someone who considers their work to be insignificant to be so enamored with the praise they receive for it. I hand her the water and reply that my mom was the one who put those things up. I explain that she's into that sort of scrapbooking stuff, a lie so terrible I must gulp my drink to stop myself from laughing. I have never seen my mother even touch a pair of craft scissors. The closest she got was cutting coupons from the weekly Pennysaver. She rarely agreed with Dad on anything, but she sided with him against my desire to leave for Los Angeles. Not yet Pedrito, she'd tell me, just go and follow your father and brother into the fields. Within a few months, you'll be made into an overseer, and in a couple of years, you'll have enough earnings to buy your own ranch. Then, she said, and only then, if you have the time and money, sure, go study graffiti and pornography in Los Angeles. Until then, you can forget about ever receiving a single cent from your father or me for those shenanigans. You could say my mom wasn't the most artistic woman ever. She would've rather cut her veins open with those craft scissors than cut out the dinosaurs that hung on the bulletin board. The journalist says it's cute that my mom scrapbooks for me, prompting me to laugh. I quickly stop once I see her frowning back at me. I want the dimples to come back.

I suggest we go into the barn in the backyard, where I keep my 'experiments.' She seems a little hesitant, and I realize I could've worded myself better. I explain that in the past few months, I've felt my mind grow slower and weaker at creating new dinosaurs and fishes for my books, so I've started painting and sketching through the early hours of the night inside the barn. I tell her it's like wringing a towel or mop to dispel any dirty water remaining within it, only I dispel all my fury from my brain onto canvases before going to sleep. I point out that it's improved my sleep as we walk through the kitchen, and she replies that anyone could sleep well in a seven-figure home. I think I'm starting to like her, but before I can make up my mind, she asks me why I call my artwork 'experiments.'

I tell her that if I called them pieces like most artists would, I might slip into the

habit of calling them pieces of shit and that my therapist has cautioned me against practicing my usual self-deprecating tendencies. When I say the word therapist, I realize I have said too much, but rather than pry for more secrets, the journalist just nods and keeps walking. My therapist has advised me to work on improving my self-esteem little by little, but I haven't told him about the experiments. I actually got the idea of experiments from Julia, before she had started seeing Andres, my brother, before I had even fallen for her.

I had only been in Los Angeles for a few weeks on the night I first met Julia at the school's student art exhibition. I attended more out of motivation to escape the loneliness of my apartment than genuine curiosity, but I stayed once I saw Julia's artwork. She had a couple of self-portraits titled, 'Faces of My Life,' each portrait maintaining the same beautiful figure that was her face. Each complemented by a distinctive headdress that differentiated it from the others. One had a McDonald's cap and a drive-thru headset, another an Aztec crown adorned with quetzal feathers, though the one that I spent the most time contemplating was the one with a simple dunce hat. It reminded me of Andres, the portrait's lifeless eyes somber like his, the background of a desolate classroom like the ones in the migrant camps we were taught in during our childhood.

Julia noticed how I stood completely entranced in front of that portrait and approached me, asking if I was a fan of her 'class clown' self-portrait. I was shocked to learn it was a clown. I thought that it was a nuanced message about how schools often fail their students, as opposed to students failing in school. Julia tilted her head and looked back at the painting. Huh, she said, and here I am dedicating it to my self-identification with Bart Simpson. I noticed the portrait's spiky hair and quickly apologized, admitting that I hadn't even noticed the strong resemblance to the cartoon character. Julia just shrugged and said not to say sorry, adding something along the lines of how art is rarely what you put into it, but more what people get out of it. I watched as her eyes floated from portrait to portrait and I added that I didn't mean to misinterpret or diminish her work. Julia smiled politely back at me and told me not to worry, that that's why she creates her experiments. Experiments, I repeated after her. Yeah, she explained, experiments. My art may not always be what I want exactly, but now I know how not to do it. I mean, at least I tried, you know?

It is Julia's frankness and warmth that I see hidden in the dimples of the journalist. We reach the barn and I remove the rusted padlock from the front door. Inside it

still smells like moldy hay and horses, a lingering breath of its past inhabitants. Now, the barn is filled with hundreds of easels all lined up in rows, each one preserving a different dinosaur or fish inside its cage of canvas. Before I can say anything, the journalist races down the barn and begins to take in each drawing, so I wait at the entrance as she looks at the museum I've collected inside that faded barn. No one has shown that much excitement for my work since Andres came to visit me in Los Angeles. I had shown him a couple of manuscripts and paintings for school I'd left unfinished, but it was the rough draft of my mystery novel that really grabbed hold of him. I mean, he even tried telling the Tamales Lady about it over dinner. His kid brother, he exclaimed while sipping his sixth Corona, future Pulister winner! I was too abashed to tell him it was pronounced Pulitzer, much less let him know that he was talking to his reflection on the vendor's car window and not the lady herself.

He wasn't supposed to meet Julia at all that night, but she had forgotten her tote bag in my apartment the day before, and she was waiting for us when we got back. We lost track of time over shots of tequila and soon it was five in the morning, the southern California sun peering over the I-10, its rays still luminous through a blanket of smog. I had an 8 am class that Monday morning, and by the time I got back they were both in my bedroom, door locked. I never wanted to hold resentment towards either of them specifically, it's not like they were to blame for the fact that I kept my feelings from Julia to myself. Still, I was, am, only human, and while I loved each half of that relationship, I couldn't stand seeing the halves flourish together. I know Julia suspected as much, as she had learned to read me like the book I bitterly dedicated to her and Andres, that damn mystery novel. I firmly believe though that Andres never knew of my irritation over the matter of his relationship with Julia. I've been able to convince myself, for the most part, that he didn't detect any jealousy even in the final words I said to him. Julia maybe, but Andres? No. Never. He would never know.

The journalist finally stopped running and now stood in front of an experiment I made many weeks ago, a T. Rex trying to play piano while sitting down. The poor dinosaur has a single tear coming down its eye, as its stubby arms prevent it from reaching a single key. I had drawn it while thinking of my Dad, I guess subconsciously making a metaphor of how sometimes, no matter how hard you try to make a dream come true, life just prevents you from obtaining it. Sometimes we just have short arms.

But the journalist doesn't see it that way. She instead asks me a very absurd question. Pointing to the picture, she asks if I thought dinosaurs sang.

I confess to her that I've never given much thought to the matter, as I always assumed they just roared.

She tells me, birds are descended from dinosaurs, right? Apparently, I reply. And birds sing, right, she says. I try to tell her how that's not the same thing, that I'm not sure that's how it works.

She sticks her chin out and offers, well how would anyone know how it works? If you say they can play the piano, surely they can sing too, right? I shrug and whisper, I guess so. I wish I could only roll out a single tear like the Tyrannosaurus Rex, but the tears come in streams, flowing down my face and carving through my skin.

The journalist's eyes widen, terrified of the dormant volcano of grief she has reawakened. She awkwardly grabs my arm, attempting to steady me before giving up and letting me flop onto the dirt floor. She gingerly settles beside me and sits in silence, even after I stop crying. Despite all the years I had spent in solitude, I have never appreciated silence as much as I do at this moment.

The journalist begins to brush off some dirt from her leg and sighs. Still concentrating on her leg, she tells me that her older brother is only a few years older than her, but due to his intellectual disabilities, my books are just about the only ones he can read by himself. She says it's embarrassing to admit, but she detested my work before this interview, feeling that my poorly drawn pictures of dinosaurs resonated with her brother more than all the things she had ever made for him. I tell her that's not true, and she just nods while looking at her feet. She says she didn't get it, didn't get why so many schools bought my books, why teachers fawned over them endlessly, why parents praised my work until she saw that piano-playing T. Rex. But suddenly it all clicked for her. She buries her head between her knees and gasps out how her brother's entire life has been dictated by how wrong he was from right, about failing what people expected him to do. She sniffles, well maybe he isn't supposed to roar. Maybe he's supposed to sing.

I look down at her phone and read the few lines she has filled up on her notes app. I realize how she's omitted any of the snarky responses I've given her and highlighted the existence of the bulletin board. I bite my lip and turn to her. Well, I offer, since no one will ever know if the dinosaurs sang, at least I should give your readers the chance to hear my song. The dimples come back, and I am elated.

I give her my painting stool to sit on and I tell her everything. How my parents immigrated from a place down south; how we never had a home to call our own until I was ten years old; how the only places we could escape the summer heat of the migrant fields were at the K-Marts and local libraries, where Andres and I would spend hours looking at encyclopedias of oceanic and prehistoric creatures. I tell her of the poolside parties we had in irrigation reservoirs and the World Series games we'd play with citrus, and I tell her how we eventually managed to ground ourselves in our studies during high school. I tell her how my parents feared our pursuit of obtaining a post-secondary education would fail, having seen so many students starve in the streets of the capital back south. How they managed to convince Andres to drop out and work full-time in the fields. I emphasize that part, so she knows they did it out of a desire to protect us, something I didn't truly appreciate until I said my final goodbye to my Dad when he passed away, three days before Christmas. I tell her how Andres refused to see me repeat his mistake, and gave me his little life savings to pursue my studies in Los Angeles. But I omit any mention of Julia, to prevent myself from accidentally speaking ill of her. I explain that Andres and I were on our way back from San Francisco sealing the final agreements of my mystery novel when we suffered the accident on the 99. I tell her that the book failed miserably, that not even my mom bought a copy (she probably didn't), and how I found myself with nothing to do and no one to see. Which wasn't true at all, as Julia had been there for me during those months, getting me out of bed, fixing my tie before empty book signings, and telling me to keep going when all I wanted to do was sink into my mattress until my pillows became clouds in the sky.

I finish my story when I tell the journalist that after taking five years to write anything, I finally mustered the courage to submit a short story about a roller-skating Velociraptor to a local publication, the Kern County Family Magazine. The journalist offers back a fragile smile, notably without any dimples. She stands up and thanks me, but as she's about to leave she stops and takes a short breath. She asks me if she can take the painting home. For my brother, she explains. I say why not, I mean after all art is less what people put into it and more what they get out of it, right? She stares at me for a moment and says, what a lovely way to put it. She thanks me again for my time, handing me her empty glass and taking the canvas with both hands. Realizing I will be alone again, I offer to make us dinner, but she says she needs to get going. As I walk her to her car, she tells me she won't publish the interview if I really don't want her to. I say I don't want her to, but I need her to do it.

The moon rises a few hours later, the old pearl at full glow as I exit the barn. All I've had for dinner is water from the outdoor well, as I've been folding easels and stacking canvases all afternoon. I give my publicist a call and ask her to send someone down to pick the canvases up, as I want to donate them to the children's hospital in Oakland. The same hospital where Julia painted that mural of dinosaurs. I also give my publicist the heads-up that this next book about the musical Tyrannosaurus Rex will be the last one I write for a while. At least of its kind. She asks me if everything is ok, and I tell her that everything is fine, I just want another try at that mystery series I've always wanted to make. She reminds me that the first one didn't exactly set the world on fire, and I look back at my empty and desolate home. I tell her that at this point, I don't need to succeed, I just need to experiment. My publicist sighs and says the market doesn't look great, but she'll see what she can do.

I lock up the barn and walk outside to stare at the summer sky, but I'm not seeking some consolation amongst constellations. No, instead I think back to Cupertino, to my old apartment, when Julia put up all those photos and fan letters on the bulletin board after my very first picture book was published. I was still drinking heavily back then and was probably singing some old Juanga record while staring out the living room window. Julia had asked me why I did it. Did what, I asked. Preserve Andres' memory this way, she said, through picture books. She lamented how both of us knew he would've wanted me to keep writing those mystery novels. I snapped back, how would she know what he would've wanted? Besides, I had added rather scornfully as I served myself another glass of Beluga, aren't these children's books what you wanted me to do with my life? To experiment? That was the last time we spoke, and the last time I ever thought about continuing the mystery series.

After a few minutes of blindly gazing into the abyss, I hear a sound, a song of sorts, coming from the trees near the barn. As I approach the source of the sound, the melody turns into giggling, and I scan the perimeter, thinking it might be some trespassing teenagers. It takes me a few seconds, but I finally spot it. Perched on one of the famed local robles, its beautiful plumage camouflaging perfectly onto the bark of the oak, is a lonesome Western Screech Owl. With its two perfect pineapple rings for eyes, it stares at me for a second and then continues to hoot the night away.

Those Good, Bad, Dead People

Molly Harris

"Are you going to the Sleepover?" asked Lucy. She rolled her cigarette. "I think Reese is hosting this time, but it's okay if you don't want to go."

Gemma plucked it from Lucy's hand before she could light it. "These are bad for you," she said. "Mom would have a heart attack if she knew I let you smoke them."

The smoking area outside the bar smelled slightly of piss. Winter in Chicago was approaching its end, but the air was still dry and stagnant. The two of them were wrapped up in their scarves—Lucy's a tired red and Gemma's a worn green. Their mother had been color-coding them since childhood, and it followed them into their adulthood.

"That's never stopped you," Lucy said, grabbing back her cigarette. The thin paper looked creased in the center, but she lit it and inhaled, coughing. "You didn't answer my question about the Sleepover."

"I don't know," Gemma said. She stuffed her hands into her jacket pockets, stretching the fabric out to touch her upper thigh. "Is it tonight?"

The Sleepover happened only once a year; it was Gemma's idea in the first place, seven years ago. It was similar to a regular sleepover, one from their childhood, but it also felt like a funeral. There were take-out meals, board games, and horror films, but there was also crying and remembering and sentences that trailed into nothing, whose pauses went on for too long, and eventually, no one could look at anything besides their own hands. Gemma wondered if Clementine would have even wanted this, if maybe they were getting too old for it.

"If this is about Reese," Lucy started, but Gemma interrupted her.

"It's not about Reese."

Lucy looked at her like she didn't believe her. She was only one inch taller than Gemma, but it felt like more; she held herself higher. The lit cigarette dangled between her fingers, and Gemma watched the ash land on the pavement.

The band started to tune their guitars from inside, and Gemma dug her hands further into her pockets. "Can I have a drag of that?"

Lucy smiled. "Oh? You want a drag now? I thought Mom would kill us?"

"She'd kill you," Gemma said. "She doesn't give a fuck what I do."

"Fair enough." Lucy took a quick puff and passed. "I think Peter's about to start."

"Peter treats you like shit," Gemma said after an exhale. "His music sucks, too. Like a shittier version of The Doors."

“So?” She turned and entered the bar, weaving through the crowds, her curly, dyed-blond hair and red scarf still vibrant through the faded window.

Gemma watched the band from the window. She liked being in the cold, how it made her face sting.

###

Peter didn't join them for the walk home, and Lucy bitched about it. She'd stolen her drink from the bar—the last of the brown liquid sloshed in her clear rocks glass, her greasy fingerprints on it reflecting the neon signs from the still-open late-night food joints and liquor stores. Gemma would have never stolen a glass.

“I don't understand what I did to have him ignore me,” Lucy said. “I mean, I don't even like his shitty band—”

“It is a shitty band.”

“I know that, but, Christ, does it matter?”

“I wish I could be more like you,” Gemma said, and Lucy stopped in her tracks. The drink clinked in her glass.

“What?”

Gemma slowed her pace, turning to her sister, walking backwards. The pavement looked glossed over from the melting ice, and the neon lights of the corner stores mixed with the warm glow from the still-lit apartment, reflecting off of it, like an oil spill, all rainbow and incandescent.

“You know,” she said, “being able to sleep with people and not give a fuck about them.”

Lucy picked up her pace, her drink sloshing over the side of the glass. “Fuck you.”

Neither of them said anything about the Sleepover.

Reese's apartment wasn't that far from the bar. Closer than their apartment, anyway.

###

The place was small, a one-bedroom, second-floor apartment. Weed smoke circled the Edison bulbs hanging from the ceiling. Gemma thought it looked like an apothecary, something mythical and otherworldly, and she wondered if she could read their shapes like some people could read smoke rings.

Reese sat in a corner, relighting a joint. He still wore the same old, but now faded, band t-shirts from college, but there were now more worry lines on his forehead. Jacqueline flipped through Netflix on the Apple TV, or at least tried to. The app cycled through the programs too quickly, the screen flashing through sharp images of color and sounds, bright and loud against the rest of the home. Nothing felt coherent, and it was starting to give Gemma a headache.

She walked to the stack of delivery menus on the coffee table. "Do we want Thai," she asked, "or do we want pizza? There's a new Thai place a couple of blocks down. Lucy and I passed it on our way here."

Jacqueline looked up from the TV. Her hair was braided, but it was so thin that it escaped from the strands. "Finally, what took you two so long?" she asked. "I can't figure out this fucking TV, and Reese is no help at all."

"It's just like a phone," Reese said from his corner on the floor. He looked annoyed, and the weed burned from his joint without him smoking it. "You know, like a touchpad. Just move it like a cursor."

"I'm so sorry, Reese, that not everyone can afford an Apple TV," Jacqueline said. "I've been using the same LG since college, and it's fine."

"It hardly works, Jacqui, you know this," Lucy said. She'd squatted in front of the bookcase with no books on it to look at the board games. "I'm not playing Settlers of Catan again. Not when I know we have Pretty Pretty Princess."

"Reese, you own that?" Jacqueline said, turning her body towards him. Her wine glass was empty. It had already left a ring on the oak side table, shiny and sticky like a bug trap.

"Did anyone buy any more booze?" Lucy asked. She tipped her empty rocks glass, and one lone, mostly melted ice cube landed on the hardwood floor. Gemma didn't think she meant to do it.

Jacqueline said that there was wine in the freezer. "I wrapped it in a wet paper towel," she said, "so it gets cold faster. It should be ready by now, it's been an hour."

Jacqueline was always the smart one, the mother hen of the friend group. She always brought the extra snacks, the just-in-case bottle of wine. She would hold anyone's hair while they were sick in the bathroom, massaging their back and telling them that it was okay, it's okay, it happens to all of us sometimes.

Reese finished his joint. He ashed into an empty beer bottle sitting next to his thigh. The Bud Lite label was almost completely peeled off. Gemma wondered where he picked up the habit; she was usually the one who picked and peeled her labels until all that was left were small stripes of blue and ribbed white paper. She had some leftover labels in her pocket now, tightly folded into tight squares.

Lucy unwrapped the paper towel from the wine on the dining room table. The wet sheets came off in blocks, preserved in their shape, and her face was blushed red from the alcohol.

"We could listen to a record instead of watching TV," Reese said.

"Clementine hated records," Gemma said. "I hate records." She didn't know where the bitterness came from. It bubbled up quickly, starting tight in her belly before it moved upward, like she was sick with it. She wondered if grief bloomed into anger. She wondered what it would become next.

"Then why do you have them, Gem?" Lucy asked. She poured four glasses for them.

Reese rolled another joint. His deft, long fingers worked quickly against the thin paper. "I mean, I like records. It's my apartment."

Gemma finally moved from the doorway, settling herself next to Jacqueline on the couch. Lucy leaned over them both—three of the glasses placed on her arms like a fine-dining server, but her rocks glass clenched in her fist like a toddler. Gemma squished herself into Jacqueline, passing her the first glass Lucy offered them. Half of Lucy's glass ended up on her jeans, and it settled into the fabric. Her sister didn't even notice the stain, how cold and wet it must have been.

###

Gemma loved Clementine, but Clementine was always in love with someone else. Before she died, she had been dating Reese for only three months.

They were all nineteen. Gemma and Clementine had shared beds in their college dorm together, whispering and giggling until the early morning light showed through their tattered blinds, and they'd skip class together in the morning. They sometimes shared baths too, or one of them would sit on the toilet and watch the other shower, talking about their upcoming day and drinking coffee from stolen diner mugs. It was supposed to be platonic. Clementine would always say, like sisters!, and that was that.

But sometimes, if Gemma had enough to drink, she would loop her leg around Clementine's in bed, and she'd pull them closer, tasting the alcohol on each other's breaths, but they never kissed. That was a boundary they never crossed. Gemma wondered if she should have, if it would have ruined everything, but she supposed it wouldn't have mattered. She wondered if she should tell Reese about it, but she didn't know how to, so she didn't.

###

"We still haven't decided," Gemma said. "Thai or pizza?"

"Are there any other options?" Lucy asked. She sat on the ground in front of the pile of board games. She had them into four piles: no, hell no, this is fine, and preferred. Only Pretty Pretty Princess had made it into the preferred pile. Lucy already had the gray, plastic crown on her head. It was too small for her now; the two sides of it didn't touch. Gemma realized that the game was theirs. She remembered it from elementary school. They'd placed their disposable sticker earrings on the crown as decoration; she saw fuchsia stars, ruby red moon, celadon suns, and even the face of a Powerpuff girl, the blue one, all bug-eyed and blonde.

She wondered why Reese had the call girls' copy.

"I'm not playing Pretty Pretty Princess," Jacqueline said. She was the only one left on the couch. No one else could have fit. Her body took up all the room—she curled her back to the corner, and her long legs stretched out on the loveseat. She shook her empty wine glass, and only Gemma saw her try to tip the last drop down her throat.

"You're just upset," Lucy said, "because you'll never be the prettiest princess."

"I'm fine with pizza, actually," Reese said. "Is Dante's still open?"

"I guess they're still open. We could call. I know the Thai place I wanted to try might be—"

"Pizza's cheaper," Jacqueline said reasonably. "More shareable." She moved to the floor to join the rest of them around the coffee table. Her back leaned against the thinned fabric of the alley-find couch.

Reese stood to play another record. Gemma could almost see how Clementine thought he was attractive once. He was all limbs, long-legged and skinny. She saw his veins and the sharp angles of his elbows, but she didn't forget his flaws. His stomach was so thin that it looked like it bowed just under his ribcage. His face looked like it aged faster than the rest of him with its thin lines, the heavy shadows that hung underneath his eyes and divided his cheekbone from his jaw. Sometimes, Gemma thought it was easier to think that Clementine had just left him instead of her leaving them both. In her mind, Clementine had left him well before her suicide. She thought that thought might make her a bad person.

"I mean, pizza's fine," Reese said, sitting back down and leaning back on his bony, dry elbows. "Can we do vegetarian? Mushroom and green pepper?"

"Can we add onion?" Lucy asked. She started to put the puzzle pieces for Pretty Pretty Princess together. She'd taken off her crown to wrap it around the jewelry box, where it was supposed to be.

"I like onion," Reese said. He took another long hit of his spliff. Gemma smelled the tobacco of it, and she wondered if she should bring it up, ask Reese if his landlord still allowed smoking just for the drama of it, but she didn't. She watched him exhale, how his Adam's apple bobbed and how the long line of his neck stretched like a bird. The smoke painted a picture of flames, dancing up towards the hanging lights before dissipating. Gemma wondered if she could break his neck. She wondered if she actually wanted to or if she'd want her own neck broken.

"Can we play Pretty Pretty Princess?" Lucy asked. She had the colored necklaces on her neck, all four of them, and she was placing the pink ring on her ring finger. She held it up like an engagement ring. The pink plastic glittered in the apartment's dim lighting.

Gemma shrugged before shuffling her body closer to her sister's. "I can be green then," she said. She dug through the jewelry box for her piece.

Jacqueline placed down her phone to look at them. "It plays four," she said, "so that's perfect for tonight."

"Well," Reese said, "I can be blue, since Lucy already called pink."

"Ugh," Jacqueline said, "I guess I can be purple."

Pretty Pretty Princess was an easy game, considering it was rated for ages five and up. There were four players: pink, blue, green, and purple. The objective was simple: one must have each of their colored jewelry items (a ring, two clip-on earrings, a bracelet, and a necklace) along with the singular crown to win.

However, there was one cursed item: the black ring. If anyone had the black ring, they couldn't win, even if they had all the other necessary accessories.

###

In the end, Gemma won, in all of her green, plastic glory. She smiled at everyone for the first time that night, at Lucy, at Reese, at Jacqueline. Reese was the one with the black ring, and even when he'd taken all of his other jewels off, he kept it on the tip of his pinky finger.

The win sat hard on Gemma's stomach, making her nauseous, so she sat in front of the still assembled board game and smiled harder and brighter. Reese ate a piece of pizza across from her. Lucy and Jacqueline were on the couch, complaining about Peter, about how he'd never be good enough, about how no man would ever be good enough for either of them, and how they wished, with all their hearts, that they could date women instead. It made Gemma feel sick.

"How did you get Lucy and I's copy of *Pretty Pretty Princess*?"

"Oh, it's yours?" asked Reese. "I don't know. I thought it was Clem's. She gave it to me forever ago. Did you want it back?"

"Did she mention it was mine? From the apartment?"

Reese paused, leaned back. The black ring looked glossy from the pizza grease. "No. We didn't talk much about you."

If Gemma was a superstitious person, she'd believe the steam from the pizza was telling her a firm no. That the shapes it spun and turned spoke of mistakes, tragedies, and self-destructive habits, and that all of what she was thinking was a terrible idea. That she knew she didn't like men and that she hated Reese, even though none of it was really his fault, and that anything she would try to do would just be some misguided attempt to feel closer to Clementine, who left her at nineteen, who never really loved her the way Gemma wanted. But she was never the palm-reading type, so she leaned over and kissed him. He tasted of pizza, weed, and a dirty mouth.

Lucy and Jacqueline didn't notice them heading to the bedroom, still in their plastic jewelry, and Gemma still heard them lamenting about Peter and other boys from the other room as Reese took off her top in the dark.

###

Sleeping with Reese was boring. She laid on her back, inactive, for about three minutes. When he came inside her, neither of them said anything. All she heard was his heavy breathing. She could see his ribs, the concave of his stomach, his dark pubic hair leading down to match her own. He tried to kiss her, but she turned her head away.

He didn't speak for a long time until he said, "If she was still alive, would I be here?"

"Be where?" Gemma asked.

"In this bed. Naked, with you."

He looked too honest. Despite the crows' feet and worry lines, he looked younger, like he did before. He looked at Gemma like it had meant something, and even though she'd won the game, still had the gray plastic crown on her head, she still felt sick to her stomach.

"Does it matter?" she asked.

"I think so, yeah."

"No," she said.

"No?"

"No, you wouldn't be here. She wouldn't have been either."

Gemma took off the plastic crown, placing it on Reese's bed. She put back on her underwear, her jeans, her socks. Kept her green jewels on, the plastic ones.

She opened the door to the living room. Lucy and Jacqueline were still talking about Peter and some other shitty man named Michael. She placed the green jewelry back in the plastic box. She went to grab a beer from the fridge, an Old Style bottle she knew she'd rip the label off of, and sat next to her sister. Lucy gave her a look, but she didn't say anything while Jacqueline struggled with the TV remote.

They didn't see Reese before Lucy and she left an hour later, only Jacqueline passed out in the corner of the couch.

She wondered if she was a bad person as she walked back towards the train with Lucy. Lucy knew something was wrong, so she piled her red scarf over Gemma's green one, and they sat together in silence on the train back to their apartment they still shared. Gemma felt too hot in both scarfs, but she kept them on, leaning into Lucy's side, her hands dug deep into her pockets, clenched. The city flashed around them as they rode, short glimpses of high rises, porches of apartments—a man smoking on his balcony, a college party happening on the other. Sometimes, the view went dark when they went through a tunnel or underground, but Gemma stared ahead at it all, unblinking. She wondered what was happening inside the walls of buildings—who was out drinking still, who was asleep with their partners in their beds, who was crying watching Love Island, who couldn't sleep because of their regrets.

"I stole back our Pretty Pretty Princess game," Lucy said. "The black ring and the crown are missing, though. I'm sure we can find them on eBay."

Useless Things

Jett Felder

When she was bored, my roommate Wanda bought useless things online. On Monday she ordered a mini waffle maker designed to look like a pumpkin. On Wednesday she ordered a staple gun and a pair of hot pink fingerless gloves, and on Thursday, a pack of 20-sided dice. The shiny new refuse accumulated in a pile at the corner of her desk. There was a beret, a candy thong, a mug that read “I’d agree with you, but then we’d both be wrong.”

Mixed in among these items was a framed picture of her and Lloyd sitting on a bench in Central Park. She’d told me the story at least ten times by now: They’d met in college in Manhattan. Wanda, a native Arizonan, found herself blindsided by winter nor’easters and humid air which clung to her during the summer. It was Lloyd who’d taught her how to drive with chains, hail a taxi and navigate the entire city by subway. He’d spent the whole of his life in the same Queens apartment, never venturing beyond state lines.

“What’s it like to live in the midst of all that distance?” he’d asked her walking back from Philosophy 35. She told him that the Southwest was road country, the land where cowboys once lost themselves in vast stretches of solitude. “There’s a reason car engines are still measured in horsepower,” Wanda said. Then Lloyd reached out and held her hand.

Of course, things had changed in the years since we graduated. At 28 Lloyd now had a wife and two girls of his own in Connecticut. Ashley and Grace were their names—Wanda had seen their family Christmas card on a Facebook post. Following the New Year, I’d often return home to find her asleep on the couch next to a bottle of wine. I didn’t know her that well back at NYU and had only found her as a roommate through an alumni message board.

One evening Wanda rented a movie online—the kind of cheesy romance you hardly spent any time actually watching. She’d bought a dress and matching lipstick just for the occasion and had prepared herself before the mirror in our room. After it ended, she ordered a lavish Italian dinner for one and adorned the living room table with a three-pack of red candles. In the morning she awoke hungover. She opened her computer and bought a new set of bedsheets.



When spring came Wanda bought a tulle wedding dress, replete with elaborate ruffles and glittering gold flourishes. She ordered cornbread muffins for hors d'oeuvres and bought an extra large knife for the cake. She hung a poster of Bali on the back of our bedroom door and wrote the date at the bottom in Sharpie. Above her desk she hung a variety pack of postcards from Europe. The locations were touristy, of course, but she didn't care. She'd always wanted to go.

In the summer she bought a small crib which she installed piecewise and kept under her desk. She filled it with all manner of children's books and toys, pacifiers and a blue teddy bear. She found she needed a backpack, school supplies, the latest iPhone with a sparkly case. Then in fall, she moved all of it to the back of the closet, buying instead items for her own pleasure: books she'd been meaning to read, a Blu-ray player, a 500-piece puzzle. And of course, more wine.

Wanda's purchases grew stranger and more complex. She bought sticks of incense and lit them when I wasn't around. She hauled the crib out of the closet and painted it black, then bought a cross cut out of crystal to hang from one of its bars. When winter came she bought a strobe light and closed her eyes in front of it while it changed colors. A week after Christmas she burned things on our concrete balcony: photos, old belongings, even some of her clothes. She scribbled over the bedroom window with the question "Who? Who? Who?"

Then January came along and she couldn't renew her lease for another year. She moved out abruptly without taking her things, I called a few friends over and we put it all out on the curb in front of our apartment building. People reported that it obstructed the sidewalk, and in a week the city took it to the dump and it was as if it had never been there in the first place.

Where to Begin

Jett Felder

If you wanted to know about my mother, the first thing you might want to know is how it happened. It was a drunk driver that hit her. Swerved up onto the sidewalk and crushed her against the facade of a flower shop. The man in the car was also killed. She'd been on her way to a daily tai chi class in the park.

You might want to know that my mother's parents both immigrated from Hungary, but only met for the first time in Chicago. That her mother, raised Catholic, had turned out a vengeful agnostic, said back in Illinois priests locked sisters in rooms and left them to die. That her father had returned from the Navy missing a finger. On the day my mother's parents met, they shared a dance to Tommy Dorsey. It was the first and last moment they'd spend really in love.

My mother believed silently and fiercely. Hers was an eclectic faith, hungry in the way of all things forged in the shadow of neglect. She took yoga lessons every morning at dawn and learned to recite Vedic hymns. Each weekend she visited the Vedanta temple in Montecito where she studied under my father, a Punjabi swami who'd immigrated as a child. In the Catholic town of Santa Barbara, the couple stood out like a false prophet. They circled our block with the stroller canopy closed.

You might want to know that my younger brother and I were homeschooled. That while other children learned how to read and write, we were taught the different types of incense, the dictates of feng shui, how to sense the presence of good fairies and ward off the bad. I recall sneaking out of the house to check if the stars were really aligned like my mother said. When I returned she would be waiting, ruler in hand, her face a taut grimace.

One day a man appeared at the front door, and the next week we were enrolled in public school. My brother and I were three years apart, but we walked together and met during breaks. At eight I started to talk back to my mother. I attacked the root of her being—her faith—and said things like how humans came from tadpoles and the brain was made of atoms and tubes.

You act so smart, she said, but you don't know. Not those teachers, not anybody.

You might want to know about the times we ran away from home. I spent nights with one school friend or another, telling their parents my brother and I had come for a sleepover. Then my parents would arrive to pick us up in the family jeep. While my mother scolded us, my father would only stare silently forward, as if the answer lay somewhere just up the road.

She said, what will you two do when I'm gone? I send my prayers to the Universe for you, and all you want to do is leave.

My brother said, I hate you.

I was fourteen when my brother began coughing up blood. He was hospitalized overnight, but his staph infection had already spread. My mother continued to make my dinner every night. She couldn't eat for a month. She still considered herself a mother of two.

Tensions cooled. I had my future to look forward to, and my mother had the earth and sky. We went about our lives like two bodies orbiting the same star: nearing and furthering but never intersecting.

I went away to college, I lived my life. I came home to visit once a year for the holidays; some years I didn't return at all. My wife lamented that her children would grow up not knowing their grandmother. I made her promises I suspected I couldn't keep. Then my mother was gone. My father had called and told me in the same soft tone he used to read out a grocery list. Despite waking and sleeping beside her until the day she passed, he'd already been living with her absence for a long time.

...

As the years accumulate, I find myself recalling my mother frequently. I will be watching an old movie or the cable news and there she will be. Stories I'd long forgotten I ever knew.

I remember now that it was not a flower shop where my mother was killed, for example, but an antique store—Tammy's Trinkets on 5th. My mother had not met my father at the temple, but weeks earlier at the supermarket, where a long conversation convinced her to begin instruction. And most nights I ran away from home I spent hiding at the school or in alleys. I'd never made any friends.

On Tuesday, I remembered that there had never been a hospital. My mother believed in home remedies. The morning my brother fell ill, he lay in bed as she pressed on his chakras with salve on her fingers; he was already unresponsive when my father returned home. For months afterward I recall her spells of anger, the quiet patter of her sobs through my bedroom wall. Shortly before leaving for college, I remember discovering the bottle of pills in the back of her bathroom cabinet. I never told her about things I saw.

My own son is of the generation raised on digital message boards and artificial light. He tells me that computers have the potential to catalog all of humanity's memories, though I am skeptical. Their hidden worlds have never offered me much.

One day he asks me about his grandmother for a school project. I tell him her name, and miraculously he retrieves a scan of the Santa Barbara Post archived digitally from 1993. He navigates to the middle pages, and her face is as clear as day. She looks young and beautiful, so different from the broken, graying woman I remember from my teenage years. The other man's picture is next to hers. Above them both reads the caption, "WOMAN TOTALS CAR IN FATAL CRASH. PEDESTRIAN ALSO KILLED." I pause over these words, glance at my son. He stares up at me expectantly.

"What was Grandma's story?" he says. And I wonder where to begin.

Generalized Anxiety Disorder

Nervous about everything, can't catch a break

Unfashionable

Where did my love of sunglasses and broomsticks go? of ballerina slippers? of tiny purses? of blue ribbons?

Scared

Will I become like my parents?

Self-conscious

Do you think I'm weird?

Awkward

laugh when you don't know what to say, which is often

ADHD

Undiagnosed until this year, thought something was wrong with me

Lost

What do I do with my life?

Changes

Lots has changed since I was four years old

Changes

Aya Cortez

Westwind Winter 2024

Contributors

Amelia Weintraub was born and raised in Oahu, Hawaii. She is a Junior at UCLA studying Psychology. When Amelia is not using her major as an excuse to give people unsolicited advice, she enjoys trying new matcha lattes and overanalyzing films.

Amari Rueda is a 20 year old first generation Latina woman/aspiring poet. She grew up with a love for art and creative writing, particularly poetry, and began to write her own poems at the age of 12. Amari's poetry often explores themes such as various forms of trauma, mental health issues, and existential thoughts.

Aya Cortez is a fourth-year undergraduate student at UCLA whose writing often revolves around themes of family and being multi-ethnic. She cites Jeannette Walls, Toni Morrison, and Ruth Ozeki as influences on her writing mindset and style.

Brett Stout is a 44-year-old artist and writer.

Daniel Cheng is a sophomore at UCLA.

Darcy Alvey left a career in publishing, serving as editor-in-chief of *Southern California Life After 50*, a magazine with a readership of 500,000-plus, to pursue creative writing. While there, she won several national awards for feature writing from the North American Mature Publishers Association. Since leaving *Life After 50*, she has had stories published in *Waypoints*, *Deadly Writers Patrol*, *34th Parallel*, *Wilderness House Literary Review*, *Founding Review* and, upcoming, *After Dinner Conversation*. She is currently writing a collection of short stories and a follow-up to her debut novel, *Pork and Beans*.

Dylan Winward is a second-year English literature and statistics & data science student from London, England. He has a keen interest in Primitivos, golden shepherds and all things Mancunian.

Erin Bashir is currently a fourth year undergraduate student at UCLA raised in Orange County. They love creating and consuming art in all mediums, but their specialty is writing. Their aspirations are to direct and write their own projects.

Jett Felder is a third year English major at UCLA. He may be found running, directing, acting, holding a boom mic, and, of course, writing.

jimmy vega is the child of Mexican immigrants, a Chicane Los Angeles born and raised poet, writer, educator, artist, and curator. His debut poetry collection will be published by What Books Press in 2025. He holds an MFA from the School of Critical Studies, Creative Writing Program at CalArts, where they co-created the MFA in Creative Writing's HYPERLINK reading series and a B.A. in English with a concentration in Creative Writing from UCLA. In 2023 their work was on view at The Reef Los Angeles as part of the group exhibit, Spell/ing. He is a former 2023 ELL Faculty Fellow at CalArts and is the Associate Director of Beyond Baroque Literary Arts/Center. He lives in Los Angeles, on unceded Tongva land, with his partner Gladys, and schnauzer, Olive.

Hannah Cole is a second year Psychology and Geography/Environmental Studies student at UCLA. Currently, she is in the process of writing her first poetry book. When not studying or writing, Hannah can often be found exploring the outdoors and hanging out with her friends.

Mia Gregg (she/her) is a first year American Literature and Culture major at UCLA. She started writing poetry in middle school in her notes app and just fell in love with it. She also dabbles in playwriting as well. Most of her poetry comes from spur of the moment inspirations and spans from odes to space, love letters, generational trauma, and the sexiness of columns.

Molly Harris lives in St. Louis, MO, with her husband and three cats. She holds an MFA in fiction from the University of Missouri-St. Louis, and she works as an associate editor at Boulevard. She has been previously published in *Litro Online*, *The Interpreter's House*, *Vagabond City Literature*, and elsewhere.

Rebecca von Damm is a third-year transfer student majoring in English at UCLA. You can find more of her haiku on her poetry Instagram @fredericnemiser.

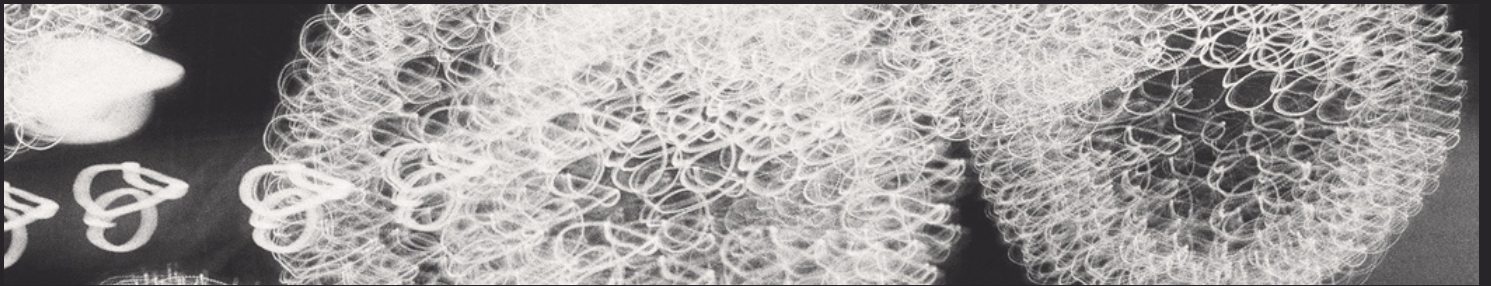
Ryan Riffenburgh is a writer and musician from Ventura, California. He is one of the primary songwriters in the band Outwest and is pursuing a BA in English with a minor in creative writing at UCLA.

T. C. Palmer is from the Pacific Northwest. He draws inspiration from experience in the natural world, observation of humanmade art, and the analysis of how the two intersect. Currently a fourth-year cognitive science and music industry student at UCLA, he enjoys studying perception, artificial intelligence, philosophy, and botany.

Yaser Cisneros is currently a third-year English major at UCLA, but hails from Bakersfield, California. His literary interests center primarily around Latin American literature, and the works of William Shakespeare. He doesn't really know what he wants to do when he graduates. Hopefully, he will write the next great American novel. Readers are welcome to check out the rest of his work on his website, yasercisneros.substack.com.

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