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Please take care as some works address sensitive topics. Here are resources.

If you are thinking about suicide, please call
1-855-654-6735

Need someone to talk to? NJ Hopeline is here to help.
Specialists are available for confidential telephone counseling and support 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. **You're NOT alone.**

Crisis Textline:
Text NJ to 741741 for free, 24/7 crisis support.

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline 1-800-273-TALK (8255) is a 24-hour, toll-free, confidential suicide prevention hotline available to anyone in suicidal crisis or emotional distress. By dialing 1-800-273-TALK, the call is routed to the nearest crisis center in a national network of more than 150 crisis centers. The Lifeline's national network of local crisis centers provides crisis counseling and mental health referrals day and night.

Domestic Violence:

National Domestic Violence Hotline

1-800-799-SAFE (7233) / 1-800- 787-3224 TTY
secure online chat: thehotline.org

loveisrespect

1-866-331-9474 / Text "loveis" to 22522
Secure online chat: loveisrespect.org

Hotlines

NJ Coalition to End Domestic Violence Women (NJCEDV)

1-609-584-8107

NJ Coalition Against Sexual Assault (NJ CASA)

1-609-631-4450

Child Abuse and Neglect Hotline

1-877-NJ-ABUSE (652-2873)

1-800-835-5510 (TTY)

Statewide Domestic Violence Hotline

1-800-572-SAFE

Statewide Sexual Violence Hotline

1-800-601-7200

NJ Human Trafficking Hotline

1-855-END-NJ-HT (1-855-363-6548)

National Domestic Violence Hotline

1-800-799-SAFE

National Sexual Violence Hotline

1-800-656-HOPE

National Human Trafficking Hotline

1-888-373-7888

New Jersey Crime Victim's Law Center

1-973-729-9342

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This year's edition would not have been possible
without your support.

Grayscale Hue

Hosna Kachooee

She dropped to her knees,
Her smiles still linger in the echoes of who she used to be
Barefoot, she walked for hours into the night
Fleeing what only returns to haunt her in her sleep

A moment of bliss, a moment of cries
By fifteen,
Nothing lived behind those eyes

She changed her hair just to shave it clean
She wore a red dress to catch eyes in the streets
Pleading, "When can I leave?", "When should I go?"
Trembling bedtime questions
She whispered to the monsters down below

And her father
Cruelty tugged unfairly at his graying hair
As he watched his sweet baby girl
Slip between unsavory truths
One moment, his daughter, then another, a stranger
This new pain of hers, something he could not soothe

Guilt, love, and dread
Now became his nightly trinity
Praying that the girl he raised
Was still somewhere, fighting
Deep inside the chemical haze

Strand by strand, he aged in grief

Everything dimmed, stalled at a threshold
Her soul now thins with sedatives
So frail, he simply could not hold

Like the rain that shared her name,
She fell and fell, where he stood
Catching whatever piece of her that dropped
The weight of loving one between moods

A truth he never wished he knew
His beloved firstborn, now faded into a grayscale hue



“Luna”

Carlos Espinosa



“Wait”

Sawyer M. Spaeth

An Obituary from a Fan You'll Never Meet

Angela Lovero

When I listen to your songs,
I still get a rush of nostalgia,
Even though I never knew your presence.

When I watch old clips,
I still feel welcomed by you,
Like a soldier coming home for Christmas,
Even though you were pixels behind a glass wall.

When I see you perform,
I picture myself in the crowd,
Screaming your lyrics with them,
Like wolves howling at the full moon.

When I play your favorite game franchise,
I wonder how you'd react to
The latest installment,
Hoping you'd be pleased.

When I hear about your favorite artist,
I think about how you'd react to newest releases,
And about the latest fights they get into.

When I recall the day you left, I feel a sense of guilt,
Because I know past me would love you, And a sense of relief,
Because I know I'd never take it well.

I'm almost the same age as you were,
Finally feeling these thoughts towards you,
And since then, your presence lingers,
Never leaving me alone.

But I could never express it,
I know they'd ask Why? When? How?

You are more than a horror tale
To young girls,
And even boys alike.

You were a beacon of light and hope,
You were a muse to many artists like you.

But most importantly,
You were someone's family,
Someone's friend.

At the End

Rosemary Tierney

I sink to the floor, my shirt sliding down the door frame as if even my clothes have given up. It was another fight, another exchange of wounds in a spate of “irreconcilable differences.” We could pull out maps and chart a timeline, and I still think neither of us would be able to answer the question of how we got here. Too much time can do that, and we have so much history – all we have is history – and we could fill books with photos and grocery lists and drunk texts and concert tickets and prayer cards from all the funerals we went to together, never knowing – no, ignoring – that someday we’d stand in a courtroom while a judge read our own kind of obituary just like a different judge once read the introduction to the story of us.

I sit on the floor until my legs go numb and I hear the bed upstairs creak as you shift, restless, ready to run, but not willing to run the risk of having to pretend you don’t see me on the way out. My body is heavy, my clothes creased, and I sit here and think about the demise of our joined life. Will it seem sudden to our friends? How will our parents take it? I’m sinking deep into the very anticipation of grief. People will say we couldn’t go the distance, not knowing how many miles of roads and fields and quicksand we struggled through until we couldn’t go any farther. And I feel like all we’ve done is move lightyears away from where we started and where we meant to end up.

Looking down at my soon-to-be forfeited ring, I begin to make the necessary arrangements in my head. When we went before the judge at the beginning, we both wore black with one red rose each. This time, I’ll wear gray, no flowers shared, no rings exchanged. I gave you all of me, and you gave me all of you. Who will we be when we give each other back the selves we’ve held so long?

Six Soaring Oak Trees

Sean Ferry

Worn-out sneakers trodding along a gravel path
Fresh water spouting and rushing out into a decorative fountain bend
Weeds that are wildflowers to me
Warm and humid air that envelops almost every sense
Back to riding the bicycle, the opposite journey will go by much faster

Merry Christmas, Adam

Angel Gonzalez

He flickers through the anger,
a tale past his fingertips and the corners of his mouth.
The shivering of the teeth against the cold January breeze.
A mere compilation of memories,
the family picture book.
Four seats at the table; one frigid and dusty; empty.
He did not catch it on time.
Perhaps he had been too young at the time.
Perhaps the song had sounded too loud at the time.
The nonsense of a guitar cannot calm a heart that
was never meant to pump.
Not like the others' do.
Yet, his anger flows...
Like the river at the edge of a city.
And this anger, like the thousand year-old merchant
has also encountered rotten bodies—rotten souls,
taking after his touch.
He's all alone, by design—that is his mold.
He will not transform it and he cannot destroy it.
This wretched garden he has constructed, will indeed flourish.
A piece of land small like his happiness,
with withered flowers and decaying grasses.
And he will care for it, spitefully.
Yet even the tallest, most robust of trees end up falling.



“Dance”

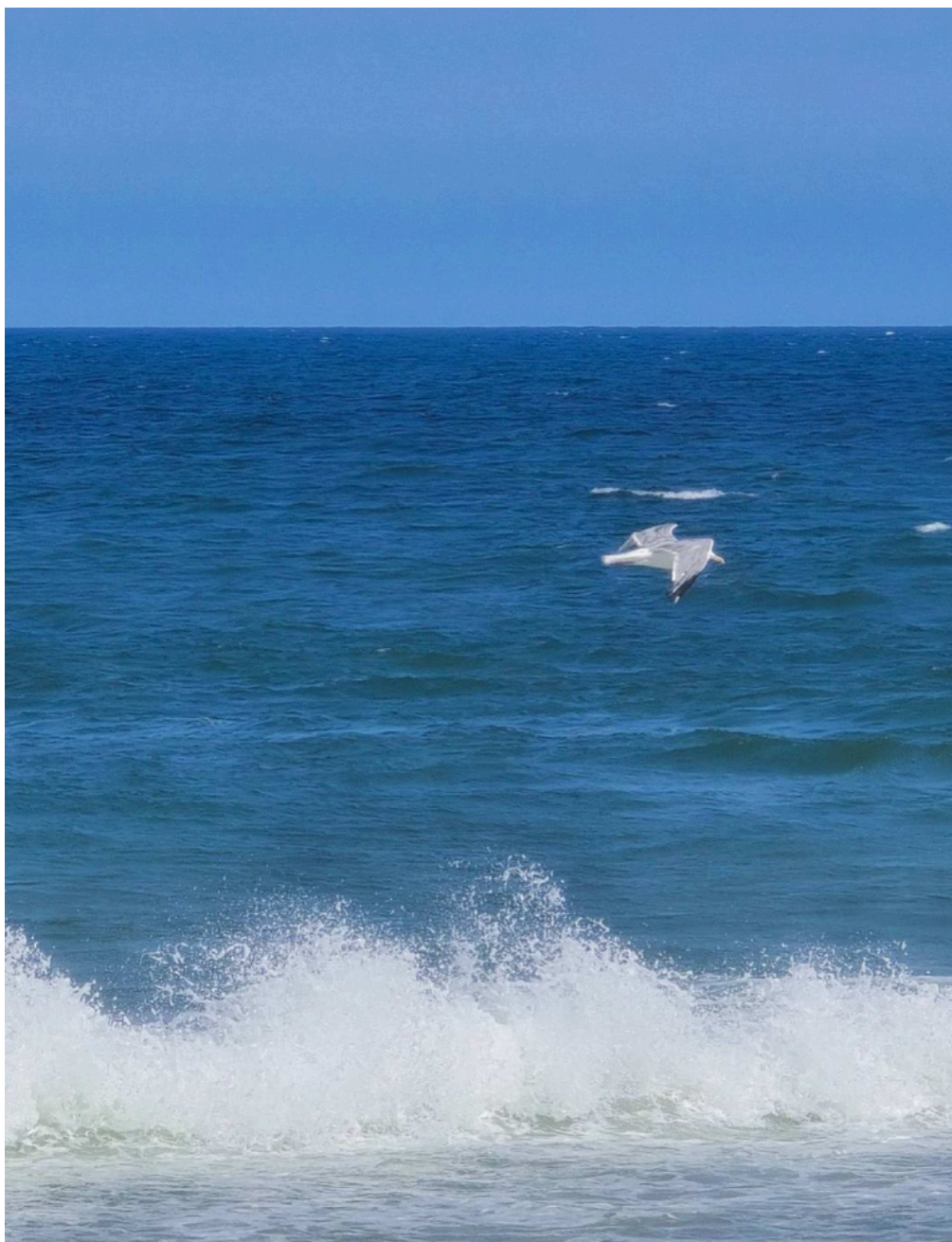
Mila Antkevych

Midnight Expressions

Sonia Hinojosa

An indigo sky
A moon shining bright
Stars twinkle on and fade out of sight
The sun had its time
Now it's gone to sleep
And the time now is mine
To share secrets I keep
With nobody in particular
Just the moon and the stars
My favorite extracurricular
Take a deep breath
Open your heart
Tell the moon the things
You keep like fine art
Oh dear moon
Oh dear stars
Why do I feel trapped
If I cannot see bars?
This world wasn't meant
For a man like me
Who was born without
The right anatomy
Soft pink blankets
Wrapped around me at birth
I was told who I should be
By everyone on Earth
Curtains brushed to the side
Of my window pane

I open up the panels of glass
And hear the ocean call my name
At least for a moment
I could be who I am inside
I closed the window
And I quietly cried



“Over Blue”

Jackson Briggs



“Summer”

Beixi Chen

Alive Again

Maximillian Venskus

A simple New York City doctor's office. Examination chair, counter with medical supplies, and a desk with a chair and an audio recorder

CHARACTERS

JIM VAN HELSING (Male, Mid 30's, physician)

IVAN (Male, appears mid 20's, vampire)

LIZZIE (Female, appears late 20's, vampire)

SCENE 1

JIM is present in the office, dictating notes to the audio recorder

JIM (*Speaking to Audio Recorder*)

Doctor Jim Van Helsing, February tenth, two thousand twenty six. I can't believe it. News came in from Transylvania last night. Dracula, dead. As is said in the vampire hunting texts, this should mean that all subsequent vampires are now human. An event like this has happened before, the death of a progenitor, but on this scale is astounding. To think all the expertise we built up treating vampires all these years is to be wiped out. And all because Dracula tripped on a cat. Reports say he landed on a wood bannister post. Nasty stuff. Frankly, I have no clue what to do.

Enter IVAN and LIZZIE

JIM

Ah! Ivan, Lizzie! What can I do for you?

JIM shuts off the audio recorder

IVAN (*Groaning*)

Frankly, Doctor, something strange has occurred. The wound in my back, from the fall off the horse in the 1400's? It has begun to ache.

JIM

Well that's certainly odd.

IVAN

It was from before I turned. Perhaps some blood could clear it up?

LIZZIE

Yes I think blood could do us both some good. I'm feeling rather out of it myself.

JIM (*Nervous*)

I... don't think that will be necessary.

IVAN

You're sure?

LIZZIE

Positive?

JIM

Yes... The things you are feeling, are the sensations of being mortal once more.

IVAN (*Shocked*)

Truly? Doctor what has happened?!

LIZZIE (*Shocked*)

What calamity has befallen us?!

JIM

Dracula has passed. All vampires are now mortal. It will be a very trying time for all of you. I'm sorry.

IVAN

What does this mean?!

LIZZIE

What will happen to us?!

JIM

Well, first of all, you will return to the appearance and state you were pre-turning. That means for you Ivan, your mid fifties and Lizzie your forties. But it's not all bad. You will also be able to walk in the daylight, and consume garlic. But probably the hardest to get used to is... you will age.

IVAN

Age!?

LIZZIE

How Ghastly...

JIM

In addition, you won't have to keep up the ruse of being a couple anymore. Your emotions should return, and you can figure out your life for yourselves.

IVAN

E-emotions? Now that you mention it I do feel this sadness. For... my friend. Dracula was my...friend.

LIZZIE

Don't be ridiculous. Vampires don't have friends.

JIM

There are no vampires anymore.

IVAN

Thank you for telling me, Doctor Van Helsing. I must be alone with my thoughts a while.

JIM
Of course. Visit again soon.

LIZZIE
Hmph. Guess I should start looking for a day job. After all, I'll need to afford more products now if I'm going to keep this flawless complexion.

JIM
If you ever need a referral to a dermatologist, let me know.

Exit LIZZIE and IVAN

SCENE 2

JIM is once again dictating notes to his recording device.

JIM (*Speaking to Audio Recorder*)
Doctor Jim Van Helsing, February twenty eighth, two thousand twenty-six. The initial chaos has pretty much subsided by now. But the adjustment is far from over. Poor Marie, turned at sixteen, now having to go through those younger hormonal changes all over again five hundred years later. The Van Helsing Organization has been reaching out to mental health and geriatric care counselors to help the newly aging population. On a happier note, we are also reaching out to the new parents who are now finally able to have children to check up on them. Disbanding the blood connection network has been a real chore, but it's proceeding smoothly. On a side note, these parties that the former vampires are throwing are insane. I guess that's what centuries without alcohol does to you, I suppose.

Enter IVAN, looking like a man in his 50's. JIM switches off the recording device.

JIM
Ivan! Welcome. How has life been treating you?

IVAN
To be honest, I preferred undeath.

JIM

I suppose that's only natural. It's been a big change after a few centuries.

IVAN

Yes. I miss my full head of hair already.

JIM

Well, have there been any positives?

IVAN

I love garlic. Do you know how hard it was to live in New York for centuries without eating classic New York Pizza? But oh the heartburn! Why would something so delicious hurt me so?!

JIM (*laughing*)

Well I can help with that. I'm glad to hear you found something to enjoy.

IVAN

To be honest, the strangest thing is the emotions. I feel compelled to attend Dracula's funeral in Transylvania.

JIM

Well that's understandable. He was your friend.

IVAN

But I also feel like I want Lizzie to come with me.

JIM

O-Oh! I thought you two hated each other after centuries of pretending to be a couple. Figured you would be all too quick to leave each other.

IVAN

I did too. But these last few weeks, I've been going on dates. And none of them understand what I went through. None of them know.

JIM

Have you considered telling her about your feelings?

IVAN

I doubt that it will change anything. I think she is sick of me.

JIM

Maybe. But it's also possible no one understands her too. It's not every day you find someone who got their soul back after hundreds of years.

IVAN

Perhaps. I will think on your advice, doctor. Thank you.

JIM

Any time Ivan.

Exit IVAN

SCENE 3

JIM is dictating to his recording device

JIM (*Speaking to Audio Recorder*)

Doctor Jim Van Helsing, March thirtieth, two thousand twenty-six. I'm going to have to start looking for a new job soon. Being an expert on vampires doesn't mean much when vampires don't exist anymore. I've been more like a therapist to them than a doctor. Maybe I should go back to school and get certified for it. It's amazing to see how many former vampires are going back home after all these years. A lot of them are devastated to see how much it has changed. But a few of them seem able to take it well, so that gives me hope at least. You think being around for hundreds of years would give them some idea of how to control emotions. But I suppose not.

Enter LIZZIE, looking older and noticeably tan.

LIZZIE

Hello doctor Van Helsing.

JIM

Lizzie! What a pleasant surprise! What can I help you with?

LIZZIE

Oh just checking in. This living thing is great! Would you look at how tan my skin is now!?

JIM

Yeah it is striking. How often do you visit the tanning beds anyway?

LIZZIE (*Nervous*)

Oh- not that often. Must just be my genetics haha...

JIM

Suuuuuureee

LIZZIE

Anyway. I also need to ask you about something.

JIM

Oh?

LIZZIE

...Ivan asked me to go to Dracula's memorial with him.

JIM

I see. Well it's fitting is it not? You two did meet him together.

LIZZIE

No. As his partner.

JIM

Ahhhhhhhh. I see. Have you given him an answer?

LIZZIE

Not yet.

JIM

Are you sure I am the best person to be asking about this? I'm just your doctor after all.

LIZZIE

You've known us the longest to be honest. I don't know how to respond. All his little quirks drove me crazy over the years. I would dream of the day this ruse would end and I could live on my own. But now that day has come and my apartment just feels...empty.

JIM

Well how about you try to go to the memorial and see how you feel afterward?

LIZZIE

Perhaps I will. But aside from that, I would like to get a referral for a dermatologist, I want to make sure my skin is absolutely radiant.

JIM

Alright let me write you up an address

JIM writes a note out to LIZZIE

JIM

There you go.

LIZZIE

Thank you, Jim. You've given me a lot to think about.

JIM

Of course.

IVAN (*embarrassed*)
Ah-no well, that's...

LIZZIE
My bad! Force of habit!

LIZZIE leans up against IVAN

LIZZIE
We came to tell you we're moving too! California baby! Somewhere nice and
sunny

JIM
So it all worked out in the end.

LIZZIE flashes her wedding ring

LIZZIE
I'd say so. This life thing was hard to get a handle on at first. But I'd say it's going
alright.

IVAN
Agreed. After all, without my soul I never would have realized what i had.

JIM
Then let's get out of this dump and live a little, eh?

A Voice that Broke Perception

Lily Adams

Will I ever be respected? Being an African American woman is something that I am most proud of. It wasn't always like this. I never understood what being different really meant until I went to school. I went to a Ukrainian school when I was in kindergarten. When I was there, I began to become very familiar with the feeling of being isolated. Since I was so little, I can only remember bits and pieces, but what I will never forget is the sense of seclusion. The students who were there would look at me in a disdainful kind of way. That's when I realized there was something distinct about me that other people recognized, and it scared me. I pondered the question: Am I supposed to be accepted? Is it good that I stand out? These questions followed me all throughout my life.

When I started in a Ukrainian school, it wasn't something I expected. From the moment I entered the school, I was very scared. As a scared little 4-year-old girl, I was soon going to find out that my whole identity would be formed in this moment. I would try to make friends in my class. I always felt like there was a hindrance between us, an unspoken hesitation that was expressed when being around them. The principal would call me in to check how I was doing, and she always had a jelly bean jar. The flavors of cherry, lime, and blueberry would just explode in my mouth. When all the kids would be playing in the playground, I would try to join, and the group of kids would say, "We just want to play with ourselves." In that moment, anger arose, and I said, "Why? Because I'm Black." At first, they were baffled by my saying something so straightforward. The girl in the group told me, "No, it's not that." Even though she was trying to reassure me that it wasn't, I couldn't fight the feeling that I had of knowing it was. They began to play and run around. I can remember feeling like I was in a fish tank, watching everyone else play with others, incapable of joining them. That emotion of feeling unaccepted or unwanted scourged me for so long that I thought no one would like who I am. The unspoken prejudices got so bad that my dad had to talk to the principal.

A few years passed by, and it was time to start a new chapter in my life called “middle school.” In my middle school, it was the stepping stone to many years of racial torment. In one instance, I wanted to join a group of girls, and one of them said, “You aren’t light enough,” and then added, “I’m kidding.” “I’m kidding.” I became very familiar with the term. It became a safe net for people to say things that were revolting. Constantly being around girls with straight hair and lighter skin made me feel ugly. I started to have low self-esteem and didn't think I could talk to people who were “socially accepted.”

High school was something that shocked me; people were just blatantly prejudiced, but they coated it as being biased. I always felt like being in a private high school made me feel like I couldn’t relate to anyone, even my friends. For example, someone would say my skin was too dark or talk about my kinky hair, and I would tell my friends, and they wouldn’t react or try to stand up for me. Which was understandable because they wouldn’t see it as offensive. A positive outcome that it had was it enabled me to stand up for myself. Sometimes it would get tiring, but I knew that I didn't deserve to be disrespected. Senior year was the year that changed my whole view of how I saw myself. I learned to love my hair and all the features that I was born with. I realized my worth, and I haven’t stopped since.

So now, revisiting the question, will I ever be respected? My life is a prime example of emotional scars that were instilled in me at a young age. I’m still struggling with being able to be open with people. It was not easy even writing this essay and digging up hurtful memories that were embedded in me, but this empowered me to stay confident. To know that I am a strong, beautiful, and intelligent Black woman. Always remembering that is the key to having others' respect. Now I might have to work harder in this world in order to be respected. That is the essential statement of living in a broken world. I know my worth, and that’s all that matters. Something that Jennifer Lewis said stood out to me. I will leave you with this: “You look in the mirror every morning and stand there and look in your own eyes and say, “I love myself, I'm important, I'm worthy.” I’m somebody in this world.”



“La Mandonna (Close Up 1)”

Daniela Crespo



“La Mandonna (Close Up 3)”

Daniela Crespo



“La Mandonna”

Daniela Crespo



“Dragon-Stone”

Claudia Duran

The Rhythm of My Art

Essence Martinez

I'm really good at what I make, but I'm slow at doing it

My hands move the way they were taught,
steady, deliberate, tracing shapes before filling them in
background, what lives in the middle, and what demands attention
the same way stories are built at kitchen tables,
slowly, with pauses that mean something

I've tried to rush with timers, "deadlines," loosened my grip
"Just finish it, " My tempo cannot panic it never has

I've watched others pack up, with their completed pieces
while I still have a breath in some sections
a shoulder unfinished, a corner untouched,
a field of white holding its place like silence between notes

They move quicker when the clock tightens
their lines sharpen under pressure mine stay steady

There's a kind of slowness that looks defiant
a kind that instructors mistake for wandering
a kind that kin recognize without naming

At home, attention comes in waves it's deep and consuming,
then distant, then back again

Time, though, has never loved that rhythm
time measures results, not process
I have a gallery of what's unfinished stacked against the wall in my room

Time took them before I could return but I still carry the empty spaces
they no longer belong to me anymore outpaced, unfinished, irretrievable

When the clock catches up, I do not rage, I do not collapse

I feel something closer to resignation,
the quiet understanding that, that is the best I can do
if I could go faster, I would

But my tempo drums without instruction
only with feeling, it does not sprint or fracture under pressure, it holds

So I plan differently I start early, and distribute my effort
I build around it instead of fighting

My rhythm is not broken, just simply at ease
and it will not shake just because a clock demands it

I let my tempo carry me, steady, unhurried, and unmistakably mine-

Unhoused Life

Rosemary Tierney

Sleeping under a leaky awning
while the weatherman foretells a storm
and new life is budding
from deep in the earth

Consciousness trickles in
with the rain and my eyes
open to see the bare trees
stretching with the dawn

Sparrows have returned
to splash in puddles and
rustle around in awakening greenery
with their water-painted wings

Even as the tips of branches drip
Even as the awning sags
in relief at winter's end
Even as I wonder what the difference is
between seasons that still leave me cold



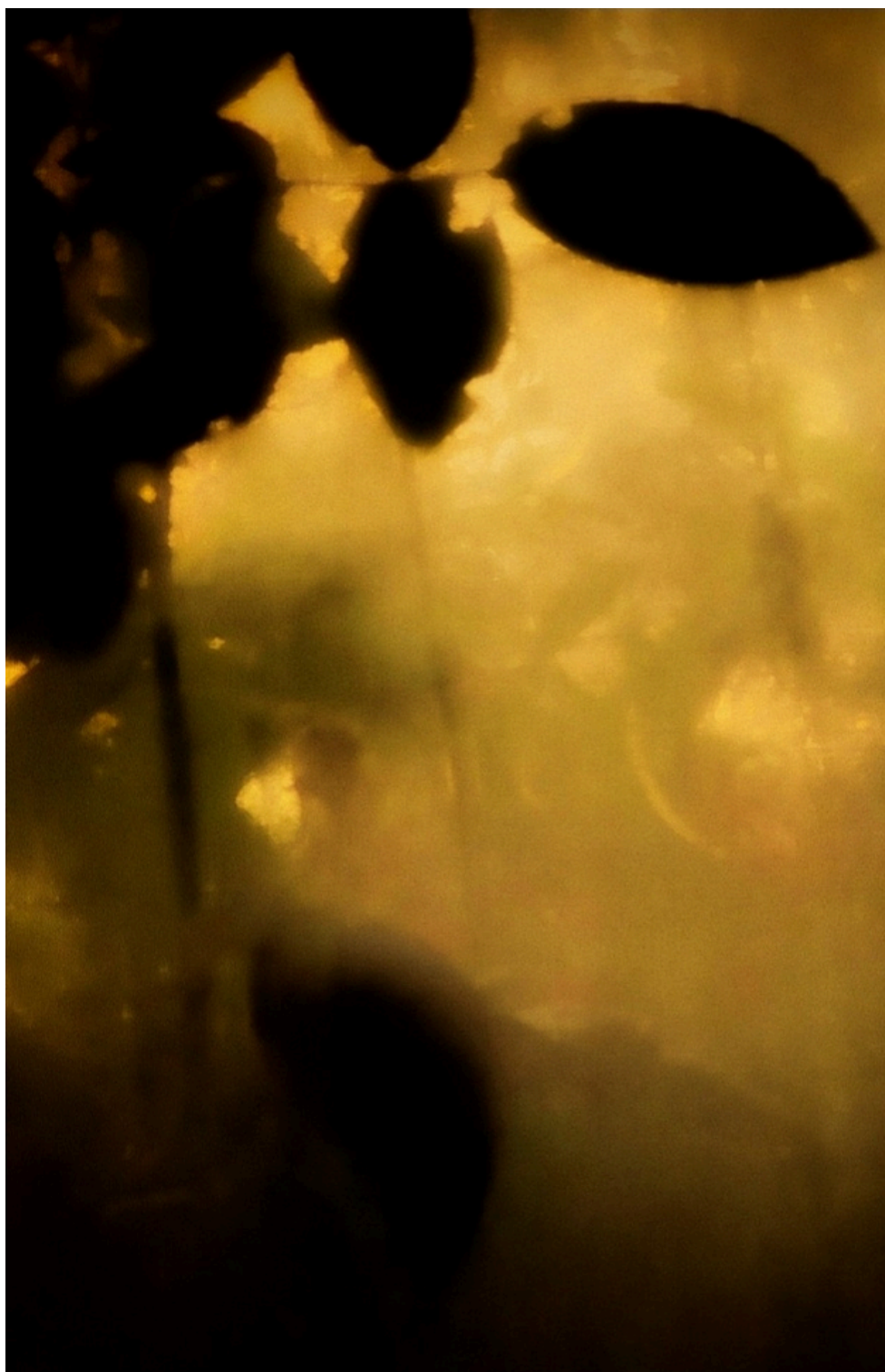
“Sunrise at the Beach”

Brandon Martinez-Perez



“Little light (Emilia sister)”

Antuanette Stanta Cruz



“Golden Hour”

Jackson Briggs

testimony

Rosemary Tierney

exhibit a

a broken mirror,
a mosaic of splintered shards—
fragments of me reflected.
a fig tree,
all the things i could never be.

exhibit b

skin that flinches when touched,
a heart that recoils from love,
ears trained to detect a change of pitch, listening for anger even if it doesn't exist—
a throbbing in my skull, a sickness in my gut.

exhibit c

bruises of blue and green,
eyes not on you, but trailing me.
covering up so they won't see
no one can help me—
you'll just sharpen your teeth.

exhibit d

fingers tracing over photographs—
smiling faces, comforting embraces.
stomach clenched over memories
of loneliness.
a hollow pit where love should live.

exhibit e

footsteps measured, cautious,
memorizing the creaks in the staircase
floating through my home like a ghost.
scanning for danger, cataloguing threats—
disappearing— my only safety net.

exhibit f

words i'll never say bled from me in ink
tear-stained and scrawled.
every wound you slashed into me left history.
i let the goodness in me atrophy,
believing every word you called me—
worthless, desperate, forgettable.

exhibit g

flashes in my memories that will not sleep,
fingerprint marks of ruin beat into me.
these spirits still haunt me.
my every step a legacy,
every breath a testimony.

closing statement

every scar still screams.
all my memories— evidence,
of what was done to me.

true love

Priscilla Cabrera

The light in me finds words to speak, expresses them so eloquently.
Despite my fear, and trembling feet convince me to love thy enemy.
Your ego has no place here, let them win their battles to win your war.

I listen to the light in me,
sing of faith, & dreams.

Singing like she knows for certain—she'll never miss her purpose.

The hate they give, you see, is too high a price for me.

Rebuking demons or traces,
your hate is yours, I won't take it.
My love is divine, you can't break it.

Giving fear no foothold,
the enemy has no way to defeat me—
though not in my own strength. The sun shining,

though not with my own grace. I won't turn my love to your hate,
though not with my own peace I will use your hate for my love—

I will set us both free.

Loneliness

Norma Quinde

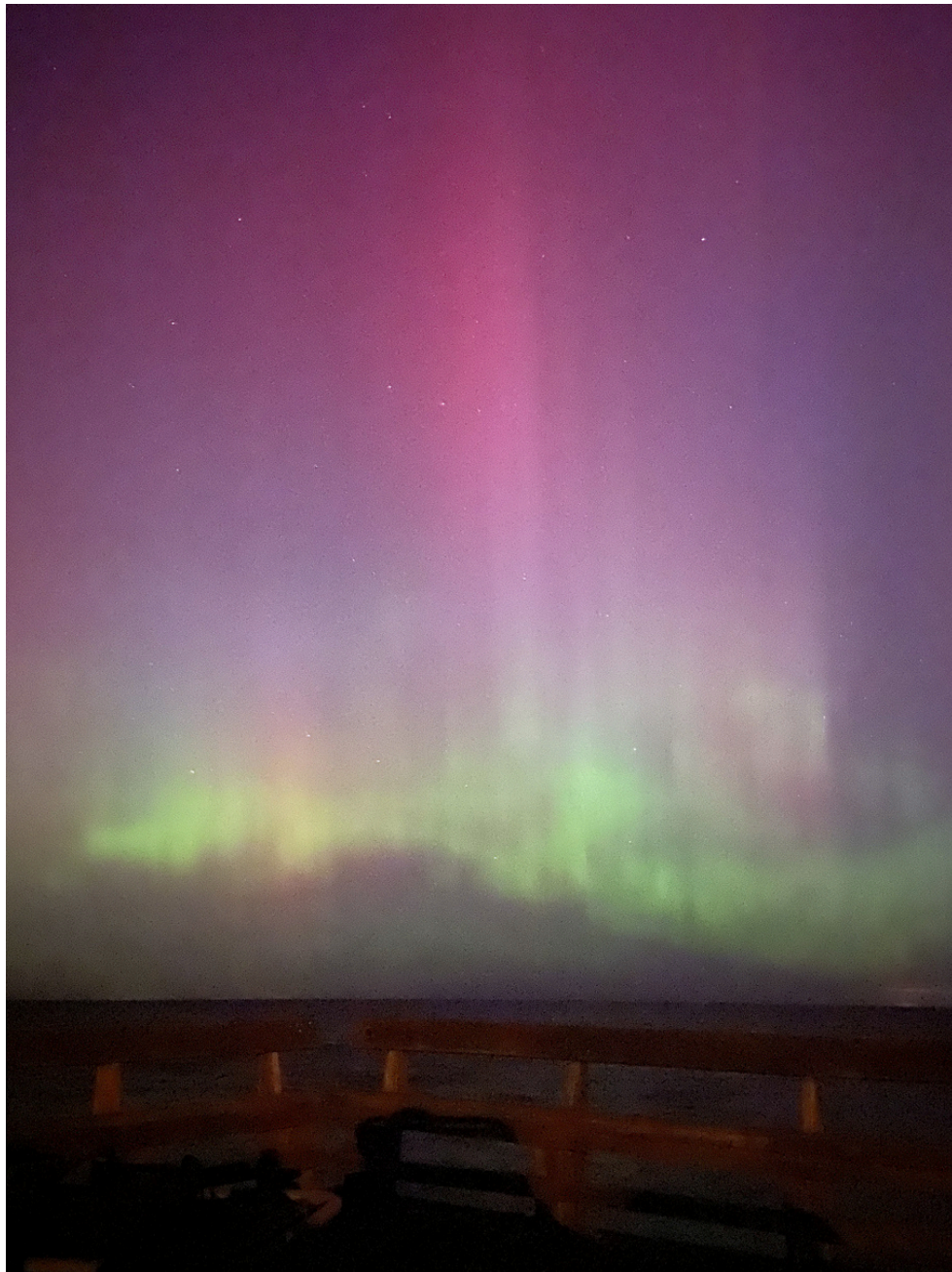
There sits a man in his room,
Shielded away from The Outside.
He has a pencil in one hand
And an empty book in the other.
And he writes - oh, he better write.

Write, write, write - oh, he better,
For the words on the page are his only company.
Write, write, write - oh, he does,
But as time passes by..
The words on the page are barely company anymore.



“A Ray of Sunshine”

Dilan Sahin



“Euclid”

Dedan Choezom

La Virgen de los Cerros (Our Lady of the Mountains)

Sergio Chamorro

As it was usual in the region, it had rained earlier that day in Rondás. The children of the town ran down the wide main road chasing a muddy soccer ball through the puddles. Martin kicked it forward towards the church at the end of the main square, and then turned his head to see the beautiful sunset god had gifted the people of this rundown town on the Colombian border with Brazil. Far out in the distance, beyond the river basin and the construction cranes, his gaze caught a strand of light towering up rapidly from his house. It ripped a hole in the clouds and escaped into the stratosphere with the speed of a bullet. It was then when he knew his brother had died.

As the beam got wider, the buzzing noise that could barely be distinguished before now became a deafening roar that quieted the town and the kilometers of rainforest surrounding it. Martin froze in place and stared, hypnotized, at this tower of white, fluorescent light, increasingly growing larger and brighter. The hum forced people out of their homes. After a minute or so, all 90 of the people who lived in the town were out on the main street staring agape at this celestial entity swallowing the rainforest.

By the river basin, the American mining facility ground to a halt. The workers and the few suits who were visiting the location that week stepped out of their offices and down from their machines to witness the blinding brightness. The manager of the plant, Joseph Taylor, stood with his back against a caoba tree while his workers ran away into the jungle. His eyebrows tightened down and his mouth shivered at the sight of one of the most beautiful things the natural world could ever produce. Tears escaped his eyes after the horrifying reality sank in; he now would have to stand before the final judge to explain why he had killed one of God's miracles.

The beam kept on growing and when he felt the punching warmth approaching them rapidly, he recalled the first day he had spent in Rondás.

Taylor arrived at Rondás a year and a half ago. He flew in from Washington D.C into Leticia. Back then, he had been relocated for a second time in the same year after unsatisfactory performances as manager of the Company's oil rigs west of Carabobo in Venezuela. From the moment he got off the plane, with his smug eyes hidden behind polarized aviators and his frail body held together by a Tom Ford two-piece, he hated everything about the southern part of Colombia. He hated the humidity that made his always perfectly combed hair get frizzy, he hated the heat that made wearing his full 2,000-dollar suit unbearably uncomfortable, but, above all, he hated what it represented him being there. The relocation to Rondás occurred after a performance review meeting in which the suits that had closely worked with Taylor throughout his 10 years at the company, deemed fair to give him one last chance to prove himself as a valuable asset. A challenge that, even though he had accepted almost on his knees, brought him a great deal of despair and anxiety. At 37 years old, with no wife, kids, or friends, working as a middleman for the Kansas-based mining company was Taylor's biggest achievement; and he simply couldn't conceive of a life in which he was not.

He got picked up by a heavily armed private security escort who drove him deep into the rainforest for hours until the road started to dissipate into a trail of macheted down trees and squashed shrubbery. The first hour, Taylor saw nothing but trees and the occasional wild species. Which made him question the need for 5 Ex-Navy Seals with assault rifles to escort him. The doubt lasted briefly when they crossed a Y intersection and got into Guerrilla country, where a group of armed rebels with red bandanas covering their mouths interviewed the driver and had him pay a "toll" to let the car transit freely. A toll that was repaid every 10 kilometers as the word spread around that there were some gringos giving cash in exchange for using the road. After an agonizing trip of 6 hours full of bumps, armed groups, and stoic Navy Seals making Mexican impressions of Colombians, the tinted Jeep made it to Rondás.

Rondás lay atop a hill that overlooked a valley. The hill and the valley were sharply divided by a wide river that pierced through the thousands of acres of deep greenery and connected the most remote town in the Colombian territory with the Amazon River. The truck drove down Rondás' main street, and Taylor crossed eyes with the townspeople who sat around and looked with curiosity at them as

they made their way towards the river basin. The sun had set an hour ago and one by one the houses in Rondás lit up. In the distance, close to the edge of the valley, a single solitary house lit up. Taylor followed it with his gaze until the view was covered by the leafy tops of the trees.

The car came to a stop and the driver silently gestured to Taylor that they had reached their destination. Taylor got out of the car and walked alongside the river towards the rudimentary operations center. The car waited for him to get to the entrance and then rushed back up the hill and away from Rondás.

Even though Taylor had worked in some of the most remote regions of the world, the Jungle in Rondás was like nothing he had ever seen before. The vegetation was so abundant and so closely intertwined with each other, that it seemed the entire territory was one giant organism breathing and vibrating with life. The air was still and impossibly humid due to the wind being blocked by the wall of trees east of the river. The buzz of every species of arthropod roared out of the deep and the singing of thousands of birds clashed violently against what seemed to be the breaths of a giant swirling through the tree tops. Taylor, drenched in sweat, got to the door and knocked. The door opened and a mix of desperate college interns and balding American engineers greeted him inside.

The walls were covered in blueprints, charts and calculations. Taylor nodded at everyone and quietly walked around the room, settling himself in. He stopped by the window that overlooked the river and noticed the drawing made with white marker outlining the mining facility that was going to be built next to a cluster of 20 feet tall acai trees.

Everyone waited anxiously for him to break the silence.

Taylor cleared his throat and said,

“So, what’s this about again? Gold?”

The engineers shared a look. The lanky engineer sitting by the bookshelf spoke up.

“You didn’t read the briefing, did you?”

“Couldn’t get to it. After a while doing this all the reports end up sounding the same. It’s either Oil or Gold. And since we’re next to a river, I figured it was Gold.”

“It isn’t”, the engineer replied.

“Then what is it?” questioned Taylor.

“You have to see it for yourself. Come on out.”

“Barry, bring a light. It’s dark as shit out there.”

Taylor followed with an intrigued expression in his face. Him, the engineer, and an intern holding a heavy flashlight made their way outside. Faced with the shore of the heavily sedimented river, the engineer instructed the intern to hold the light steady pointing towards the water. The engineer rolled up his sleeve, knelt down and stuck his arm inside to dig for something on the river bed. He dug for a couple of seconds in the mud and then took his arm back out to throw what he had dug out to Taylor’s feet. Taylor looked down and didn’t distinguish what it was at first. It was a shiny, transparent rock the size of a tennis ball. When the intern pointed the light at it, Taylor immediately understood the secrecy behind this particular operation: It was a 100% pure, pink diamond.

“Diamond?” Taylor asked.

“Not any Diamond. This is the rarest Diamond strand in the world,” replied the engineer.

“How?”

“According to the surveys, there’s a meteor underneath the river. It has almost 2 tons of Diamonds on it,”

“How much is it worth?”

“Barry?”

“No more than 10 Billion, depending on the purity of the diamonds,” the intern said.

Taylor walked around with his arms crossed, reflecting on the information for a second. He scoffed and a laugh escaped him.

“Who knows about this? The town people? The rebel groups?” asked Taylor.

“Just the people in that room, and you now.”

“We have to keep it that way. Understood?”

The engineer and the intern nodded.

They walked back inside, and Taylor spent the entire night looking out the window at the smoke coming from the house in the valley.

The first days of Taylor’s in Rondás were uneventful. He spent most of his time secluded inside that painfully cramped white container with the rest of the engineers holding endless meetings with the suits in America, Shanghai and Paris. Even though in Rondás there were beauties unavailable in any other part of the globe, Taylor’s outlook towards the untamed wilderness outside his door was nothing more than transactional. Every creek saturated with green, every elusive bug, every moss covered tree, every bird sprawling with color were the mere background of the most important operation of his career, and every line drawn in the blueprint paper was one more appendix of this lush purity that had been marked for demolition.

Regardless, not even Taylor’s apathy rivaled the beauty of the sunsets in Rondás. When the sun started to go down, the clouds would get dressed in royal purple and the reflection of the decaying sunlight on the far end of the valley would hit the water in the river making it look crimson. Quite often, he would find himself

leaving the office and enjoying a cigarette by the river shore. The Tuesday he met Maria, he had forgotten his cigarettes inside, and was too lazy to go retrieve them.

The air was eerily still that afternoon and the birds seemed to be resting after one of the hottest days in weeks. Taylor gazed up the river and then high into the sky. He listened to the silence for a moment until a rumble coming from the other shore alerted him. He lowered his head and locked eyes with a Nukak woman named Maria. Her face was beautifully decorated with red lines forming geometrical patterns that framed her eyes and mouth. Her son, Martin, played in the water. He had black hair and always seemed to be dusty. Hidden inside a burlap sack nested in her arms, she carried a baby. He smiled at her. Maria slightly inclined her head, grabbed Martin by the arm and rushed back into the jungle.

The indigenous woman and her striking, hypnotizing, bright yellow eyes, became Taylor's biggest obsession. He waited for her every single day at sunset on the same spot they had met that hot Tuesday afternoon. Some days he would scan the jungle until the sun went down, hoping to catch a gaze of her. Sadly, she never showed up. Unbeknownst to Taylor, she would be hiding in the bushes, waiting for him to go back inside so her kids could bathe in peace. Their paths would cross again a couple of weeks later, when the construction of the mine started.

It was Monday, and the Gringos gathered around the shore sharing glasses of champagne as they overlooked the underpaid Colombian workers setting up 2 charges of C4 on top of a boulder in the middle of the river. Taylor gained the crowd's attention. He was holding the detonator in his hands. He proceeded to deliver a half-assed speech about team bonding, work-families and historic achievements in the mining industry. It was filled with corporate buzzwords and culturally risqué jokes that aimed to elicit a reaction out of his robotic audience. His dullness was well received and the crowd shyly cheered him on as he finished and prepared to detonate the charges.

Taylor pressed the button and the charges went off. Water splashed as high as the eye could see and pink glitter coming from the diamonds in the river covered the

air. All the birds resting on the treetops flew away in terror and the loud explosion echoed all the way out into the jungle, shushing the music of the green and replacing it with a cryptic silence for an instant. While the team mingled and raved about the pink glitter swaying down from the sky, Taylor caught a glimpse of Maria who looked at them from the distance. She held tight onto her covered baby and in disgust started stepping back when she crossed eyes with Taylor. Taylor waved at her and started to approach her. Maria ran away, but in the process something fell from inside the burlap sack she had the baby in. When Taylor got to where she was, the only thing remaining was a pink flower with long petals lying on the ground.

The following weeks were rush after rush for Taylor and the mining team. Trucks coming in from Leticia constantly cruised down to the river basin carrying equipment for the mine. Within the span of a month, the cranes had started to get set up, the drills had started to fire on all cylinders and, day after day the quietness that had once characterized Rondás had been pushed aside by the construction noises that started from sunrise and didn't stop until past 9 pm. The intervention of the river was violent, aggressive and careless. A combination of null government presence in Rondás and the Company having "legal" rights over the land surrounding it, gave them total leeway to rip apart this flow of life with the meanest, heaviest machinery they could get their hands on. They burned down the shrubbery surrounding the shores, axed down the cluster of trees that curved over the water, and the countless fish that swam through its current were constantly being pulverized by the drills. When the cadavers got to the fishermen's nets a couple of kilometers down, their flesh was nothing more than a mush of bones, rust and engine oil. The townspeople had not grasped the threat the mine represented to their livelihoods until the fishermen started to show up to the markets with fewer and fewer fishes, and when the birds stopped showing up to the main square of the town due to the incessant deafening noise coming from the river shores.

The night of the 4th week of operations, the plant closed early due to a heavy storm that covered the region at sundown. When it was close to midnight, Taylor was the only one awake. He was trying to draft progress reports on his laptop,

when out of the corner of his eye he saw movement next to a crane on the other side of the river. It was Maria and her kids.

Martin held a light to the floor while she took out some sort of wooden blade to puncture the tip of her finger. She pooled some blood on the ground, threw some salt on it and then, carefully stuck his baby's hand out to touch it. The blood turned a deep blue color after the touch. Taylor's voice roared through the rain demanding them to stop.

Maria and the kids gathered themselves and rushed out. Taylor woke everyone up and had them inspect the crane and the surroundings. No one found anything and the puddle of blood had already dissipated with the water and mixed with the mud.

The next day, the air around the plant was free of dust, smoke and that awful gasoline smell that emanates from the drills. The calm morning was crowned by one of the cranes hanging from the top of a colossal Caoba tree that had grown and pierced through it overnight. The workers of the plant stood around in awe, sharing looks without saying a single word about the bizarreness of the event. Taylor stood by the window inside his office and watched as the workers meandered around the beautiful tree. His jaw clenched and his aviators hid the burning rage his eyes projected. Taylor couldn't explain the how or the why behind the appearance of the tree to either his workers or the people that now had to buy another crane for the facility, but he loosely understood the woman he had dreamt about day and night for the past months was directly responsible for it.

That night, he remained vigilant for as long as he could stay awake, waiting for Maria to make an appearance. His eyes closed around 3 am and he had awful dreams that wouldn't let him wake up. The one that aggravated him the most was one about being a parrot flying over the far end of the valley. He flew over an old colonial house that was burning violently, and watched as a family of five tried to put it out, but they couldn't find enough water in their well to do so. Instead a mixture of mud and engine oil kept coming up every time they threw the bucket down.

Throughout the next 2 months, Taylor did not see Maria once. But accidents that he would directly attribute to her kept on happening at the facility that would sometimes halt operations for days on end. Heavy thunderstorms, flash floods, landslides and outbreaks of diphtheria, dengue, sika, and chicunguña were constantly present. Fires would often break out, and the plant would have power outages due to ground-shaking lightning bolts. The jungle, in conjunction with all the weapons it could find, seemed to be fighting against the presence of this metallic bacteria that was pressing on one of its veins and polluting it with cancerous cells.

After every incident, Taylor would always, without fail, find one of Maria's flowers laying somewhere he could clearly see it. Standing on top of the bloody vomit of one of the engineers or laying on top of the thick mud from the landslide that now covered the excavator; it would always serve as a reminder that they were not welcome there. And that the river was not theirs to pillage.

The escalating conflict between the ruthless forces of the jungle and the mine made abundantly clear to Taylor that he had to confront Maria. One Tuesday afternoon, he grabbed the only Spanish speaking intern at the plant and took him on a quest around the entire town to find the yellow-eyed girl and her kids. Although Taylor had been to Rondás a mere 3 times since his arrival, everyone in the town recognized him as the Gringo from the mine, and they knew he meant trouble. Doors shut in their faces, people pretending to not speak English even when talked at in Spanish and insults coming from different directions plagued their day. Nobody was willing to talk to Taylor and the search for Maria seemed like a futile exercise. When they were going back to their car, a group of kids playing tag ran past them in the square that connected the main road to the church. Between the group of barefooted rascals, Taylor saw Martin leading the charge.

"KID! COME HERE!" shouted Taylor.

Martin looked straight at him, and recognized the crimson hair and the long pianist hands his mother had warned him about. Without doubting, he fled

rapidly, picked up his rusted bike, and rolled down the street towards the valley. Taylor and the intern got in the car and started chasing him. Martin snaked down the alleyways, until he made it to the dirt road that led to his house. The truck kept up the best it could but the roughness of the terrain made it impossible for it to continue. Taylor immediately jumped out and started chasing the bike by foot. After running for half a mile he made it to Martin's home at the end of the road. It was a small brick and mortar construction with half of the tin roof panels rusting away. The walls were covered in moss and a weird haze made out of pollen engulfed the entire area. The front door was wide open and whispers could be heard from inside.

Taylor approached the door and was met by Maria and her kids. Maria whispered something in Nukak to Martin, who turned around, cleared his throat and said to Taylor in very rudimentary English:

"Inside"

Confused, and with a bad gut feeling, he followed the group inside the shack. The house was covered by nature inside; as if the jungle had made it part of its own body. The walls were covered in moss and leaves, the floor was dirt and roots sticking out, fish swam in the sink and Lilly pads grew inside the bathtub.

Maria pointed at a sofa for Taylor to sit down on. She went to the kitchen to bring two glasses of water, and then calmly sat down in front of Taylor with Martin by her side. She held tight onto her baby and started speaking in Nukak. She elbowed Martin on the arm to get him to translate.

"Why you are here?"

"I wanna know how did she do it?"

Martin whispered to her. She replied.

She says, “What?”

“The accidents. I know it was her. How did she do it?”

Martin translated. Maria chuckled.

She says, “Go home. You can’t be here. Your people can’t be here,”

“It is not up to me. I get paid to do this”

She says, “...is wrong. The “rio” is not your object. What’s inside is not for them-
- How did she do it?”

Maria stared at him dead in the eyes. The calmness and military sternness that came from her made Taylor uneasy. After a minute of silence, Maria nodded and said:

“She says she is showing you. You can understand now.”

Maria stood up and led Taylor to the crib in the corner of the living room. She laid her baby down and uncovered him for the first time. The 13-month old was a particular creature; an eyeless human body, with dark-green moss covering parts of his skin. His legs were covered in flower petals that grew from his pores, and the tip of his moss covered fingers had bright red tiny flowers barely peeking out.

Taylor was mortified by the baby. He found everything about it disgusting and dirty. Nevertheless, the most deeply animal and human part of his brain wouldn't stop sending tears down his cheeks. The baby chuckled and in a reflex movement, grabbed tight to one of the railings of the crib, immediately transforming it into a vine. Taylor turned his head and looked deep into Maria's eyes. She grabbed his cheek and wiped the tears off with her thumb. She smiled and said something in Nukak.

“What was that bud?” Taylor asked Martin.

She says, "She knows you understand. You have to go. She is sorry. But she takes care of brother." Martin replied while looking at the ground.

Taylor stepped back, and ran away from the house.

Taylor was unable to sleep for days after meeting Maria's creature. His mind was flooded with doubts and thoughts of remorse, guilt and a deep existential feeling of dread and smallness. Regardless of where the baby had come from, he was the living proof of something larger than him, the company, and all the nations in the world. The endless hours of reflection he had ahead of him got cut short when the Company summoned him to an emergency meeting. He was informed that the constant halts in operations, machinery replacement invoices and lack of clear communication from him and the heads of the project made the suits in America wary. They informed him of their discontent, and that they would be heading down to review the operation themselves to determine if Taylor was apt to continue spearheading the project. All of the sudden, the door the baby had opened in Taylor's mind immediately closed, and he was abruptly uninterested in questions of permanence, nature and morality. His interest in numbers, shareholder value and increasing percentages trumped his deeply human curiosity regarding Maria's boy. The baby was now the personification of the antagonist jungle that had put him in this dire situation in the first place; and now it was the baby's turn to be marked for demolition. Taylor knew Maria was not to be reasoned with, and he couldn't allow for another accident to happen while the performance review was taking place.

He convinced the Spanish intern to help him one more time. They went to the sample room, took two diamonds and drove out into the night and away from Rondás towards Guerrilla Country.

The next morning, Maria was bathing her baby by the window sill, when a truck pulled up in front of her house and 4 rebel combatants got out and signaled for her to come out. She immediately grabbed the baby and rushed out the back door. The men intercepted her and held her at gunpoint back into the house. The leader explained that they were not there to do harm, but that they would have to take

the baby for a week, until the gringo's meeting was over. Maria refused and aggressively fought to get the men away from her child. She grabbed a knife from the kitchen and started swinging it at them. They aimed their rifles and told her to back off. No one wanted to shoot, but Maria got too close to the youngest soldier, who couldn't have been older than 16. He shot and the bullet went inside the baby's forehead and out the left ear. Maria fell down and desperately tried to help her lifeless child who started to peel away leaf by leaf. The soldiers stood around her, petrified by the scene.

The 16-year-old soldier approached Maria and apologetically tapped her on the shoulder, who in return stabbed him in the neck. The remaining three tried to get her off of him but were quickly interrupted by a loud buzz that came from the baby's body. A strand of light not thicker than a pencil started to emanate up into the ceiling. All of a sudden it exploded and became a tower of light that ate and pulverized everyone inside the house.

The light grew larger and larger, engulfing kilometers of rainforest until it made its way to Rondás and the river basin. The light pulverized the workers at the other side of the river, but the trees were left intact. The suits and the remaining workers tried to find shelter inside the treacherous jungle, but Taylor stayed behind and gladly accepted his punishment.

The warmth reminded him of the afternoon he met Maria. When the river was blood red, and the birds were fast asleep; and he realized the happiest moment of his life was spent in the jungle of Rondás.

The End.

A Bittersweet Goodbye

Cristina Galarza

HANNAH, an eighteen year old girl, sits on her bedroom floor on a summer day. She's in an oversized hoodie with a pair of matching shorts and you can see her hair glistening from the sunshine coming through her bedroom window as she prepares for her move to NYC, where she will be attending NYU in the fall. Next to her sits her 10 year old little sister AURORA, she has long beautiful auburn hair and big bright eyes. She's wearing a white shirt paired with daisy embroidered overall shorts, as daisies are her favorite flower, and in her front overall pocket sits her favorite plushie named Winston. AURORA is helping HANNAH with last minute packing before their family farewell dinner tonight to send off HANNAH, who will be leaving for college tomorrow.

AURORA

Hannah, are you excited about leaving tomorrow?

HANNAH

(Folding her clothes) You know it's a bittersweet feeling. Don't get me wrong, I'm so excited to go to New York and be in a new place on my own for the first time and see all it has to offer. *(AURORA interrupts)*

AURORA

Yeah, but won't you miss us?

HANNAH

(Stops folding and looks up at AURORA) Of course, I'll miss you guys! Going to a new city and being on my own for the first time, that's the sweet part, but the bitter part is that I'll miss you guys and I'll miss my friends and just being home. I know I'll probably be home sick at first, but then I'll settle in, make new friends and I know I'll adjust.

AURORA

(Very excitedly) But see! If you're going to be home sick maybe you shouldn't go at all! *(AURORA pauses)* You know there are colleges in California too, UCLA is not too far. You don't HAVE to go to NYU.

HANNAH

I know, but it's always been my dream to go to NYU ever since I was your age. Wouldn't you want me to pursue my dream school?

AURORA

When you put it that way, of course I want you to go to your dream school. It's just that, I'll miss you!

HANNAH

I'll miss you too! Honestly, I think I'll miss you the most. What am I gonna do without my 6:00am wake up call of you jumping on my bed, or our Sunday movie nights? I'll even miss you rummaging through all my clothes and makeup and then me hiding your favorite plushie until you give me back the clothes that you took. *(HANNAH pauses)* I know at first it's going to be a little weird and uncomfortable for both of us to be away from each other, but like mom always says, growth begins at the end of your comfort zone.

AURORA

You're right. I'm happy for you! That you get to go to your dream school. Maybe I'll go to NYU one day too.

HANNAH

Maybe. *(HANNAH looks around, as if looking for something)* Hey, I'll be right back, I'm going to grab my packing checklist, I think I left it downstairs. I want to make sure I'm not missing anything. *(HANNAH exits the room)*

AURORA

Okay. (*AURORA takes a deep breath as she stares at HANNAH's packed luggage, the lights dim*)

HANNAH

(*Lights up. HANNAH walks back in with her checklist*) Aurora, do you think you can read down the list to me?

AURORA

Sure. Winter coat, clothes, toothbrush, brush, hair ties.

HANNAH

Check, check, check, check and check.

AURORA

Phone charger, headphones, airline tickets, passport.

HANNAH

Check, check, check, wait where's my passport? It was just here!

AURORA

I don't know, I thought your passport was just here too.

HANNAH

(*Frantically rummaging through her luggage*) Oh no! What am I going to do? I can't go without my passport!

AURORA

I'll check the closet, maybe you left it there when you were grabbing clothes.
(*AURORA gets up and walks over to HANNAH's closet*)

HANNAH

It can't be in the closet. I remember the passport being out here and you said you saw it too. Right?

AURORA

I mean I thought I saw it.

HANNAH

You're right, check the closet! Check everywhere! I can't leave without my passport!

AURORA

(Shouts to HANNAH from the closet) No, I don't see it in here.

HANNAH

(Cries out) I don't see it in any of my bags either. I had it with my pouch right next to my plane ticket earlier, I know I did! How could it just disappear? Are you sure you didn't see it in the closet?

AURORA

Yes, I'm sure. Did you check under your bed? Maybe it slid under there by accident.

HANNAH

That's a great idea. Let me check there. *(HANNAH runs to look under her bed)*

AURORA

Do you see it?

HANNAH

(Sounding defeated) No.

AURORA

What are you going to do? Are you still going to go?

HANNAH

I don't know. I can't go if I don't have my passport. (*As tears start to well up in her eyes*)

AURORA

Oh Hannah, please don't cry. I'm sorry!

HANNAH

(*Wiping tears from her eyes*) It's okay. Don't apologize, it's not your fault I misplaced my passport.

AURORA

(*Cries out*) No, I'm so sorry! If I had known you'd be this upset I would have never...

HANNAH

Would have never what?

AURORA

(*AURORA with tears welling up in her eyes*) I took it! I took your passport! I hid it when you went downstairs to grab your checklist. I'm so sorry Hannah!

HANNAH

Why would you hide my passport?

AURORA

(AURORA sits on the bed and looks downward) I don't know. I guess I thought if I took it that maybe you wouldn't leave and maybe you'd change your mind and stay. But I don't want to make you cry. I'm really sorry Hannah! I'm happy that you get to go to your dream school.

HANNAH

(Sits down next to AURORA and puts her arm around her) It's okay Aurora. I forgive you. I know this is going to be just as hard of a transition for you as much as it is for me.

AURORA

(AURORA looks up at HANNAH. As she wipes tears from her eyes) What's a transition?

HANNAH

Transition means adjusting to a new phase of life.

AURORA

Oh.

HANNAH

And you know, I will be back home for all the holidays and you can also come visit me in NYC.

AURORA

Oh yeah! I forgot that you will be back for the holidays and I would love to go visit you!

HANNAH

Hey, I want to give you something. *(HANNAH hands AURORA a box)*

AURORA

What's this?

HANNAH

I was going to wait till dinner tonight, but I think now is a good time. Open it!

AURORA

(Slowly opens the box. Her eyes light up) Wow! A bracelet with daisies, it's beautiful!

HANNAH

I wanted to get something special for you as a farewell gift and I know how much you love daisies, so I got you this bracelet and look *(HANNAH pulls out a bracelet from her pocket)*. I have a matching one too. That way we can always feel close to each other even if we are miles away.

AURORA

(Looks up at HANNAH with bright eyes and hugs her) I love it! Thanks Hannah! I'll wear it everyday!

HANNAH

I'm glad you love it!

AURORA

Wait, I have something for you too!

HANNAH

You do?

AURORA reaches into her front overall pocket and pulls out her favorite light up plushie, Winston.

HANNAH

Winston? But he's your favorite.

AURORA

I know, but I want you to have him.

HANNAH

Aurora, are you sure? I know how much comfort Winston brings you, especially with your fear of the dark. You sleep with him every night.

AURORA

Yes, I'm sure. Like mom always says growth begins at the end of your comfort zone.

HANNAH and AURORA smile at each other and embrace as the lights go down.

CURTAIN!



“Focused at My Perch”

Sean Ferry

my ghost and me

Autumn Rayne Mastroianni

my ghosts and me
don't go chasing ghosts,
people say—
they're gone for reason.
memories swept away in the wind,
ephemeral mirrors of who you could've been,
the would'ves the could'ves the should'ves,
they are all gone and buried.
don't bring dull shovels to sun baked earth,
to go and dig up past hurts,
unearthing the grave of your maladies,
won't cure em.
let em lie.
ashes to ashes.
dust to dust.

who are they to tell me what's worth forgetting?
which ghosts should stay buried?
this isn't your haunted soul,
these shadows don't darken your door,
don't tell me which bones should stay untouched.
pieces of my history lay buried in these sands,
without them i'm a bare bones biography—
looking for meaning in the hollow places,
rifling through folds of brain matter—
searching,
for just a fragment of my history.

i'm a mosaic of missing pieces,
stitched together with guesswork and mystery,
absence makes it home in me.
i'm a form created by negative space.
identity made of dreams—
my features reflected back at me
my name etched in skin
my blood beside me
dreams i've held so tight i feel their roots in me.
tell me how do i let it stay buried?
how do i forget the ghost? the specter in my bloodstream?

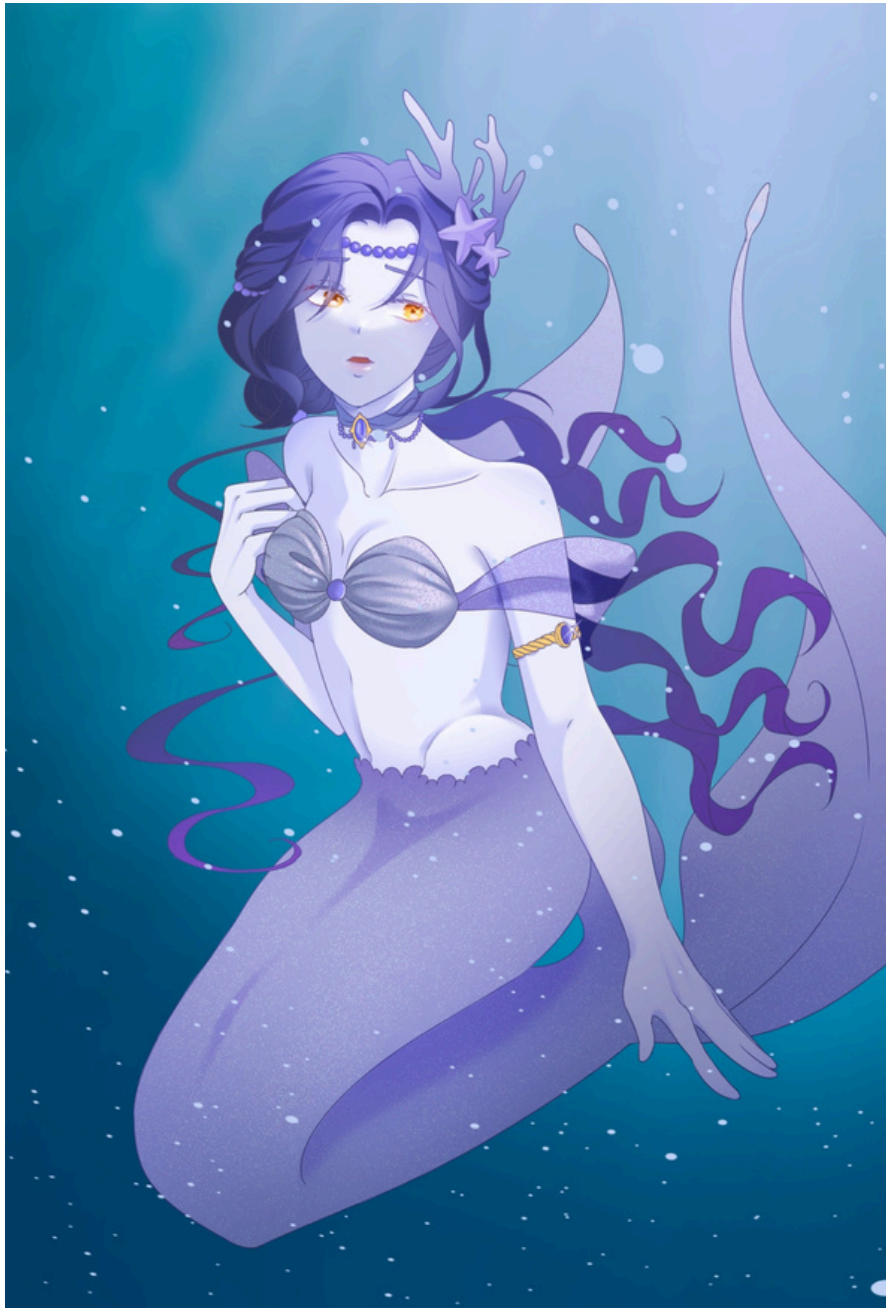
half of me is sealed behind a face just out of reach,
the tenor of a voice lost to the sea,
a name spoken like a wound
or never spoken at all,
forgotten like he isn't half of me—
twenty-three chromosomes of my legacy.
what did he leave behind, besides my eyes?
what did he leave inside of me?
what is him? what is me?
how much of my mother's hatred is caused by pressing on a wound,
rather than a fresh bruise.
would he have protected me?

don't go digging up ghosts they say,
but if i let them lie
i'll die swallowed up whole by the emptiness of me.
my lack of symmetry—
one side of me abandoned,
a haunted houses, my ghosts and me.

so i will dig,
even when my arms shake,
when the hot sun evaporates the hope from me.
i'll perform seances in the dirt,
scream into graves and brace myself for what echoes back to me.

if the truth is jagged, i'll bleed with my eyes open.
if i find nothing, well at least i'll know i searched,
sought for something—
rather than settled for nothing.
maybe no good will come from it,
my ghosts volatile and malignant
misty figures of history.
maybe i won't find peace,
just questions with sharper teeth,
but the bite doesn't scare me.

these ghosts are mine,
and i'll carry them with me.



“Mermaid”

Yein Kim



“Venetian masquerade”

Mila Antkevych

Tales of the Ghost Town

Brandon Montalvo

Jessica (35) and Maxwell (33) are the Parents of Sarah & Tom who are 10 year old twins, with Sarah being the older twin by 2 minutes, and with Max being the youngest sibling in the family. Breanna is 11 and Chase is 9, they are siblings and cousins to Sarah, Tom & Max due to their dad. Jared (30) is Jessica's younger brother. They are staying at Jessica's house because their parents are on a business trip that they couldn't move out of, and they didn't want their kids to miss Halloween so they sent them there for the weekend to do Halloween with their cousins.

NARRATOR (SARAH):

Hi, I'm Sarah, and I'm going to tell you a little Halloween story. At first, I thought it was just a story about a ghost town.... It all started when we were waiting to go trick-or-treating.

Up in SARAH'S room decorated for Halloween. Streamers and paper bats hang from the ceiling. SARAH is dressed in her Halloween pjs, sitting on a beanbag chair on her phone while BREANNA is slowly turning back and front on SARAH'S desk chair on her phone. CHASE is lying on SARAH'S bed watching her TV and TOM is also lying on SARAH'S bed, with his head hanging off the side and his legs on the wall watching her TV. They are waiting to go trick-or-treating with their costumes and get so much candy. Then, suddenly a close-up on SARAH'S face. She looks up from her phone, a bright idea dawning, and a smile spreads across her face.

SARAH

Hey guys? Let's tell scary stories!

The energy in the room shifts. BREANNA stops her chair from spinning to look at Sarah. CHASE pauses the TV, sitting up now interested. TOM begins to flip himself right-side up on the bed.

BREANNA

I'm down for that.

BREANNA (*thought, with a smirk*)
This should be fun.

TOM is now off the bed, sitting on the floor and leaning against it. He lets out an exaggerated groan.

TOM
Yeah, because I'm bored!

The bedroom door creaks open. MAX (5), the youngest sibling, peeks in with a happy smile, having overheard the conversation.

MAX
Can I join!

TOM immediately scoffs, looking at his little brother with a teasing smirk. SARAH starts to say something but TOM cuts her off.

TOM
Little bro, I thought you didn't like scary stories?

MAX glares at TOM, crossing his small arms defiantly. SARAH rolls her eyes at her twin's behavior.

MAX
Ha ha, I am five so I can do it now! (*MAX holds up five fingers to emphasize his point*)

MAX points a finger at his brother.

MAX
And this is not YOUR room, TOMMY, it's Sissy's! So...

(MAX sticks his tongue out and blows a raspberry at TOM)

TOM's face flushes red with anger. His hands clench into tight fists. Everyone else - SARAH, BREANNA, and CHASE - looks over at TOM, surprised by his sudden fury. He glares at MAX with a death glare.

TOM (in a loud, sharp burst)
JUST GO TO YOUR ROOM AND PLAY, MAX!

MAX stands frozen in the doorway, his eyes welling up with tears. SARAH sees TOM'S clenched fists and gently places her hand on his, trying to calm him down.

MAX (voice trembling)
MOOOM! Tommy yelled at me!

In a blur of motion, MAX runs out of the doorway and down the hall to find their mother. TOM'S angry expression instantly turns to panic as he realizes he's in trouble... again.

TOM (stuttering loudly)
WAIT! NO! MAX! MOM!

TOM scrambles up from the floor and bolts out of the room, slamming the door shut behind him. His footsteps can be heard fading down the hall. SARAH and BREANNA sit side-by-side, rolling their eyes with identical sassy expressions. CHASE, meanwhile, is just quietly observing them, looking completely unbothered.

SARAH & BREANNA (in unison)
Boys. (They share a small laugh)

From the bed, CHASE clears his throat loudly. He strikes a dramatic pose, one hand on his hip and an eyebrow raised.

CHASE
Hello? I'm still here. And newflash... **I'm... A BOY!** (He ends with a smartass smile)

BREANNA and SARAH both chuckle at CHASE'S antics.

BREANNA

Sorry, brother! I totally forgot you were there. You are so quiet sometimes, Chase.

SARAH (*playfully scoffing*)

Yeah, Chase, of course we don't mean you, dude. Tom and Max are always bickering, but I swear... (*her voice becomes silly and dramatic*) ...They do... love each other.

The bedroom door opens again. TOM walks back in, an extremely annoyed look on his face. He closes the door and slumps back down into his spot on the floor, his arms crossed tightly over his chest. The others just stare at him while a close up on TOM sighs heavily.

TOM

Sorry guys. I had to apologize to Max.

TOM'S expression turns from annoyed to indignant as he mumbles to himself.

TOM (*muttering*)

...even though it wasn't my fault! I just... got mad!

TOM'S voice rises as he launches into a full-blown, whiny complaint.

TOM (*whining*)

Sooooooooo I don't SEE why I had to apologize to him! He started it!

SARAH, BREANNA, and CHASE looking at the fuming TOM. SARAH has her head in her hand, BREANNA is trying to stifle a laugh, and CHASE just looks amused. SARAH puts a calming hand on TOM'S shoulder.

SARAH (*softly*)

Tom, you're doing it again bro.

TOM (*softly*)

Oh... sorry... thanks sis.

BREANNA leans forward, her eyes wide with excitement. She wiggles her eyebrows, making everyone laugh.

BREANNA
So, what is the scary story?

A dramatic, spooky shot of SARAH, her face lit from below as if by a flashlight.

SARAH (*dramatically*)
IT'S! THE! Tale of the ghost town!

BREANNA and CHASE lean in, eyes wide with spooky delight.

BREANNA & CHASE
OOOOOOOOO!

SARAH begins her story. The background behind her fades into a scene of kids in costumes trick-or-treating while they are walking down a spooky street at night.

SARAH (*storytelling voice*)
It was the night of Halloween... a tale told that some kids were bored, waiting to go trick-or-treating... They got so much candy! **BUT THEN** they heard a noise... and guess what they found?

In the story-within-a-story, the kids follow the sound and come face to face with a glowing, translucent figure.

SARAH (*voice-over*)
...and guess what they found? **GHOSTS!!**

Back in the bedroom, TOM lets out a high-pitched scream.

TOM
AAAAAAH!

TOM (*nervously*)

Ummmmmmmmmm? (*clear his throat to try to sound tough*) Big sis... I-I-I'm going to my room real quick to... ummm? (*snaps fingers*) Get a blanket! Yeah, get a blanket! Be right back!

TOM rushes out of the room. CHASE looks after him, confused.

CHASE (*confused*)

What's the matter with Tom?

SARAH

Nothing! OK, continue the spooky story, Chase!

Back in SARAH'S story. A brave kid in a superhero costume steps up to a ghostly cowboy.

SARAH (*voice-over*)

As I was saying... They found the ghost. One brave kid went up to the ghost and was like, in a cowboy voice...

In the story, a brave kid in a superhero costume approaches a ghostly cowboy figure

BRAVE KID

Excuse me, are you a ghost?

The cowboy ghost tips his spectral hat.

GHOST COWBOY

Why yes! I sure am a cowboy. And I'm a ghost, of course.

Another kid from the story sees what's happening so they run away in terror... a small wet spot on his pants.

SARAH (*voice-over*)

One of the kids rushed home with his pants a little wet....

A loud voice calls from off-panel. SARAH, BREANNA, and CHASE look towards the door.

MOM (*off-panel*)
Oh kids, come for dinner!

CHASE (*whining*)
But Titi?! (*soft groans*) we are telling a scary story!

SARAH & BREANNA
Coming, Mom/titi!

TOM reappears in the doorway, now smiling.

TOM
I'm hungry so I'm going to eat. I'm coming mommy! (*TOM heads downstairs, meanwhile BREANNA shrugs softly at SARAH*)

BREANNA
I actually am kinda hungry though, Sarah - Titi always makes badass food!

SARAH (*snapping her fingers*)
My mom does make very good food. And! After that we are probably going to get dressed in our costumes.

CHASE looks at them with a soft huff and a raised eyebrow.

CHASE
You two are making ME hungry! So can we just go downstairs?

SARAH & BREANNA
Ok.

They all head downstairs, passing their Marvel-themed costumes hanging on the stair railing waiting to be worn for Halloween for a fun night with lots of candy and... maybe a spooky surprise or two?

Everyone is done eating, so all the kids are getting ready for trick-or-treating, with SARAH and BREANNA in SARAH'S room and TOM and CHASE in TOM'S room. Meanwhile, MOM is helping MAX in her room while calling the dad to see if he is back from work so they can all leave. The costumes were Marvel theme this year and they always go all out.

1 HOUR LATER...

Split panel showing the kids getting ready in their costumes

- SARAH and BREANNA are in SARAH'S room
- TOM and CHASE are in TOM'S room.
- MOM (JESSICA, 35) is helping MAX in her room. MAX, dressed as a little Hulk, is jumping on the bed.

MOM is on the phone. We see DAD (MAXWELL, 33) in a car on the other end of the line.

MAXWELL (*on phone, smiles*)

Hey Jessie babe! How are the kids doing? (*chuckles*) Excited for tonight I hope?

MOM

Hi Axwell honey! (*smiles*) The kids are fine (*soft chuckles*) They loved dinner! I called you to see how far you are from home?

MAXWELL (*on phone, chuckles*)

Great! Are you guys all dressed? I should be there in 20 minutes. I took some backroads to get home faster (*huffs*) The roads during holidays are crazy!

MOM

We are all getting dressed now (*hums as she thinks*) Then I have to make sure the bags are ready, get the wagon from the car, and set it up for tonight, so that should give you time right Axwell dear? (*happy soft gasp*) I can't wait for you to see the kids' costumes! They are SO cute! (*smiles*) I have a little hulk jumping around our bed (*chuckles then calls out to MAX*) Maxie say hi to daddy!

A big, joyful panel of little Hulk MAX waving excitedly from the bed

MAX (*loudly cheering*)
HI DADDY!

MOM
Ok Axwell, I have to go check on the kids. I love you babe (*smiles blowing a kiss*)

MAXWELL (*on phone*)
Okay Jess my love, I will see you soon, I love you more (*smiles blowing a kiss*)

They both hang up the phone and MOM looks at MAX on the bed

MOM
Maxie let's go check on the kids (*smiles*) Daddy is coming home now.

MAX
Yay Daddy! (*giggles*)

MOM picks up MAX off their bed putting him on the floor and MAX happily runs off to SARAH room first while MOM checks TOM'S room

10 MINUTES LATER...

The kids are now in their Halloween costumes, ready to go.

MOM
Okay, are we all ready to roll, guys? (*smiles*)

KIDS (*in unison*)
YEAH!!! (*cheers*)

On a suburban street decorated for Halloween. MOM is holding MAX'S hand. TOM, SARAH, and BREANNA are ready to run off.

MOM

Now guys, we have to stick together, okay? *(waves her finger)* And no one goes alone to... you know who's house. *(sighs with a smile)* Stay safe! I love you! *(blows a kiss to them)* Your father will get you when you are all done ok?

BREANNA, SARAH, and TOM wave goodbye and head off.

SARAH

Bye Mom! Bye Max! *(smiles)* I love you too

TOM

Bye Mommy! Bye Little bro! *(smiles)* I love you too

BREANNA

Bye TiTi! Bye Chase! *(smiles)* Have fun guys!

Everyone goes their own way but as the older kids walk down the street, BREANNA suddenly stops and looks towards a dark, wooded area.

BREANNA

Hey, did you see that?! *(raises one eyebrow)*

TOM & SARAH *(confused)*

See what???

BREANNA starts walking purposefully towards the spooky area. SARAH grabs TOM'S hand to pull him along.

SARAH

Hey, wait up! *(calls out to BREANNA)* Come on, Tom, let's go!

TOM

(Huffs) Hey, Sarah!?! *(looks at SARAH like she is crazy)* WHAT THE HELL!

NARRATOR (SARAH)

Breanna being serious as always, she goes to go look at it.

The three of them arrive at the gates of an old, spooky graveyard. A full moon hangs in the sky.

NARRATOR (SARAH)

After a little while of running they stop at the graveyard...

A close-up on SARAH'S face, looking spooky again as she tells another story.

SARAH

Do you guys know the legend of the graveyard? Legend says that a few groups of teenagers saw a mysterious figure right where this graveyard stands.... People say that whoever goes in... never comes out!

TOM is visibly shaking, backing away from the gate.

TOM (scared)

S-Sarah! H-how about we go now? Like right now, away from here, and get some candy? (nervous chuckles)

BREANNA stares intently at the graveyard gates, a determined look on her face.

BREANNA

But guys? (huffs softly) I swear I heard something here! (rubs her arms) I felt a weird chill... I have to go check it out!

TOM puffs out his chest, trying to look tough.

TOM

Are you insane, Breanna?! (raises both eyebrows) We are **NOT** going in there! (scoffs) It's a graveyard... with **DEAD** people... inside there!?

BREANNA smirks at TOM.

BREANNA (*scoffs jokingly*)

Okay? Mister Tough Guy. (*smirks*) How about this, after we go trick-or-treating (*turns to TOM and points her finger at his chest*) you have to promise we're going to check it out? (*wiggles her eyebrows with a smile*)

SARAH

Sounds like a Spooktantics plan brother (*smiles*)

TOM looks back and forth between BREANNA and SARAH with a face of, "They are not going to stop till I say yes aren't they?" so he takes a lollipop, opens it, licks it, then points it between SARAH and BREANNA

TOM (*sighing*)

You two aren't going to stop till I say yes are you?

SARAH and BREANNA both nod with huge smiles so TOM puts the lollipop in his mouth.

TOM (*mumbles to himself*)

I can't believe I'm going to do this (*groans*) Okay... Fine... I guess?

SARAH puts her arm around TOM'S shoulders doing a side hug with a smile using her other hand to hold her candy bag.

SARAH

This is going to be so cool (*chuckles*)

BREANNA

Well what are we waiting for? (*cheers*) Let's GO!

SARAH

Hey wait up! Come on Tommy boy! (*smiles*)

BREANNA starts running to the graveyard with SARAH following close by

TOM

Wait! shouldn't we make a.... *(sighs)* And they are already running towards the graveyard... Great.

TOM bends his full head up when he groans then looks back at SARAH and BREANNA fading into the night

TOM

Don't leave me here guys! *(shouts to them)*

TOM scared of being left alone runs after them towards the graveyard

30 MINUTES LATER...

The kids are back at the graveyard entrance, their candy bags full. The graveyard looks even more menacing now.

BREANNA

There it is! *(smiles)* The graveyard.

BREANNA does jazz hands at the graveyard entrance making SARAH laugh and making TOM regret everything.

SARAH

Woah! *(chuckles)* It's just like in the movies! Come on, let's go in *(tries to sound spooky)* maybe we can find the cowboy ghost! *(smiles)*

BREANNA

(scoffs jokingly) Hello there were cowgirls too! *(chuckles)*

SARAH grabs TOM'S arm pulling him towards the entrance. He looks terrified.

SARAH

Come on, Tom, let's go inside!

TOM (*nervously*)
Um... o-k, Sarah...

A wide shot from inside the graveyard. BREANNA enters first, followed by SARAH, with a reluctant TOM lagging behind. The tombstones cast long, creepy shadows.

BREANNA (*softly*)
Wow, this place is so creepy and dark... I'm getting goosebumps. (*smiles*)
Awesome!

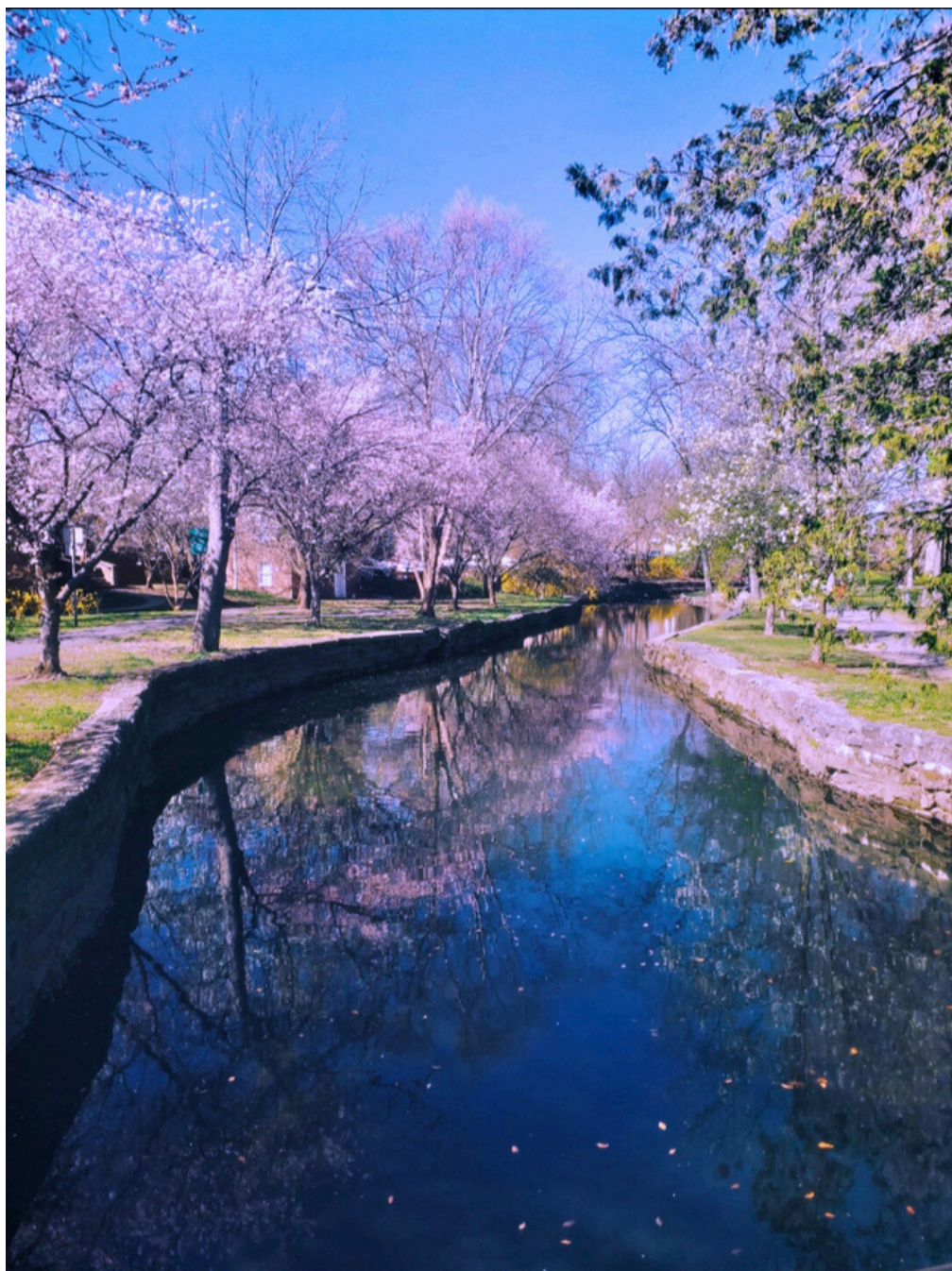
A close-up on TOM'S terrified face, his eyes wide.

TOM (*scared*)
You're not the only one getting goosebumps, Breanna!! (*nervously laughs clenching his candy bag to his chest*)

In the distance, silhouetted against the moonlight, stands a single, old tombstone shaped like a cowboy boot.

NARRATOR (SARAH)
And there it is... the cowboy grave.

To be continued...



“blossoms on the water”

TianaMarie Allen



“Quick Snack”

Jackson Briggs

Limerence

Elijah Pena-Garcia

Poetry ?

It's not a term im familiar with
But for some reason your face comes to mind
A beauty half of yours become myth
Your eyes are all I see when I close mine
Our hands are a flawless fit, there exists no other pair
Yet i have no hope of a solution for this torment and despair

Emotions pound on my cranium, category five
Am i thundering too loud how I feel?
Or is it an affliction that I am untreated for
How can i distinguish the fleeting from the present?
Do I run from the rain or do I attempt to be my most stoic tree?
Do I deeply love or do I attempt to?
One knows not

Heart “freshly” served, thrown and thawed out on the floor
A rushed product is not worth the ache that follows
My brain knows better, from top to bottom the nerves hesitate
Not enough time has past to repair and recuperate

Yet it is strange, with you I rarely question
Only one encounter we've had
And the ripples of it disrupted the once calm puddle
I am hopeless against the torrential downfall
I hope to drown



“glowing lanterns in industry city”

TianaMarie Allen

She Lies Bare

Elise Nephew

CHAPTER ONE

“There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death.”

—Proverbs 14:12

With a black eye, bloodied mouth, and broken hand, Molly walked up to the young man behind the counter of New York-Presbyterian’s emergency room. Under the nauseating fluorescent lights, she approached him with a blank stare, straight lips, and hair so disheveled it resembled a lion’s mane.

“I need to see a doctor.” Molly stated as if commenting on the weather. The young medical receptionist had ceased his typing on the computer and completely diverted it to the enigmatic girl. His eyes went so wide that white surrounded his irises—Molly stood still, maintaining an uncomfortable stare through dark brown lenses. She remained silent and simply waited, and the man found her gaze so relentless he neglected to notice the blood that dribbled down her chin. Not to mention the black-and-blue that encased her right eye in a moon-shaped bruise. He sucked in an uncomfortable breath, not at her black eye, but at her unperturbed disposition, at the disinterested lilt in her tone. How she stood perfectly still, expressionless, with blood pouring out of her mouth. With fractured bones in her right hand.

Finally, struck with a sense of urgency, the medical receptionist ripped himself out of his stupefied state, “What brings you in today?”

Molly’s eyebrows shot up at the idiotic question, which only further set her off, as a jolt of pain zipped through her head from the tenderness of her black eye, but her lips remained an unamused flat line. If there was one thing Molly hated more than showing weakness, it was a stupid fucking question. *As if I already don’t look like hell*, thought the woman.

She held up her right hand and displayed her purple, bloodied knuckles and the giant swell on the back of it, which protruded from her skin like a belly from a pregnant lady. She smiled wide, displaying her teeth, caked with dried blood, and then promptly closed her mouth, returning it to that unamused straight line. The medical receptionist went wide-eyed once again, and upon noticing him squirm, the corner of Molly's mouth twitched upwards just the slightest bit.

"I was in a little scuffle."

About three hours before Molly traumatized a medical receptionist, she found herself on 6th Avenue, breakfast sandwich in hand. The chill of an April morning in Brooklyn left her unmoved. She stormed down the pavement to her townhome, her lips snarled, convinced the day was already shot due to her mother's unbelievable bullshit. But that was put on the backburner when Molly's eyes rapidly found themselves on a black BMW, which had to be from at least 2008. Her gut hiccuped—it did not lurch—and soon she knew she had visitors, two dumb bitches Molly knew all too well. One of them was the girlfriend of the man who gave her cocaine earlier that morning, Pax, who was a 6'5" Albanian man littered with tattoos and rumored to own a bazooka. His girlfriend, Gretta, was also Albanian, stood at 5'10, with blue eyes meaner than Pax's. The other was some unassuming broad who just used Pax's drugs, a face Molly begrudgingly remembered but a name did not come to mind, who stood at a similar stature to Gretta. They emerged from the cover of a 2008 black BMW, adorned in black hoodies and sweatpants, where they had been waiting for Molly to arrive. They sprinted up to her and wasted no time in their assault. Gretta punched Molly square in the face, while her accomplice came from behind and attempted to hold her down so Gretta could continue her barrage of swings.

"Dumb fuckin' whore, fuck somebody else's man!" She spat, and plummeted her fist into Molly's face again, which caused her to immediately burst out into laughter at this absurd set up, her white teeth stained with red blood. In between bouts of giggles, Molly spit out red, then lied:

"If I ever got to a point where I'd subject myself to *that*, I'd have already killed myself."

Molly knew what was coming, so she jerked herself from the nameless woman's grasp and ducked, and Gretta's fist flew into the face of her accomplice. Her nose cracked. Taking advantage of the confusion, Molly ripped herself from that woman's grasp and tackled Gretta to the ground, as her accomplice stood there and cried out in pain as blood spurted from her nose. Molly's eyes narrowed slightly at the grotesque sight, and thought, *that was for me, bitch?* Something sinister flashed in those dark brown eyes of hers, and even Gretta wasn't stupid enough to miss it. Gretta had a few inches on Molly, but the dark-haired woman was stockier and had more muscle to her physique, so she took her on without much trouble. Once both of their eyes locked, Gretta harrowingly realized this might become one of the worst days of her life. She had heard about Molly—but seeing the carnality in her eyes firsthand was much more horrifying than some rumor. Pure malice lied in those eyes as she straddled Gretta, and punched her senseless, her dark brown hair falling from her face in lustrous waves as she beat the woman into a bloody, crying pulp.

After Molly's fist collided with Gretta's jaw for the ninth time, something loudly snapped in her right hand, but the adrenaline kept her from feeling it. At this point, Gretta's friend had regained some strength and attempted to pry Molly away, only for Molly to punch her exactly where Gretta did, but harder. Another crack sounded, and whether it came from her fist or the girl's nose Molly didn't know. And after her hand was a sickening mixture of black and blue and red, she remembered the name of the girl she currently straddled—it was Sierra. But Molly didn't care for Sierra—she returned to check on the state of Gretta, who lied on the concrete, unconscious—a state she would remain in for quite a while. Her jaw was broken, her eyes were swollen shut, she was missing a few teeth, and upon observing this, Molly thought, *well she won't bother me for a while.*

After she left the two women beaten and bloodied, Molly walked one more block to her townhouse and assessed her injuries, as well as her situation. Already, her mind was conjuring up an escape plan, unperturbed by the utter brutality she both received and inflicted (mostly the latter). However, she was considerably pissed at the prospect of having to leave Brooklyn, for she had inadvertently pissed off

people who would make her life miserable there. She may have doubled down and lied about not sleeping with Pax, but she had a feeling the secret was already out, Molly only remembered beating one of those girls unconscious—which meant the other one still had the capacity to spread the word. Molly also had some *associates* that would be rather angered to hear this news, some at her for her disloyalty, others for her association with Pax. Maybe a few for a lack of invite. It was a real clusterfuck.

Damn, she had to leave New York *State*, for Christ's sake! Pax was connected—he sold her her cocaine, as well as her X, GHB, LSD, you get the deal—and basically everyone else in the whole damn city. And she just beat his girlfriend up to the point where some of her teeth were scattered on the pavement of 6th Avenue. He had a helping of lowlifes to choose from if he wanted a few of her teeth gone, too. Or worse. Probably worse. In short, he was not to be fucked with, and had many friends to enforce that agenda. So, above all else, Molly was pissed that she had to pack up and find somewhere new, and *far*, to fuck off to.

After racking her brain through a few different ideas, she began to conjure up a plan as an unignorable throb began to pulsate from her hand. She looked at the disgusting swell that was her right hand, and thought it was time to pay the hospital a visit.

Dr. Antonio Bruglia, a strikingly tall man with wiry limbs, a large Roman nose and tan skin, gently knocked on the door of Molly's hospital room. His brown eyes were deeply sunken into his skull, and his wrinkled mouth was predisposed to frowning. He opened the door when he did not receive an answer from the begrudged Molly.

He was greeted with dark, seeping eyes, which bored straight into his black irises; emptiness ricocheting off emptiness. Molly sat upright on the hospital bed and did not move. The doctor blinked again, but did not break eye contact. Molly felt as if her eyes were some curtain he was trying to see past, as if something covert lied beneath them.

“Miss Molly Whitley, how do you do?”

Miss Molly Whitley did not answer—she started blankly at him, cocked her head to the side and held up her broken hand, now wrapped in a white cast, and asked:

“Are you the one with my discharge papers?”

Dr. Bruglia was taken aback—he could not remember the last time someone addressed him so rudely. A tantalizing heat crept up the back of his neck.

“No, I’m the doctor the hospital wing you’re currently in is named after.”

Molly’s mouth broke out into a sarcastic smirk, tauntingly amused.

“You seem awfully proud of yourself for that, but do you have my discharge papers?”

Dr. Bruglia was finding it increasingly difficult to maintain an air of professionalism, when his current adversary was a professional at pushing his buttons. Or anyone’s buttons—Molly had quite the skill for that. According to her medical records, Molly had antisocial-personality disorder, an adversity to authority, and an overall lack of empathy and conscience. In layman’s terms? She was a psychopath. Which meant that she did not particularly care about Antonio Bruglia, or his success in the world of pharmaceutical-medicine, or how he was a world-renowned doctor with billions of dollars to his name.

But he certainly cared about her.

“I’m Dr. Bruglia, a psychiatrist. I was wondering if you wanted to discuss the events that led you here, concerning your medical history. You said you were in a ‘little scuffle’ earlier today, but your hand is broken in three pl—”

“I’m not telling you shit, so you can give it up. The next person who knocks on this door better have my damn discharge papers. I don’t even know who you are.”

Well he certainly knew who she was. In the last hour, Dr. Bruglia had amassed an eerily excessive amount of information on the woman who sat on the

examination table in front of him, all the way down to the deodorant she used. Having billions of dollars makes that a painless task. Dr. Bruglia looked down at her, his empty eyes encased by unflattering glasses with a wiry black frame. Something in her gut made her note the way in which he looked at her, for it was the most discomfoting thing she had been confronted with that day, even though she had already gotten jumped and broken her hand—those slimy eyes took the cake. Because, after her explosive response, Molly knew that glint in the doctor's eyes—his eyes seemed like that of an owner watching his hamster run on an ever-spinning wheel, curiously amused. It felt as if she were the hamster in the cage and his eyes peered at her through the cracks. Those dark eyes, darker than her own.

He was in no rush to break the silence that followed Molly's insults, her words hung in the air uncomfortably. She stared at him and did not break eye contact. He smiled uneasily and stepped toward the door. Just before he opened it, he turned around and said,

"I don't think this is the last time we'll be seeing each other. Take care, Molly."

"Oh, go jerk off to one of your mental patients."

And with that, the door gently opened, he stepped out, and it quietly clicked shut. Molly never wanted to see that man again, and she hoped that she didn't, but knew that she would.

CHAPTER TWO

"If you go down to Hammond
You'll never come back
In my opinion you're
On the wrong track"
—The Roches, "Hammond Song"

Molly awoke to grumbling snores and thick, heaving breaths—which came from the 6'5" man asleep beside her. The late morning sunlight peaked through the cracks in her blinds and filled the darkness with an unwelcome glow. Her brown eyes narrowed at the sight—and sound—of her drug dealer, naked, in her bed, which was littered with empty zip-lock bags and crumbs of ketamine. Pax was a titan of a man, who had as much muscle as he did height, with sandy brown hair and a clean-cut goatee. He was practically choking on his own snores, and would stop breathing for a few seconds at a time, just to be attacked with an onslaught so violent it caused Molly to sit and stare with her mouth slightly agape, disgusted to be woken by this. Plus, he took up half the bed.

"Pax," she began, and when he did not budge, she took her hands to his broad shoulders, briefly shook them, and repeated, "PAX." The man shot up from the mattress as Molly swiftly retracted her hands from him. She backed up as he frantically reached around the mattress, his hands grabbing at nothing in particular, while repeating,

"What, what, what?" Molly blinked once, her jaw locked and face stern as she observed the fumbling man. A wave of distaste washed over her and she longed for him to leave.

"You are way too young to have such terrible fucking sleep apnea."

"What, was I having an episode? Is that why you woke me up? Aww, you don't want me to die."

Molly blinked.

“No, I woke you up because I want you the hell out of my apartment.”

“And you don’t want me to die?”

She opted to ignore his question and simply waited for the disheveled man to comprehend what she said. She did not make it difficult to interpret—but was well aware of his painfully insubstantial intellectual capabilities. Finally, after an uncomfortable minute, Molly’s words had penetrated Pax’s thick skull and rang clear, and he got a move on. He slipped on jeans, a red flannel, some ridiculously gauche pair of sneakers, and gathered his things. She accompanied him on his graceless journey out of her bedroom, in an oversized black t-shirt and boxer shorts, all the way through the arduous path of her living room, as he still reached for his psyche through last night’s drug-induced haze. Molly was not exactly at her mental prime, but she was far more lucid than most would be. Just another perk to not feeling much of anything at all, which reminded her—

“Pax, my drugs.” The bearded man jolted, hit with the memory of a forgotten obligation, and fumbled around in his pockets, pulled out nothing, then realized what he needed was in his bag—so he kneeled on the floor and sifted through it while Molly crossed her arms and tapped her foot impatiently—finally, he pulled out a pill bottle full of ecstasy and handed it to her.

“Some molly for my Molly,” He had cracked that joke an innumerable amount of times and she had never laughed once, and this time was no different. She just snatched the pill bottle from his hands wordlessly. He took her silence as an invitation to speak further and chimed, “free of charge,” accompanied with a gut-churning wink. Without a beat of hesitation, Molly demanded:

“Get out now.”

She stood over him as he ascended from his knees and wordlessly shuffled out of her apartment, and although he was used to her cold demeanor, he walked out with his head low and shoulders slumped. After his departure, the door behind him clicked softly shut and Molly released a lengthy, exasperated sigh, left to ponder the previous night. It was about twelve in the afternoon at this point, and the

woman had lost track of how many times Pax had left her apartment in such a state. The feeling he left behind was never pleasant, but recently it had turned particularly sour. She had started to develop a real adversity to him, like itchiness from a wool sweater, but benefitted from their arrangement—free drugs for sex. In Molly’s mind, that wasn’t much of anything at all. Sometimes it worked out for her, honestly. But, Molly was not ignorant of Pax’s ardent feelings towards her, despite having a girlfriend and other...stipulations that one would consider as inhibitors to such passionate feelings, like maybe his violent line of work, but he had a love for her that, when thought upon, would make her frown in distaste. But it was quite apparent to her—and it’s not like Molly felt bad, but having kept him around for so long, it was fair to admit she wasn’t having fun anymore. It was quid pro quo, but in the end, Molly never really got what she wanted. Because in order to obtain something you want, you have to care, and Molly didn’t really care for anything at all. But she’d take the free drugs.

And the drugs, well, Molly saw them as a droplet in a vial, pouring a milliliter of vibrant color into a sea of black. But the sea always swallowed up the color, no matter what.

Molly burst through the front door of her townhouse, her speed undeterred by the white cast wrapped around her hand. She ran straight to her bedroom and neglected to notice the television humming on low volume in her living room, and jerked the doorknob open, only to be met with the utmost unwelcome face.

“I don’t even wanna know why the fuck you’re here—just get out.” She ignored the strange sight of her mother sitting cross-legged on her bed—adorned in her ridiculous regalia akin to a yoga teacher—and scurried to her closet, stood on the balls of her feet, grabbed a large duffel bag off a high shelf, and began sifting through her clothes and filling it. Her mother watched in silence, a frown stuck on her mouth, and flashed a menacing glare she reserved strictly for her daughter.

“I’m gonna choose to ignore the disgusting way you just talked to me,” She spat, with a New York accent so thick that it could not possibly go undetected, “I am here to simply let you know that Ike needs a place to stay, and so he’s gonna stay here with us for a while.” Us. *Ike*. The coked out yoga teacher, a real charmer.

Molly continued to ignore her as she ran to the bathroom, and continued filling her bag with the bare necessities. She opened up the top to the toilet tank, where she hid five thousand dollars in cash in a plastic zip lock bag, and stuffed it in with her toiletries. Her mother shouted at her from the other room, but Molly made no attempt to try and hear what she was saying, and made every attempt to make sure her mom didn't see the money. Then, she stormed back into her bedroom, faced the wretched woman on her bed with matted brown hair and smeared makeup, with a ridiculous teal bandana around her head, and spewed:

"No one's staying here anymore, not you or your brain dead boyfriend. I'm leaving and I don't know when or if I'm coming back, and I'm not a fucking homeless shelter for drug addicts—which is what Ike is, a fuckin' homeless drug addict. Fuck you both." At this point, Molly had gathered a backpack and a large black duffel bag of her things, and was about to open the front door as her mother shouted,

"No one would have to know! It's not like you pay rent anyway, you stupid fuckin' whore!" Molly stood at the front door, her back turned toward her mother. Without missing a beat, she retorted,

"I only learned from the best."

And with that, she slammed the door shut, abruptly silencing the cacophonous profanity of her mother, and stepped out into the cool spring evening. She made no effort to tell her that some angry Albanians would be knocking on her front door very soon. It's not like she had planned on telling her, but her mother's behavior certainly solidified that decision. The woman who displayed no concern over Molly's sudden injuries, her urgent need to depart, nor of her new whereabouts, the woman who only wondered about how it would affect her and her asinine boyfriend, the woman who called her own daughter a "stupid fuckin' whore" didn't get a warning.

Molly stormed out and began her descent down Baltic Street, adjusting the shoulder strap of her duffel bag, the only hint of an expression on her face lay in

the straight line of her lips. It was then when her phone began to ring incessantly, text chime after chime. She fished out her phone and was unsurprised to be greeted with vulgar text messages from Pax:

5:59 PM: what the fuck did you do????

5:59 PM: molly you fucked up big time

6:00 PM: she's in a fucking coma

6:00 PM: you're a crazy fucking whore you know that?

6:00 PM: fucking psychotic slut i'm going to fucking kill you

6:01 PM: you better hope i don't fucking find you

Molly read the text chain, her expression unchanged, and quickly typed:

6:02 PM: Don't worry, you won't, you fucking dumbass.

Then, she quickly blocked his number, turned her phone off, and signaled a taxi. When the yellow cab pulled over, Molly hopped in and gave the driver an address in Montclair. The driver immediately scowled and unlocked the doors.

"No ma'am, I don't go to Jersey."

Molly stared at the man through the mirror from the backseat. He had a thick handlebar mustache and looked to be of Arab descent. It was then he noticed her black eye, the cast around her hand, and overall disheveled appearance. Having noticed a slight hesitation in the man's body language, Molly pounced:

"Please sir, you wouldn't believe the day I've had," she paused to sniffle and wipe a pretend-tear from her bruised eye, "I just need to get out of the city."

Having completely fallen for Molly's act, the taxi driver frowned and a nefarious glint crossed his eyes, which did not go unnoticed to Molly, who stared at him and did not break eye contact. From the middle seat, she leaned forward, resting her breasts on the armrest in the front seat, turned her head to face him, and spoke silky words from her lips:

"Don't worry, I know how to properly thank a gentleman..."

And that's how Molly found herself on Upper Mountain Avenue on that April

evening. The wealthy suburban street was quiet, and two parallel lines of opulent mansions lined it for miles. Once the taxi driver parked, his eyes met Molly's in the mirror, expecting, hungry, and too distracted to notice the text she had just sent on her phone. Her nostrils flared in disgust as a thick silence permeated the air.

"So here's what's gonna happen," Molly broke the silence, "I'm gonna go inside, grab more than enough cash to cover this fare, and then I'll come back and take care of you."

The locks of the cab doors clicked shut. Molly let out an exasperated sigh and huffed dramatically as the cab driver turned around to face her, "Listen—"

"I don't care for your money, a deal is a deal. I did not drive here for money, little girl. Now don't make me force you, you were more than willing—" BOOM! The cab driver immediately whipped his head back around towards the windshield, to see he was interrupted by a strange man harping on the hood of his car with a metal baseball bat. Immediately, he screamed, "WHAT ARE YOU DOING?" in a thick Middle Eastern accent, popped the driver's door open, and rushed outside. The man continued smashing and denting the taxi as Molly noticed he left his wallet in the front passenger seat. She quickly snagged it, threw it into her duffel bag and exited the car as well.

The cab driver stood at a stocky 5'8" with a protruding beer belly. The assailant with the club was tall and muscular, and fended off the angry cab driver without much issue or effort. But the moment Molly stepped out of the car, he threw the cursing man, who kept trying and failing to punch him, straight to the ground, knocking the wind out of him, then he kicked him a few times in the stomach for good measure. As the taxi driver lied there, groaning in pain, the other man ran straight to Molly and immediately enveloped her in the tightest embrace she'd ever been in. And then, he pulled away in panicked disbelief, holding her shoulders as he breathed,

"Molly! Who the hell did this to you?" He looked down at her beaten appearance, a fire behind his eyes, his brows furrowed, deathly serious, "Who do I have to kill?" He looked to the broken and beaten taxi driver, "Well, who else do I have to kill?"

The young woman looked up into Hunter's luminous blue eyes. For the first time that day, she broke out into a genuine smile, despite the pain it caused her bruised lip.

"Long story, Hunter. No need to kill this guy, he didn't put me in this state. Plus..." Molly glanced at him, curled on the ground, and ensured he couldn't see her flash Hunter the wallet she snagged. A humorous glint shone in her contemporary's eyes, and he scoffed in disbelief before his smile matched hers. His grin was crooked and boyish, and its radiance almost drowned out the man who lied on the ground and cursed them out in Arabic. Almost.

Molly walked over to the cab driver and picked his head up by taking a fistful of his hair, and nodded her head towards his dented taxi. "It's drivable, now drive on back home, and I won't call the cops and tell them you tried to trap me in your car and rape me. Or that you tried to solicit a prostitute." To truly drive the point in, Hunter opened the driver door to his taxi. He waited there and cleared his throat expectantly. "I'll count to three, then I'm taking the club to your balls," Molly threatened—*would you look at that, that got him moving*, thought the girl as he hoisted himself up and scrambled to his yellow taxi. He sped off into the night, and after having known Molly for a single hour of his life, his car had been dealt thousands of dollars worth of damage by a henchman with a club, he was bruised, beaten, and bloodied by said henchman, and he got his wallet stolen by the woman who the henchman took orders from. A single hour. He sped off into the night and prayed to never see her again, leaving Molly alone with her old...friend.

"Molly, what the hell happened to you? What's going on?"

She looked up to him with siren-like orbs. Her eyes were dark brown, almost black, and *sharp*. They had a habit of stealing the breath from your lungs.

"Can I just come inside? I'll tell you all about it."

And so Hunter, without an ounce of hesitation, led her by the hand to his modern white mansion in the posh suburbs of Montclair. Molly knew she'd be safe for the

night, maybe two, but was relying on Hunter to have somewhere in mind to relocate her. Meanwhile, the blonde man's heart beat so rapidly in his chest, he felt the inclination to check his pulse to make sure he wasn't going into cardiac arrest. Molly nonchalantly shuffled into his mansion, and was at least grateful this was going according to plan, but couldn't help but notice Hunter's sheepish demeanor and flushed cheeks. She began to postulate various methods in which she could utilize his obvious feelings for her, when she realized she had to slightly edit the story behind her showing up at his door in the first place. She began to formulate a version of the story that would keep Hunter's opinion of her favorable, as she took in his new opulent abode. Her eyes went wide at his foyer, with ceilings as high as two of her townhouses stacked on top of each other, and spiraling black staircases that led up to a gated terrace, overlooking a glistening bronze statue of a lion.

"Jesus Christ, Hunter, save some pussy for the rest of us! A fuckin' lion?" But Hunter wasn't interested in discussing his status in life, he was officially set on Molly explaining herself. He guided them towards his living room, with a massive flat-screen TV, and sat them down on his all white, fluffy cotton couch.

"Molly, *sweetheart*, you show up here with a black eye and a cast around your hand? And a taxi driver who, apparently, tried to *rape* you? With all due respect, dear, what in the everloving *fuck* is going on?"

The girl let out a tired sigh, as if she'd been caught and finally had to spill the truth.

"Hunter, it's a long story. But you should know, before I start," she grimaced in anticipation, "I may-or-may-not have pissed Pax off to the point where he wants to kill me—"

"*Molly.*"

"I know, I know, and I may-or-may-not need to get the hell away from the East Coast—"

"*MOLLY.*"

“Jesus, can you help me or not? This guy actually wants me dead.”

Hunter removed his head from his hands, rubbed his face and blew a raspberry with his lips. He looked directly into Molly’s eyes, with the raw intention of finding out the truth from a woman with an unrivaled inclination, and skill, to lie.

“Tell me what happened, dear.” Molly blinked.

“So, you know Gretta?”

Hunter nodded.

“Okay, so, she’s schizophrenic from all the crack she snorts, because she and a buddy of hers jumped me today, ‘cause she thought I was fucking Pax or something.”

Hunter’s blonde eyebrows raised accordingly.

“Well, were you?”

“Dear God, no!” Molly lied effortlessly, “And I told her that, but she was out for blood. So I defended myself accordingly!”

“Well of course, dear—”

“But now she’s apparently in a coma, or so I’ve heard—”

“Oh fuck, Molly!” Hunter immediately threw his hands to his head, and ran them through his blonde hair. “Yeah, he’s gonna want to kill you, that’s for sure.”

“Yeah. That’s kind of why I’m here—”

“Say no more, hon. Just lay low here for a few days, I’ll find somewhere for you.”

Molly’s features immediately softened, and she juttled out her bottom lip cutely.

“Oh Hunter,” she immediately wrapped her arms around his muscular frame, “thank you.” Molly was internally rejoicing over her decision to turn to him—it had turned out to be the best move.

He immediately returned the embrace, his hand wrapped in the thick tassels of her dark hair, lost in her. Molly always had that effect on him, and she was well aware of that, which is why she let him hold her in such a way. Whatever made her more favorable in his eyes, Molly would do. It just seemed like the smartest plan for now. Suddenly, struck with an important thought, Hunter pulled away—

“The townhouse...what’s going on with that, hon?”

Molly sucked in a tight breath through her teeth and let out a facetious *tsk tsk tsk*.

“My bitch of a mother is definitely moving into it right now, with her retarded fucking boyfriend.”

Hunter’s eyes went wide— “But Pax is gonna find them in no time.” Hunter let out a long sigh of relief.

“Right, right. Then I can find someone else to live there, or sub-let it or something...”

As Hunter anxiously contemplated what to do with his Brooklyn townhouse, Molly closed any inkling of space between them on the couch, ran her non-broken hand across his thigh, and purred, “So, why don’t you show me the bedroom?”

And with that, Hunter scooped Molly up in his arms, with a certain reverence—as if she would break, and carried her to the bedroom. It had been the first time she had been held in such a way in her life, and she hoped it would be the last, too. Her lips devoured while his tasted, her hands grabbed tightly while his smoothly traveled across the scape of her body, delicately. She wanted to be ravished, but Hunter did not love in that way, and Molly did not love at all.



“Pizza Rat!”

Norma Quinde

Soma (In The Time Of...)

Ginangel Gonzalez Tejada

A thumb and a knife,
two lives but one demise.
I carved my way out of this prison.
Seventeen years had to pass,
for me to finally realize,
she was never wise,
and she had never been right.

She had left our home,
I figured out all this violence on my own.
With Papa I never got along.
It was just me and puddles of blood.
A crime scene I never had the chance to clean up
because, the more I hurt, the more bodies dropped.

And you, with the rose curls and faint look,
embraced me and all my ghosts.
With a fig for a heart, records on a bag
and a thousand feelings never swallowed.

I would have followed him to the edge of the universe,
where flowers don't bloom and where parents search for their babes.
Yet life is a morgue, misery toasts and bloats of its role on the road.
The lord commanded, "unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His
blood, you have no life in you."

So I devoured, and chewed, and morosely digested every bit of his being before it decayed.

And I came to breathe again.

His essence now guiding me through the feast of ephemeral existence.

The Return

Cristian Tenempaguay

Two points almost stopped me from going to college.

Two points almost convinced me that maybe this just wasn't for someone like me. But that moment didn't begin in a testing room. It began years earlier.

Growing up, my mother always taught me to be grateful for everything I have. "There are people who would kill to be in your position," she would say. I've carried those words with me my entire life. Even though we came from very little, we have come so far. When I look back at where I was born and compare it to where I stand today, I feel tremendously blessed. Still, I have always believed I can do better. Maybe that mindset pushes me forward, or maybe it can be dangerous because it makes you overthink and question yourself. But that has always been my attitude: things are good, but they can be better.

That's exactly where I found myself during the summer of 2024.

I had a beautiful family — two children who look at me like I have all the answers, a dog, a steady independent contractor job, and a supportive extended family. Many people would not ask for more. But that has never been me. Late at night, when everything was quiet, I would ask myself, What's next? What else can I do to get more out of life? That feeling wasn't new. I have always tried to expand, to build, to become something greater. Over the years, I explored different ventures — tattoo artist, fitness trainer, photographer. And not to brag, I was pretty good at them. Still, none of them took off the way I envisioned. None of them felt like the path I was meant to stay on.

That summer, two realistic paths stood in front of me. One was to fully dedicate myself to my job — grow my small independent business, work longer hours, gain more clients, and see how far I could push it financially and professionally. The other option was to return to a dream I had let go of many years ago: school.

After leaving high school, I attempted to pursue higher education more than once. None of those attempts became reality. After becoming a father of two, I truly felt that ship had sailed. College seemed like something for younger people, not someone juggling responsibilities and bills. But the dream never truly disappeared. It was still there — hidden, quiet, but intact.

One afternoon, as I sat lost in thought, my eldest niece Natasha — who feels more like a little sister because of our closeness in age — came over to hang out. During our conversation, she shared that she was planning to go back to school to pursue a degree. Then she looked at me and said, “Why don’t you come back to school with me?”

That question stayed with me.

Although the idea of returning to school had already crossed my mind, that moment made it personal. It wasn’t just a thought anymore. It was an invitation. The process, however, was intimidating. I didn’t even know where to begin. I assumed you just signed up and picked classes. Instead, Natasha explained that the first step was taking a placement test. Only after that could I register for courses. Doubt showed up quickly. I hadn’t written a proper essay in years. And math? Math has never been my forte, especially algebra. But I knew I had to try. I would have hated myself years down the road if I didn’t.

Like Spider-Man said, “It’s all a leap of faith.” That’s exactly what this felt like. Not certainty. Not a guarantee. Just a leap.

I’ve always been a little superstitious, so I told myself that if I passed the placement test, it would mean the universe wanted me to follow this path. If I didn’t, maybe it wasn’t meant to be. Still, I wasn’t going to leave everything up to fate. I researched how to write essays again and reviewed algebra and geometry problems. YouTube became my tutor. I delayed scheduling the test for as long as I could, until August, when I finally felt ready.

For the first time, I drove to Bergen Community College’s Paramus campus. I

didn't know exactly where I was going, but with Natasha guiding me over the phone, I somehow made it to the One Stop testing center.

I thought I was prepared.

I wasn't.

I arrived late, confident that the test would be easy. I also had to pick up my children from my mother's house in a few hours. After waiting, they called my name. The English portion went smoothly, as it has always been my favorite subject. But once I reached the math section, things changed. It started well enough, then quickly became unfamiliar territory. My phone began ringing — my mother reminding me to pick up the kids. The pressure mounted.

Eventually, I finished. I walked out without even getting my results because I was already running late. The next day, I returned to campus to retrieve my scores and hopefully register for classes. In my mind, I repeated the same rule: If I pass, I stay. If I don't, this isn't for me.

The counselor began discussing potential classes before showing me my results. I had passed the English portion. But I failed the math section. For a moment, I wanted to stand up and walk out of the building.

Then he said something that changed everything:

"You only missed it by two points. Why don't you retake it?"

Two points.

Two points separated me from becoming a college student.

It hurt knowing I had been that close. But it also meant I wasn't as far away as I thought. Retaking it was a no-brainer. That night, I barely slept. I watched math videos, practiced problems, and refused to let two points define my future. The next morning, I returned to the testing center and retook the exam.

I passed.

When I heard the news, it felt surreal. I walked out of that building not just

relieved, but changed. For the first time in a long time, I hadn't walked away when something felt uncomfortable. I stayed.

After years of trying different paths to avoid going back to school, all roads had quietly led me here. This time felt different. This time felt right.

On the first day of classes, I was nervous. I felt like a child on his first day of school. When I arrived at Bergen Community College, balloons decorated the entrance and faculty members stood outside welcoming students. They welcomed me too. In that moment, something inside me healed. The child in me who never attended kindergarten felt seen for the first time. My first class was philosophy, a subject I had always been curious about. Like any new student, I couldn't find my classroom. I asked the first professor I saw for directions, and instead of simply pointing, he kindly walked me there himself. That simple gesture meant more than he probably realized.

After my morning class, I drove straight to work because my next class wasn't until the evening. Sitting at work that afternoon felt unreal. Just hours earlier, I had been in a college classroom.

Now I was back on the job, waiting for the time to pass so I could return to campus. As I drove to work, the radio played "I Can't Believe It" by T-Pain — the same song I used to listen to years ago while riding the NJ Transit 175 bus that made a daily stop at Bergen Community College's campus, back when college was just a dream I told myself wasn't realistic.

That song sounded different that day. Because I really couldn't believe it.

The child who once dreamed of becoming a doctor, singer, actor, teacher, engineer, even a scientist had returned. But this time, it wasn't about big titles or big dreams. It was about something simpler.

It was about not running anymore. Two points almost convinced me that I didn't belong. Instead, they taught me that belonging sometimes requires staying one

more time, trying one more time, believing one more time.

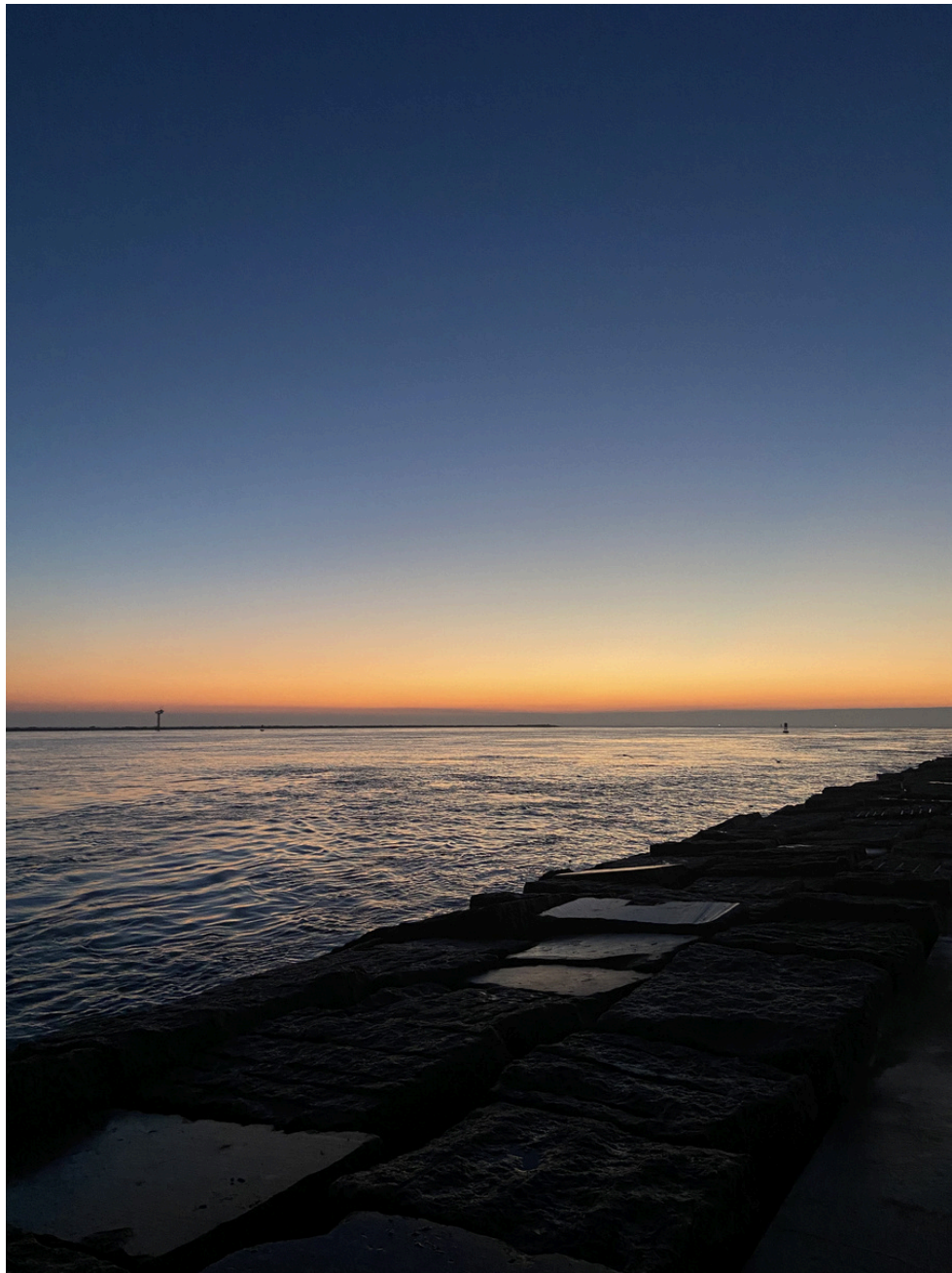
This was not a dramatic comeback story. It was a quiet decision — to stop letting fear decide my future.

And for the first time in a long time, I chose myself.



“Crush”

Mila Antkevych



“Winter Sunrise”

Dedan Choezom

The One

Rosemary Tierney

I stretch out my hand,
Calling until some Other
Answers from the dark

The gripping hand, cold;
The voice, fluttering parchment;
A companion, vowed

And in that darkness
Beneath dry, aged whispers
I met my dearest
Fears and fascinations, all
My ends and desperation

Quick is the blood
And hard is the well-bottom —
Listen for a kiss

El 65

Ryan Liam Rivera-Aguilar

En memoria de Juan Aguilar-Suarez

Aunque ya no estás en este mundo, siempre estarás en mi corazón.



Personajes:

LIAM (JOVEN): Un niño de unos 11 años, pensativo, curioso, en búsqueda. Usualmente se viste con camisetas y pantalones cortos.

JUAN AGUILAR SUÁREZ (ABUELO): Un hombre mayor, de unos 82 años, calmado, gentil y firme. Usualmente se viste con camisas de botón y pantalones de vestir.

LIAM (ADULTO): Un hombre de unos 29 años, aún pensativo y curioso, pero seguro de su identidad. Se viste con ropa cómoda para dormir. Por ejemplo, pantalones de sudadera y camiseta blanca, o pijama.

Escenario:

El apartamento de JUAN. Hay una mesa y una sola silla donde JUAN se sienta, iluminado por una luz suave. Un espacio pequeño y silencioso que se siente como un recuerdo lejano. Todo lo demás es sugerido.

Luz tenue. Se escucha una respiración calmada. Silencio. Después de unos 10 segundos, una luz más cálida sube. JUAN está sentado en su silla, relajado. Está leyendo un periódico en español. LIAM (JOVEN) entra por el lado izquierdo del escenario con un suéter delgado y una actitud alegre.

LIAM (JOVEN)

¡Bendición, Abuelo!

Dice emocionado mientras se quita el suéter y lo coloca en un gancho.

JUAN

Que Dios te bendiga y te acompañe, mijo.

LIAM (JOVEN)

Mami me estaba diciendo el otro día que tú estuviste en el ejército.

Sonríe al principio, pero luego se pone serio.

¿Puedo preguntarte algo?

Se sienta en el piso.

JUAN

Ya lo hiciste.

LIAM (JOVEN) sonríe y mueve la cabeza.

LIAM (JOVEN)

Ay, tú eres bien gracioso, abuelo.

Se pone serio otra vez.

Cuando estabas en el ejército... ¿Tenías miedo?

JUAN se recuesta un poco, pensando.

JUAN
A veces.

LIAM (JOVEN)
¿Todo el tiempo?

JUAN
No. Lo suficiente.
LIAM (JOVEN) frunce el ceño, tratando de entender.

LIAM (JOVEN)
¿Cómo era?
JUAN mira hacia el frente, no a LIAM. Su voz se mantiene calmada.

JUAN
Frío. Lejos de casa. Ruidoso cuando no debía serlo. Silencioso cuando más importaba. *Una pausa.*

LIAM (JOVEN)
¿Peleaste mucho?

JUAN
Yo me quedé con mis hermanos.

LIAM (JOVEN)
¿Hermanos?

JUAN
Hombres que hablaban como yo. Hombres que extrañaban la isla como yo.
Hombres que llevaban a Puerto Rico en los bolsillos y guitarras en la espalda...
junto con sus rifles. *LIAM (JOVEN) se endereza.*

LIAM (JOVEN)

Mami dijo algo de “Los Borinqueneers”... ¿eso era?

JUAN sonríe, orgulloso pero con ternura, y asiente.

JUAN

Sí. El 65.

LIAM (JOVEN) asiente, procesándolo.

LIAM (JOVEN)

¿La gente sabía cuán valiente eras?

JUAN suelta una risa bajita.

JUAN

La valentía no hace ruido. Es calladita. Hace lo que tiene que hacer... y vuelve a casa.

LIAM (JOVEN) duda.

LIAM (JOVEN)

¿Te... te cambió?

JUAN finalmente mira directamente a LIAM.

JUAN

Me enseñó lo preciosa que es la paz. Y cuán fuerte tiene que ser el amor para sobrevivir a la guerra.

La voz de LIAM se suaviza.

LIAM (JOVEN)

Siempre fuiste tan calmado y tan dulce conmigo.

JUAN

Porque tú te merecías calma y ternura.

LIAM (JOVEN) traga saliva.

LIAM (JOVEN)

Ojalá te hubiera hecho más preguntas.

JUAN extiende la mano, pero no lo toca.

JUAN

Estás preguntando ahora, mijo.

Un beat.

LIAM (JOVEN)

Te extraño.

Silencio. La luz cambia sutilmente a una luz blanca y fría.

JUAN

Lo sé.

LIAM (JOVEN) mira alrededor.

LIAM (JOVEN)

¿Por qué se siente... raro?

JUAN se levanta lentamente.

JUAN

Porque te estás despertando.

LIAM (JOVEN)

¿Qué?

Visiblemente confundido.

La luz sobre JUAN comienza a desvanecerse.

LIAM (JOVEN)

¡Espera! Tengo más preguntas...

JUAN

Y tú cargarás las respuestas.

LIAM (JOVEN) se levanta, en pánico.

LIAM (JOVEN)

Por favor, no te vayas...

JUAN

Yo nunca me fui.

JUAN dobla el periódico y lo coloca en la silla antes de salir hacia la oscuridad.

La luz cambia abruptamente a un brillo fuerte y duro

LIAM (ADULTO) se despierta de golpe, solo en su cama. Se sienta, desorientado.

Una pausa larga.

LIAM (ADULTO)

Abuelo...

Su voz se quiebra.

LIAM (ADULTO) se lleva la mano a la cara y llora en silencio, honestamente.

Oscuro total.

English Translation:

The 65th

In memory of Juan Aguilar-Suarez.

Although you are no longer in this world, you will always be in my heart.

Characters:

YOUNG LIAM: A young boy around 11 years old, thoughtful, curious, searching. Typically wears t-shirts and shorts.

JUAN AGUILAR SUAREZ (ABUELO): An older man around 82 years old, calm, gentle, steady. Typically wears button-up shirts and slacks.

ADULT LIAM: A man around 29 years old, still thoughtful and curious, but certain of his identity. Wears loungewear to bed, which could include sweats and a white t-shirt, or any pajama set.

Setting:

JUAN'S apartment. There is a table and a single chair where JUAN sits, illuminated by a soft light. A small, quiet space that feels like a distant memory. Everything else is a suggestion.

The Scene:

Dim light. The sound of calm breathing. Silence. After about 10 seconds, a warmer light rises. JUAN is sitting in his chair, relaxed. He is reading a Spanish newspaper. YOUNG LIAM enters stage left with a thin sweater on and a happy demeanor.

YOUNG LIAM

¡Bendición, Abuelo!

He chirps with excitement before taking off his sweater and placing it on a coat hanger.

JUAN

Que Dios te bendiga y te acompañe, mijo.

YOUNG LIAM

Mommy was telling me the other day that you were in the military!

Smiles at first, then grows more serious

Can I ask you something? *He sits on the floor.*

JUAN

You already did.

YOUNG LIAM smiles and shakes his head.

YOUNG LIAM

You're so silly, abuelo.

His face returns to being serious.

When you were in the military... Were you scared?

JUAN leans back slightly, thinking.

JUAN

Sometimes.

YOUNG LIAM

All the time?

JUAN

No. Just enough.

YOUNG LIAM frowns with a puzzled look on his face, trying to understand

YOUNG LIAM

What was it like?

JUAN looks out, not at YOUNG LIAM. His voice stays calm.

JUAN

Cold. Far from home. Loud when it shouldn't be. Quiet when it mattered most.

A pause.

YOUNG LIAM

Did you fight a lot?

JUAN

I stayed with my brothers.

YOUNG LIAM

Brothers?

JUAN

Men who spoke like me. Men who missed home like me. Men who carried Puerto Rico in their pockets and guitars on their backs, along with their rifles.

YOUNG LIAM sits up straighter.

YOUNG LIAM

Mommy said something about "The Borinqueneers"... Is that it?

JUAN smiles, proud but gentle, and nods.

JUAN

Yes, The 65th.

YOUNG LIAM nods, absorbing it.

YOUNG LIAM

Did people know how brave you were?

JUAN chuckles softly.

JUAN

Bravery isn't loud. It's quiet. It does what it has to do and comes home.

YOUNG LIAM hesitates.

YOUNG LIAM

Did... Did it change you?

JUAN finally looks directly at YOUNG LIAM.

JUAN

It taught me how precious peace is. And how strong love has to be to survive war.

YOUNG LIAM'S voice softens.

YOUNG LIAM

You were always calm and gentle with me.

JUAN

Because you deserved calm and gentleness.

YOUNG LIAM swallows.

YOUNG LIAM

I wish I asked you more questions.

JUAN reaches out. He does not touch YOUNG LIAM.

JUAN

You're asking now, mijo.

A beat.

YOUNG LIAM

I miss you.

Silence. The light subtly shifts into a cold white light.

JUAN

I know.

YOUNG LIAM looks around.

YOUNG LIAM

Why does it feel... strange?

JUAN stands slowly.

JUAN

Because you're waking up.

YOUNG LIAM

What?

Visibly confused, The light on JUAN begins to fade.

Wait! I have more questions...

JUAN

You'll carry the answers.

YOUNG LIAM stands, panicked.

YOUNG LIAM

Please don't go...

JUAN

I never did.

JUAN folds the newspaper and places it on the chair before exiting into the darkness.

The light snaps to full and harsh brightness.

ADULT LIAM wakes abruptly, alone on his bed. He sits up, disoriented.

A long pause.

ADULT LIAM

Abuelo...

His voice breaks.

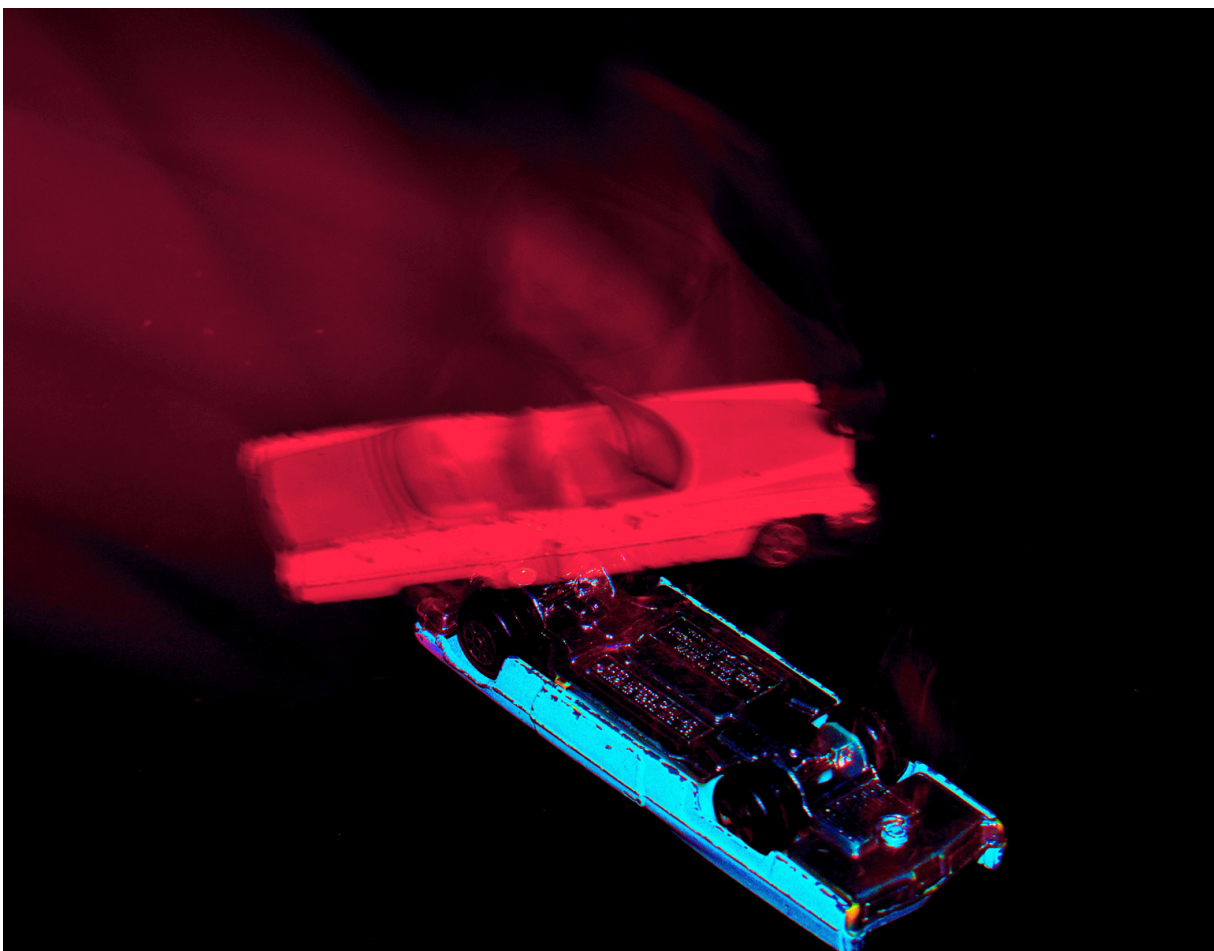
ADULT LIAM presses a hand to his face and cries quietly, honestly.

BLACK OUT.



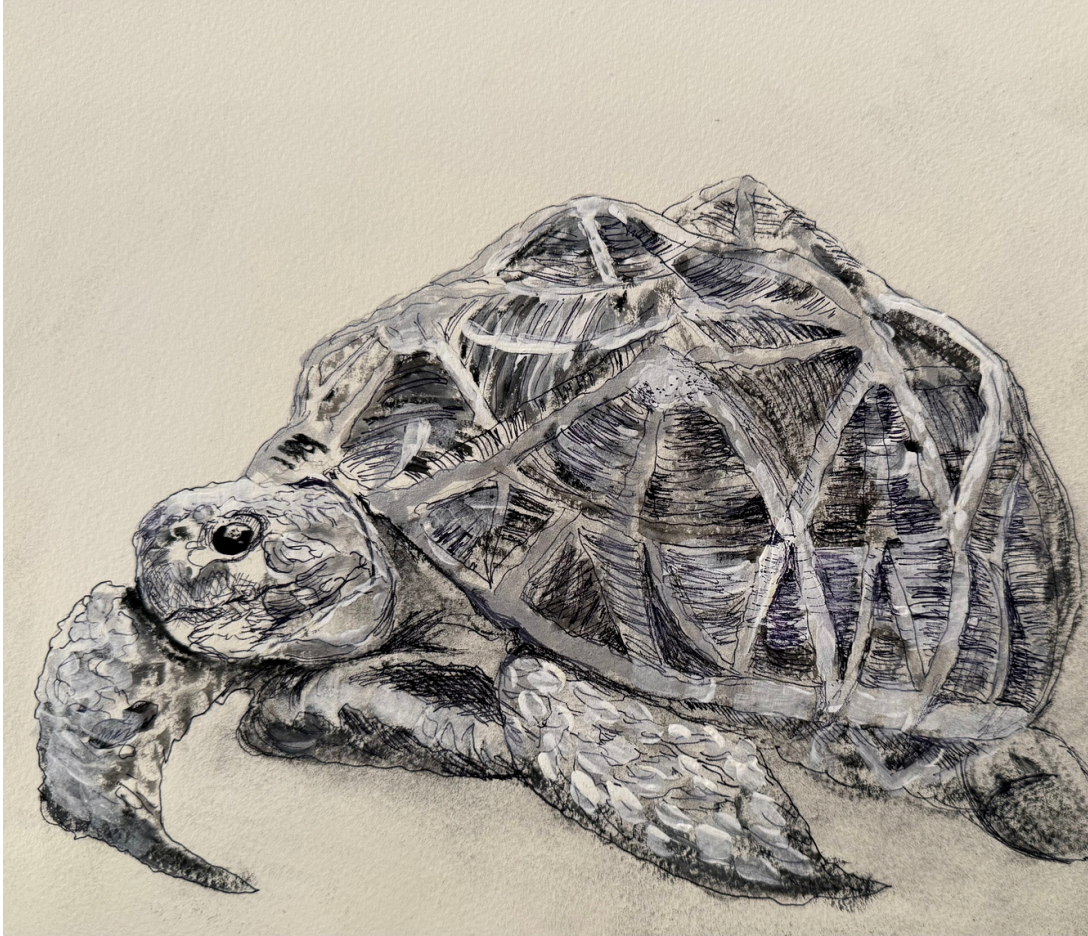
“Bad Camouflage”

Jackson Briggs



“Rough Landing”

Sophie Lebron



“Turtle”

Mila Antkevych



“Misterio limeño”

Antuanette Santa Cruz



“Natural Burn”

Claudia Duran

Someone Special to Me

Kristina Baron-Stambuli

It was still dark outside when my grandfather entered my room and tapped my shoulder. He quietly whispered, "Kristina, we are going crabbing today." I climbed out of bed and felt around for my bathing suit, shorts, t-shirt, and sweats. I layered on my clothes in the dark and left my room heading for the kitchen that was dimly lit. My grandpa and I shared a crumb bun along with two cups of hot cocoa.

Just as we were leaving for the garage, I grabbed a few juice boxes and a handful of cookies. In the garage we gathered the fishing net, anchors, and bait. After my grandfather put me in charge for checking to make sure there were enough life jackets in the boat, he started her up.

We pushed off into the dark, silent waters. Upon arriving to our destination, my grandpa dropped the anchor into the mucky water with a jolt. It sank into the mud. We then cut the bait and attached it onto the hooks. My grandpa let me tie the line onto the boat, and showed me how to do a special knot. While I was doing this, my grandfather opened up the cookies and broke one in half so we could share it. Just as I was finishing my half, I noticed that my line had become taut. I slowly pulled it up and there it was, the enormous crab that my grandfather then captured in the net. But just as he was about to put it in the bucket, it slipped through the net and started running around the boat.

"Put your feet up! I'll get it!" my grandpa yelled. And in less than 45 seconds, he did.

"Boy," I told my grandfather, "Grandma is going have to boil a lot of water for today's catch." He nodded his head and leaned back to relax. I nestled up into three

life jackets and fell asleep. Just as I woke I felt the boat moving at a slow pace.

"We're on our way home, Krissy," my grandfather said. All before the sun rose.

23 baby

Cass Guinto

can't believe i'm in my 20s
in a recession first-worldingly watching
the world end and the club
isn't even bumping the black eyed peas
this must be the age where everyone
(even the white guys with fringes)
ran out of ideas for songs

can't believe i never got to smoke
on the back of somebody's pickup truck
in a gas station parking lot conveniently placed
in the middle of so much nowhere that
you've gotta ask how they found it
in the first place... it's a shame to be in my 20s
without prom nights or middle of nowhere to
romanticize

never got to climb through windows
never got to thrift before the good stuff got
swallowed by depop and new yorkers from ohio
never got to be a degenerate older brother with
playboy magazines under his bed
never got to say "get out of my room mom" cuz
immigrant parents have an open door policy

life's all streets in a place that's just medium
enough you can't romanticize it the way you

would a city or a small town
and one couldn't even accurately portray just
how underwhelming it all is
not only is life unlike the movies; it's actually a
cheap late night commercial where they're trying
to sell you a drug for a disease you don't have
but it's not even the commercial itself man it's
the sped-up talking at the end about the million
different side effects

everyone's off to the 20s equivalent of prom
nights and pickup trucks and i don't even have a
license to follow them man
i wanna show up at my honey's front yard with a
boombox blasting stereo hearts man
i wanna go home to my bratz dolls man i wanna
dream like i used to man maybe
they should make a pill for that



“Heket”

Eric Barahona

Adding More Artists Into My Music Library

Sean Ferry

2025 was the year I spent broadening the range of music I listen to.

In previous years, I cycled through the same three or four artists (even three or four songs at times) so my goal last year was to listen to some musicians I was unfamiliar with. What inevitably has happened is that now I've just been listening to the following three new singers on repeat—I really haven't learned. It's not my fault though, they're all super talented.

One of the first albums I heard was Jensen McRae's "I Don't Know How But They Found Me!" from the spring of 2025. McRae's an indie folk artist with an extraordinary voice and lyricism. I'd actually first heard her music on a radio station a few years ago, but I rediscovered her newer songs from a video she'd posted online. Many of the songs on "I Don't Know How But They Found Me!" are filled with lyrics exploring the parting and grieving of relationships, but McRae's also able to find some optimism, or maybe acceptance, in tracks like "Praying For Your Downfall" and "Let Me Be Wrong". The piece that'd originally led me to listening to the record was the album's third song, "Savannah". I soon became addicted to the sharp, haunting lines describing an ex-partner who didn't live up to promised plans. Another standout recording is the eleventh and final track, "Massachusetts" which grapples with all of the details—large and small—that you keep from a loved one, even when you're no longer a part of that person's life.

A stand-up comic named Chris Fleming inspired me to listen to Phil Collins's music. Fleming discusses the soundtrack of Disney's 1999 film Tarzan in her comedy special entitled "Hell"—and Phil Collins does all of the music for that Tarzan soundtrack. As Fleming notes, the songs Collins made for the movie are amazing. They're super nostalgic as well, with a distinctive 90's sound, which I

suppose makes sense considering the time of its release. The second Collins record I chose was his 1985 album “No Jacket Required”. I particularly liked the tracks “Inside Out” and “Sussudio” on that one. What’s arguably his most popular song, “In the Air Tonight” was added to my playlist too. “In the Air Tonight” isn’t from “No Jacket Required”, but I enjoyed listening to it just as much as the other two songs.

“Moonstone” is a gorgeous and delightful EP from the R&B artist Raveena. I also listened to her 2022 album called “Asha’s Awakening”. The EP has a little more of a carefree, or chill sound than “Asha’s Awakening”, but it’s understandable since the album is a longer project, so more energy and detail most likely went into it. “Headaches”, which is the first track on “Moonstone”, had been added to a playlist made by the Pandora app that I was listening to, and I’m so glad it was—I immediately came to the realization that I needed to hear more from Raveena.

These musicians weren’t the only singers I listened to in 2025 by the way, they were just my favorites. Last year, hearing Collins’s music led me to his band Genesis, and McRae’s songs prompted me to seek out more folk artists. It’s currently winter though, and I don’t think I’m going to venture into new music for a while. I’d rather find solace in some of the songs I’ve heard numerous times. The track “Starflower” by Raveena will have to hold me over until actual flowers start sprouting.

the universal Om

Rosemary Tierney

in the universal Om
the breath that gave life
drawn in for one and pushed out for many
we exist
flickers of flame and star-filled eyes

the light has no glow
it's nearly engulfed
in the blackness that is the place of our beginning
the beginning was the Om

and the Om summoned light from far away
light that swelled and broke and collapsed
like a wave on rocks and
dripped down to fill a pocket in space
a canyon with invisible walls

filled to the brim and then
light and water reflecting each other
fell in love
and birthed the world

what rhythm
in then out
in then out
born and die
flash and fade

wander lost
return home
begin
end
begin again

Om



“White”

Sawyer M. Spaeth



“Christmas Roxy Picture”

Kaylee Haftek



“Nanjing memory”

Beixi Chen



“Across the Water”

Dedan Choezom



“glass ascent”

TianaMarie Allen



“uppie and corny”

Bryce Pallathumadom



“Fly High”

Cristian Tenempaguay



“Center Stage”

TianaMarie Allen



“Tuesday Afternoon”

Dilan Sahin



“Hometown memory”

Beixi Chen

The Sole of the Academy: What Columbia's Shoes Whisper About America

Mila Antkevych

A secret battlefield rages beneath our feet—a slow, steady tension simmering across cracked cobblestones we either cautiously tread or deliberately dodge. These old stones wear Columbia's unofficial trophies with pride: flattened bubble gum and cigarette butts, souvenirs of all-night cram sessions and existential dread. Welcome to the sidewalks of Columbia University—where shoes collide in a chaotic dance of class signals, questionable taste, seasonal denial (yes, those open-toe sandals in December), and unapologetic weirdness. It isn't just a campus footwear problem; it's an American magnum opus—a case study in performative identity, privilege, resistance, and, sometimes, pure, baffling fashion anarchy.

Take the open-toe sandals in February, because nothing says “I've got this” like purple toes in subzero weather. There she is, the queen, striding into Butler Library with an oatmilk latte and a gothic pedicure, probably auditioning for Morticia Addams. Her shoe choice is not a medieval torture device, but a pure work of art. She's writing her thesis on Sophonisba Anguissola, dodging adulthood by obsessing over Renaissance brushstrokes. The butterflies on Sophia Webster's sandals practically shout, “Women can paint, think, and look fabulous doing it!” She's Columbia's Marie Antoinette: freezing fashionista, but in style. It is a prime example of the American Dream—look sharp, sound smart, and pretend the cold isn't killing you. Those butterflies? Tiny, frostbitten rebels, breaking gender barriers one step at a time.

On the other end: Crocs with little test tubes and acid socks, apparently for a bio-major, worn by a post-lab PhD candidate who hasn't slept since the Biden-Harris

inauguration hangover. Crocs are what happens when capitalism and exhaustion shake hands and say, “Fine, let the kid live.” Once mocked as the anti-fashion apocalypse, they’ve returned as semi-ironic status symbols, like cargo pants, oat milk, or knowing how to pronounce “Balthazar” without sounding pretentious.

Sneakers? Please. Everyone at Columbia wears sneakers, the great equalizer, until you look closely. There are noble, weather-beaten Vans and Converse that have survived three internships and one traumatic puddle in Hamilton Hall. Then there are the “modest” military-green Loro Pianas—modest in the sense they cost a month’s rent in Queens, or in Colombian terms, tuition for one useless credit. Even here, there’s a caste system: econ majors in blindingly white Common Projects, gleaming with hedge fund ambition; philosophy bros in all-black Adidas, broadcasting Nietzschean despair; and the Heidegger crowd—black dress shoe purists—because if anyone understands the metaphysics of footwear, it’s him (and yes, Arendt knew too). STEM PhDs wear Hokas because, after 25, knees matter more than calculus—and if Columbia had offered arch-support grants, they’d gladly apply.

Now, the boots. The boots in July. Who are these people? I saw two in 92-degree heat, stomping through College Walk in knee-high leather boots like they were braving a snowstorm of moral superiority. I asked why. One said, “It’s a trend.” I get it. I once wore sheer stockings in sub-zero Ukrainian weather for fashion. A trend is a trend—no matter the blisters, heat rashes, or hallucinations. But what emotional journey are you on, and can I join? Martens, especially the ones squeaking in Lerner Hall, are the Columbia contrarian’s uniform—edgy, nostalgic, and fully prepared to quote Foucault.

Then there are the UGGs. God help us. Once nearly extinct on campus—thank you, fashion gods—they remain the sweatpants of shoes: a surrender flag wrapped in shearling. You don’t need stilettos to turn heads anymore. Just shuffle across campus in UGGs like a sentient duvet. People will turn, not in admiration, but in quiet envy, longing to give up too.

And yes, I wear polka-dot ballet flats—constantly. For fun. For hope. For the revolution. Three semesters in, and not one other polka-dot soulmate. Why, Columbia? Too smart for whimsy? Too intellectual for flirtation? Then one day, a miracle: a tenured Art History professor, famous for devastating critiques and sharper cheekbones, glided into Schermerhorn in kitten heels covered in red polka dots. Reader, I nearly collapsed. My soulmate had arrived. In a sea of academic black and beige, those shoes didn't just walk—they winked. They whispered, "I know Yayoi Kusama personally, and I still believe in whimsy." In a university and a country where productivity reigns, a flirtatious shoe is a form of civil disobedience.

What do Columbia's shoes reveal about America? Everything. Shoes expose the myth of meritocracy (your orthopedic sneakers won't get you tenure, but Manolo Blahnik's probably could), the madness of weather denial (UGGs in May, sandals in snow), and the constant need to signify identity with every step. In a nation obsessed with self-branding, our shoes are avatars: aspirational, contradictory, overworked, and sometimes, gloriously delusional. It is more than a campus quirk. Shoes are our most public form of autobiography: they tell strangers where we're from, how much we earn, what we value, and what we want people to think we value. They're also, quietly, a stage for resisting those expectations. The girl in February sandals might be defying practicality to prove she can inhabit brilliance and beauty at once. The Crocs-wearer might resist the polished, overworked Ivy image.

Is the July boots girl? Maybe she's rejecting seasonal logic entirely. America, at its core, is a performance of confidence, of resilience, of individuality. Shoes are our opening line. Whether we're stomping, shuffling, or suffering, we're all sending a message. And sometimes, that message is just: Yes, my toes are freezing, but have you seen my butterflies?

So next time you walk past Alma Mater, look down. America's story is there, stepping on your foot, probably wearing flip-flops in a blizzard.

The Piece

Elise Nephew

There's something that I've lost in which I've been aching to recreate
I carry this puzzle piece around with me from place to place
And gracelessly try to fit it in all that I create
But no matter what I do, it's just not the right shape
Maybe if I got myself a chisel or a hammer
I could shave this piece down to make it fit
But in this fruitless exercise, doomed from the start
The piece is shattered into tiny little bits.

leave of absence

Cass Guinto

like a sweet stray someone
i paw at the empty bowls of street
ahead, the city aglow with blazing
wonder, and i can't help but notice
the stones are so wet underneath my
feet... they're still carrying
yesterday's dew... before that, they
were submerged and you could
hardly tell what animal i was in all
that water . it's hard to say
what you'll miss the most:
the mailbox, the doors, the perfume
soaking our embrace?
i've learned so much about the beast
we call memory . it is terribly short
and that is what makes it frightful...
but i'm thinking the greatest loss is
the relevance of expectation; the
desire that never bloomed the way
we thought it would . still, i recall the
awning of your friendship sheltering
this poor stray, and the way
the clouds parted —
the manner in which the sun crept on
us, drying the wet of our matted fur,
as if saying
look! look!
even now! i am still here!

Where Am I

Cristian Tenempaguay

Our journey in this world begins without a course
Without an identity
We don't know who we are nor where we are heading
But the clock doesn't stop, nor the road comes to a dead end
It keeps on going and we got to keep on walking.

In the first hours of that clock, you can be anything you want
A teacher, a doctor, a preacher
It's all in you
Everything trying to come out at all at once.

As midday approaches the morning is gone
And the time has matured a bit more
You no longer play
Now every action will have a reaction
You think you know it all but at the same time know nothing at all.

Afternoon approaches and you have to make decisions
Decisions that dictate the rest of the time
Some are good some are not
But they all have a meaning and will always be the best teacher you will ever have.

By evening you think you know who you are
Some cases you may be right
You may know your true identity and where you heading
If you don't its okay

Because even if the clock don't stop this is not a race
We go and walk on our own pace
Making our own luck and writing our own story
The goal is not to make it to the end but to make every step and minute worth it
till the end.



“Fox”

Yein Kim



“Light”

Mila Antkevych



“drawings and characters”

Bryce Pallathumadom

The Son of The Stars

Autumn Rayne Mastroianni

Lys bounded through the olive groves, the warm breeze of the late summer evening kissed her bare skin. Sunlight leaked through the silver-green leaves—deepening the golden-brown of her tan. She knew the trees like she knew her own body; she swung from the branches instinctively, always knowing which ones would hold her. The wind whipped her hair, spinning her long curls into a halo of frizz—the odd tree branch lodged like a hairpin.

A gruff chuckle drifted up through the branches. She looked down to see Argo laughing at the state of her.

“You look like a wild thing, like a dryad—birthed from the trees themselves,” had anyone else said that, Lys would have taken it as admonishment, her father always scolding her for her unladylike nature.

Lys rolled her eyes at him, but a smile tugged at the corners of her lips. He liked to tease her—the mess of curls, the scratches that littered her arms, but there was never criticism in his gaze. Argo admired Lys. Ever since they met—her father having taken work as his family’s groundskeeper—he had been captivated by her fearlessness. He had loved her since they were children, but he never dared to admit the truth to her—his careful, noble demeanor was always at odds with her wildness. He was meant for polished halls and fine marriage contracts; she belonged to the groves, the trees, the earth. He would never be as brave as she was, yet he loved every wild and untamed piece of her.

Argo reached up for her; he wanted her close—to look into the vivid green of her eyes, breathe in her familiar scent of damp earth, feel her warm breath on his skin. Instead, she threw her head back and laughed, only the tips of her wild hair brushing his fingers.

“If you want me, you’ll have to catch me!” She yelled down as she scrambled even higher into the trees.

Argo laughed, breathless but happy, chasing after her. For a moment, the world was nothing but sunlight and freedom.

Then the wind shifted.

The precious memory melted away.

Lys’s eyes snapped open as a gust of hot air brushed against the back of her neck. Damp. Heavy. Animalic. The way it skimmed her skin was no longer playful; it was alive and primal. Fear prickled in the back of her throat.

The grove faded, the silver leaves became frigid stone. Sunlight turned to suffocating darkness.

She swept her hands out in front of her, blindly searching for anything familiar. Only cold stone pressed against her palms. The comforting scent of warm earth was gone, replaced with something acrid.

The breeze returned, this time brushing the hair off her shoulders. Not just a breeze, but a breath.

Her body went cold— every instinct screamed to stay still, but she had to turn.

The darkness was blinding, but there in the gloom she saw it. Two glowing eyes reflected back at her. She scrambled back in terror, expecting the creature to explode in rage, but the eyes did not move—instead, they carefully watched her in the dark.

Lys tried to stand, to steady herself, but her head was spinning with confusion and fear—why was she here?

Then, all at once, a glaring light enveloped the room, candles flickered alive, casting dancing shadows along the walls. The sudden flash blinded her. Slowly, shapes emerged from the glare, and the scene flooded back into focus.

Curled at the other end of the chamber was a figure, hunched into a ball, their head pressed against the stone floor— as if refusing to see could make it all disappear.

Her breath hitched in her lungs. Lys recognized the figure as a man, slight of build, clothes clean except for streaks of dirt across his knees. The candlelight caught the tawny blond of his hair, flickering and shimmering in the dim glow. Lys's body felt encased in flame. She would recognize that shade of blond anywhere— even here in this unforgiving light. Even when the cold of the chamber had drained all the warmth from him, he was unmistakable— Argo.

Argo shuddered, sobs wracking his body. His fear was so palpable Lys felt she could touch it. The instinct to comfort him overwhelmed her, but when she ran to him, she was violently jerked back. A shackle encased her ankle in a vice grip. A gasp of shock slipped through her lips, the sound exaggerated in the deathly silence.

Argo lifted his head—his eyes rimmed red, wide with fear—and shock. “Lys, Lys,” his voice raw, drenched in panic. He crawled toward her, but his own chain cut him short. She scrambled forward desperately, they reached out their hands, fingertips almost brushing—but it felt like miles. The gravity of the situation sank like a rock in Lys's stomach. Something terrible was happening.

A piercing screech filled the chamber. The sound was head-splitting. And just as

suddenly, it stopped.

A tinny, unnatural voice echoed in the chamber.

“Welcome to the labyrinth,” the voice said, cold and smooth, impossible to locate. “Your fate here is determined by a choice. One of you may leave here alive...if you betray the other. If you refuse, you will face the Minotaur together...Two people have never left this labyrinth together. Choose wisely.” The voice disappeared with a click.

Lys’s breath stilled, an eerie calm washed over her. She was going to die. Her gaze flicked up to the Minotaur, noticing for the first time the creature watching from the shadows, too focused on Argo to see it before.

Its massive frame was unmistakable even in the harsh candlelight. She studied it, fear overtaken by her reckless curiosity. It was thin, its skin pulled taut against rolling muscle. Its ragged, labored breathing filled her chest with pity rather than terror—it sounded as if it was in pain. Slowly, she raised her gaze to meet the creature’s. Its eyes were enormous, wet, sorrowful—far from the bloodlust she had imagined.

Argo’s voice broke her concentration. “Lys...” his voice trembled with tears. The sound punctured her heart. He had always been gentle, too kind for all the cruelty of the world—he didn’t deserve this.

“We’ll get out of here, we will. The two of us.” She whispered, forcing false courage into her words. She was the strong one; she had to protect him.

A harsh metallic clink rang through the chamber, and they both froze.

“Make your choice.” The voice said, louder this time.

Lys took a shuddering breath and turned to Argo. “We stay together,” her voice low, but steady.

Argo’s fingers twitched in the air, reaching towards hers as far as the chains would allow. He nodded decisively, his jaw hardening in determination. “Together,” he echoed. Their hands hovered, just a fingertip apart—the closeness filled them both with defiant strength.

A pause. Then the voice returned, calm and with an almost approving edge. “Very well, then.”

All at once, the candles went out, plunging the chamber into oppressive darkness. Lys’s pulse hammered in her ears. Argo was trying desperately to reach out to her, his ragged breath matching her thundering heartbeat.

The lights flared back on. Argo’s hand grabbed hers, his grip bone-crushing, but grounding. She looked down—the chains were gone.

In the darkness, the Minotaur and the chains that had bound him vanished without a trace. But somewhere far away, a low, guttural roar reverberated through the stone—a sound tinged with hunger and remorse. The creature was somewhere deep in the labyrinth... waiting for them.

The wall before them groaned. Once solid, it now began to slide open. Argo and Lys’ eyes widened. Beyond the door stretched the maze, jagged stone walls twisting and disappearing into darkness. Lys’s shoulders slumped; the strength she had mustered moments ago drained away. Not only did they have to face the Minotaur—they had to escape the labyrinth.

At their feet, weapons appeared: a short sword for Lys, a spear for Argo. Lys had always loved to play warrior as a child, wielding tree branches as swords—but now

the way the light glinted off the sharp edge of the blade made her stomach churn.

The labyrinth waited, its energy pulsed— alive, patient, watching. Together, they stepped forward, hands finally entwined, and they entered the belly of the beast. Deep within its stone corridors, the Minotaur’s mournful presence lingered.

...

The labyrinth was cold, the air thick with the scent of iron and rot. Lys’s head rolled, she was disoriented and sick from the smell. Each passage looked the same, walls all slick with condensation, torches sputtering to stay lit in the damp air.

They moved silently. Argo gripped his spear so tightly his knuckles whitened. Lys walked a few paces ahead, her blade drawn— every muscle in her body taut. A low groan shook the walls of the maze, a sound like bones grating against each other. Argo flinched, but Lys only clenched her jaw and tightened her grip.

“We kill it, we’re free,” Argo said steelily, as though saying it aloud would make it true.

“Yeah,” Lys replied, though the word tasted like blood on her tongue.

They pressed on deeper into the labyrinth. The deeper they got the stranger the labyrinth appeared. Unusual markings marred the walls—scratches, deep grooves— but also something else. Drawings, childlike figures carved into stone. A circle and stars, a crude depiction of the night sky. A bull-headed figure reaching upwards.

Lys stopped, her fingers trailing the etchings, “Argo,” she gestured to the wall. The figure’s arms were outstretched, not in attack, but in yearning, reaching for something just out of reach.

Argo frowned. “You think it made them?” His voice low, “The beast?”

Lys ignored his question. “Why stars?”

“Maybe he’s counting his kills,” Argo replied, though he seemed unconvinced.

As they turned the corner, Lys kept thinking of the drawing. There was something so human about it.

The air grew thicker, warmer—tinged with copper. Then came the sound of breathing, not the steady rhythm of a predator waiting to strike. No, this was labored, uneven, laced with pain.

Lys raised her sword, her heart hammered in her throat, but her grip stayed steady. Argo followed behind her, his spear raised, but trembling. The corridor opened into a wide chamber, the air thick with humidity. The floor was slick, Argo pitched forward into Lys, sending her sword skittering across the stone. Lys threw her hands up in front of her face, her knees so weak they barely held her weight. This was it. The end. The Minotaur had them. She waited for the screams, the blood, the pain. When nothing happened, she opened her eyes.

There, half-hidden from the dim light, sat the Minotaur; it hadn’t even looked up. It was crouched in the corner, head bowed, its massive shoulders heaving with every labored breath. Shackles still encircled its wrists, so tight they tore open its skin. Lys hesitated, her eyes darted from her sword on the ground to the pitiful creature before her. This wasn’t the creature she’d imagined— the merciless monster of the legends. There was something so heartbreakingly human about the way it cowered there in the corner, its head pressed to the stone as if in prayer. She thought... Maybe we weren’t the only ones trapped here.

“Argo,” she whispered.

He lifted his spear to her. “Do it now while he’s weak.”

She grabbed the spear, it felt like lead in her hands—Argo turned away, as much as he wanted to survive, he knew in his heart that killing the creature was a cruelty—she couldn't take it. The Minotaur raised its head, its gaze met Lys', its eyes weren't wild with rage or hunger. They were wet, shining with something she hadn't expected—tears.

Its voice pricked at her skin like broken glass.

“Please... don't run, Alyse.”

Lys froze; she couldn't breathe, her whole body turned to stone. Nobody had called her Alyse since she was a child, not since her mother died.

Her throat tightened, “How do you—?”

The Minotaur lifted its head higher, its horns scraping the wall as it moved. She saw it clearly then, the bull's snout split with old scars, eyes that didn't belong to a beast at all—golden, and human. They were beautiful, swirled with age and grief.

“You looked at me,” its voice rasped. “I saw the olive trees, saw you laughing,” Lys remembered then, her eyes meeting the creature's in the dark—the chill she felt in her spine when it held her gaze.

Lys stepped forward, overcome with grief—for herself, for the creature before her. Argo gripped her arm. “Lys— don't.”

The Minotaur didn't move to attack— no, he was a man. There was a man trapped inside. “I was not always this way.” He placed his hand over his bloodied chest—as if to quell the ache inside.

Lys inched closer, crouching down to look into his eyes. “What did they do to you?”

He shifted and flinched as the chains encircling his wrists chafed. “I was born from a curse, a punishment for my mother’s sins. The son of a king, yet his disgrace. They built the labyrinth and buried me in its heart. They send new souls in here to feed me. I don’t want to kill them, I don’t, but I’m so hungry. This labyrinth is a tomb for every soul who passes through.”

Lys’ stomach lurched. “They made you into a monster.”

He gave a bitter smile. “No, they made me into their myth.”

Argo’s voice cracked, his determination faltering. “If we don’t kill you, we’ll never leave, that’s what the voice said.” Tears slipped down his cheeks.

The Minotaur bowed his head again, his shoulder slumped as if all life had gone out of him. “I know, that’s what it always says.”

The silence that followed was suffocating. Tears filled Lys’ eyes as she thought about the stars on the walls—the figures’ outstretched arms.

“You drew the sky,” she whispered.

The man, the Minotaur, looked up then, and his eyes were full of tears. “I haven’t seen them since I was a boy. They named me for the stars—Asterion— and then they took them from me.”

Something in Lys broke, and tears streamed down her face. “Well then, we’ll bring you back to them,” she said, her voice shaking.

Asterion smiled—it was a terrible, gentle thing—his eyes still wet with tears. “You can’t. The labyrinth is bound to me. As long as I live, you cannot leave. End this.” He picked up Lys’ sword that still lay on the floor before him, and held it out to her. “Free me from this, free yourselves.”

Argo's breath hitched, and his spear fell to his side. Lys shook her head, refusing to grab the sword.

Asterion looked at Lys— deep into her eyes like he did the first time. His voice was stronger now. “End it. Let me see the sky again.”

Lys' whole body trembled as she reached for the blade. This was wrong. Asterion didn't deserve to die. She took the sword from his grasp, the hilt slick with his blood. She wanted to drop it and run, leave this place, wake up back in the grove. With the olive leaves brushing her cheeks, Argo's laughter in her ears. But the labyrinth pulsed— its patience growing thin— it demanded a sacrifice.

Argo stepped forward, his arms wrapped around Lys, steadying her. His voice was barely above a whisper. “Lys...if we don't.”

She knew. This was the only way. The words scraped her throat raw. “I know.”

They both turned to face Asterion again; there was no pleading in his expression—no grief. Just relief. His head bowed in peaceful acceptance.

“Thank you,” he whispered. “Thank you, Alyse.”

A sob wracked Lys' body. She held the blade toward Asterion, the tip just grazing his chest. Her hands were shaking, tears blurred her vision. Asterion wrapped his hand around hers, his touch so gentle. Together, they drove the blade into his heart.

The only sound that escaped his body was a sigh—finally at peace. His massive frame slumped forward, Lys and Argo lunged forward to catch him. They held him tight as the golden light in his eyes faded.

A rumble awakened beneath them, the walls of the labyrinth shook as cracks tore through them.

“Lys!” Argo shouted, grabbing her as dust cascaded around them. “We have to go!”

Together they pulled Asterion’s body toward the widening fissure in the wall. It took every ounce of strength left in them to drag his body out. The maze that had once seemed infinite was now collapsing in on them.

Golden light poured in through the cracks, guiding their way towards the outside world. When they finally emerged, gasping, the night air hit like a wave. It was cool and sharp— alive with the scent of the sea. The stars above blazed— bright and endless.

Lys fell to her knees in the sand. Her body gave out in exhaustion and grief. Argo helped her lay Asterion down, arranging his arms gently across his chest, brushing the rubble from his body. The labyrinth behind them quietly crumbled into dust.

For a long time, neither of them spoke. They just sat there looking up at the stars shimmering, reflecting off the tears that strained Lys’ face.

“He’s free now.” Argo whispered, his voice breaking.

Lys looked up at the sky—endless, glittering, eternal—the ache in her chest left her hollow. “He was never a monster.” She said softly.

Argo reached for her hand and pulled her close to him. For the first time, she let herself break and be comforted by him. Together they sat by Asterion, the stars gleaming like thousands of watchful eyes.

When the dawn came. The tide rose, and the waves crashed over his body. Gently, they enveloped him and carried the son of the stars home.



“Lost in a Crowd”

Sean Ferry



“Sparkles”

Yein Kim



“Guayacotres”

Eric Barahona



“behind the red curtains”

Antuanette Santa Cruz

Consumed in Conversation

Rosemary Tierney

It went something like this:

We sat sideways on stools, drinks by our hands
like two ancient rulers struggling to find a middle ground
between subsumption
and the isolation of deprivation —
two opposites fascinated by foreign facets
of *talamh nua*, of *terra nova* —

and not greed but desire laced the breaths we passed back and forth
as we sought to understand each other the way light and dark try
to wrap around the same world from different sides.

With every word we explored
all the ways light can be bent over
and over beneath the securing weight
of darkness. Our discovery? Separation is the most
acute suffering, a numbness, not death
but worse. After all, a little death
stimulates life like breath.

Friedrich's Solitude

Jacqueline Mendez

I'm a bleeding monster, struck within a horror.
Dare I speak the words trapped along my tongue like a fever dance,
Pacing along to the stirring of a symphony I felt within you?

Divine souls entwined, I renounce all the chains of earthly molds that bind us here
For a moment of your touch, wedged deep within your heart's secrets.
I am a drunken man who craves for a mere moment of your time,
Ravaging the design of your silhouette that haunts my wandering mind.

The most beautiful dream of my life, I owe all to you
Naught but a dream that perishes at your fingertips.
My dear, I'd have it no other way
To covet my love away as you look the other way.

Until we meet again in dreams I could never hold,
Until we never cross the paths my love sinks upon,
In a solitude of letters I could never send,
To my one and only,
You.



“My Brom and Me”

Dilan Sahin



“Bergen Moon”

Cristian Tenempaguay



“The Beauty of Colors”

Didare Kaya

Confrontation

Norma Quinde

The Graveyard.

It is where the bodies of the dead lie as their souls transcend into a better place. But among this world, a creature resided within The Graveyard to help any who travel to such a location. No one knew what the creature was besides the creature itself; A squinchie.

The tombstones were off in the distance. In front of it all? A small building with two candles on the sides, a small box of matches in the middle on a small table. The creature watched an anthropomorphic goat enter into the building, picking its head up; They could not see it. Not yet. Not until it found the right time to show itself. It heard the animal make a small prayer as they sat on their knees, hands clasped together for some sort of answer.

They would get an answer when they opened their eyes.

The goat gasped, finding herself in.. A white, foggy void. She darted her eyes up as the creature craned its neck down, tilting its head ever so slightly. The goat held her breath, realizing how small she was in comparison to the one who resided in The Graveyard.

The creature did not drop its smile or even blink. The goat was mildly creeped out, yet saddened, an effect of the creature's magic.

The creature did not mind this reaction, for it was used to it. "Malkah..." It spoke in its wispy voice.

"How- How do you know me?" Malkah stuttered.

“I know of many,” It simply responded. “I know of the heartbroken, the desperate... So I ask: What brings you to me?”

“My... My family..” She murmured, her head hanging low.

“Ah yes... The Massacre,” The creature commented, circling around Malkah. “So, so many innocent lives were taken on that day, Malkah... You have my condolences.” It watched the goat flinch. “I promise Death is taking good care of all of them.”

“But.. I can still talk to them, right?” Malkah glanced up. “Can’t– A–Aren’t you capable of sending messages to them or something?”

“Yes, yes,” It nodded. “Rest assured, I am willing to deliver messages and even talk to Death of having you meet one of their souls if it will help you find closure,” The creature explained. “You wish to speak to your mother and little brother, yes?”

“No.”

The creature froze.

“I want... I-I want to speak to someone more important than them.”

There was a pause.

“...Who then?”

“...Stoicism.”

“Stoicism....” The creature’s voice drifted off. “Why do you wish to see him?”

“He was my God. I was his follower.”

“Stoicism was a Deity who deserved his fate,” The creature plainly stated. “You are aware of this, yes?”

“You don’t understand–”

“Malkah.”

“You don’t know how much he means to me– He– He’s helped me, my family–”

The creature took a small step back upon seeing the goat smile. “He’s also killed many, taken the lives of the calm, the innocent, children who have yet to–”

“HE HAS HIS REASONS,” Malkah yelled out into the open. “You–” She laughed. “You just don’t get it! If Stoicism has done something such as murder, he has a reason. It must be for the greater good– Anything, *ANYTHING* he’s ever done is for his followers, for us, for *ME*.”

“I worry for your sanity.”

“My mind is fine,” Malkah retorted through gritted teeth. “Now will you send my message to him?”

“No.”

“You can’t say–” The goat was interrupted by a lump in her throat, a choked sob escaping her as she fell to her knees once more. Tears dripped to the ground as the goat cried out in heartache, clutching her chest.

“*I will not repeat myself,*” The creature seemingly growled despite not moving its mouth, its head lowering so it could stare into Malkah’s eyes. “You wish to speak to someone who has harmed this world, taken those who had *a future ahead of them*. It’s a shame you idolize such a being. And it’s a further shame you believe you can demand I give a different response in my own domain.”

Malkah’s eyes narrowed.

“My word is final, Malkah. No.”

“...Fine.” She forced herself to stand. “I’ll find a way to talk to him myself.”

The creature watched her turn away. “..Be careful what you do, little lamb.” The creature warned. “For Death is always watching us.”



“Nanjing”

Beixi Chen



“Flower Tears”

Claudia Duran

Trust for a Torch

Fasih Ur Rehman

Reach the gem in the empty and cold,
Find your path, the soul sold.
Heed, and do not look back to throw the dice;
In chapters of the past, I lost once or twice.

A lonely ache, a truth hushed,
Wisdom is not an experience rushed.
Look around and feel the crowded emptiness;
Trust was traded for a string of warmth in hastiness.

Buyer holds a torch, warm and bright.
It seems he caught the cold, not meeting my sight.
My goods, my goods, I have no goods.
An embrace of warmth is all I have left in the cold woods.

The gem afar glares and stares.
The path is less thorny if we walk in pairs.
No vow of lovers, no words desire,
Just brothers, guarding one shared fire.

I Will Never be the Girl

Elise Nephew

But I will never be the girl
who is coy and mysterious
I am intruding upon the world
my eyes ever so serious.

I am loud and outrageous
my voice bellows from my chest
Still I am a woman
who tries her very damned best.

I am bold and outspoken,
I cannot recommend upsetting me
I don't play wordless mind games
what I say is the key
I'm an enigma of monstrous claims
so you'll have a hard time getting to me.

I will never be the girl
you want me to be.
(I say this with certainty.)



“The Message”

Norma Quinde

You Can Do It

Kristina Baron

A dog barks,
as a child sits alert,
yet not moving.

The dog gives a little push on command, as the child tries to maneuver to his feet,
without the enjoyment of being able, to use his arms in this task,
or any other for that matter.

One step, two steps, three steps, landing on a furry body,
he knows it's okay,
we'll try again.

Up we go,
a little push from behind,
a little encouragement from in front.
There you go, almost there, almost up,
whoops, we'll try together,
again, again, again.

No tears are shed,
for he know he can do it.
A task that should be easy,
yet given to him as a challenge.
Yes, he's doing it, he's up,
he's running and jumping.
Abruptly falling,
yet standing quickly,
on his own.

For this is all in a days work,
of an occupational therapist.



“Financial District, NYC”

Carlos Espinosa



“sakura”

TianaMarie Allen



“Eva”

Kristina Baron



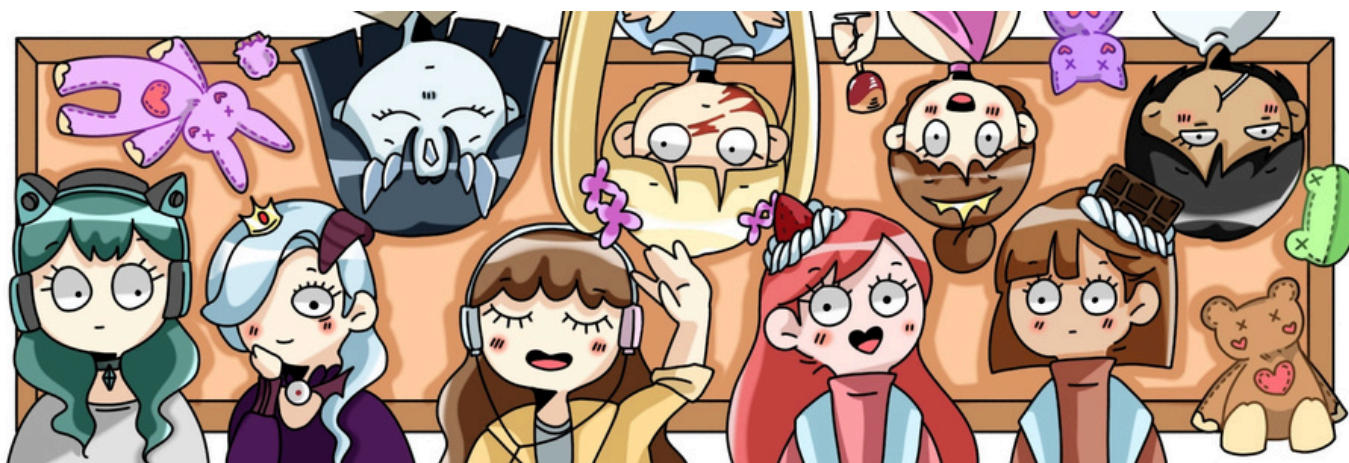
“Fading”

Sophie Lebron



“Beach”

Dedan Choezom



“My characters”

Yein Kim

Asian Heritage Committee 2026 Portfolio

This Year's Theme: "ABCs of Family Stories and Recipes"

What does food mean in your family or community? Is there a dish that reminds you of home? Or a recipe tied to a special moment, tradition, or person? Whether it's a cherished holiday dish, a snack passed down through generations, or a meal that simply makes you feel loved, we invite you to share it!

“Nilaga” – Filipino Boiled Beef Stew

Joana Constantino



Ingredients:

- 1 pound beef (chopped)
- 7 cups water
- 1 onion (chopped)
- 1 bag baby potatoes
- 2 carrots (peeled and chopped)
- 1 cabbage (chopped)
- 1 tablespoon whole black pepper
- 1 tablespoon fish sauce (patis)

Instructions:

1. Boil the beef in a large pot in water and simmer until tender.
2. Add onion, baby potatoes, carrots, and pepper until tender.
3. Add cabbage and cook for 5 minutes.
4. Add fish sauce for extra flavor.
5. Serve and enjoy. Kain Na!

Nilaga is a traditional Filipino family food meaning “boiled” and this soup is a reminder of home and comfort. It is cooked on rainy days, special Sundays, and makes people feel more comfortable when people have a cold or just relax at home. Like the stew itself, it is a combination of simple ingredients coming together to form the perfect soup.

C is for Coquito

Minami Gonzalez

WARNING: This recipe yields 16 servings, so make sure you have a large party!

Ingredients

- 2 cups of water
- 8 three-inch cinnamon sticks
- 6 large egg yolks
- 3 12-oz cans of evaporated milk
- 2 cans of coconut milk
- 3 14-oz cans of sweetened condensed milk
- 3 cups of white rum (preferably Bacardi or Don Q!)

Instructions

In a 2 quart saucepan, heat water and cinnamon sticks to boiling over high heat. Reduce heat to medium and cook until liquid is reduced to one cup. Remove cinnamon sticks and set liquid aside to cool to room temperature.

In a 3 quart saucepan with a wire whisk, beat egg yolks and evaporated milk until well mixed. Cook over low heat, stirring constantly until mixture thickens and coats a spoon - about 10 minutes (DO NOT BOIL). Set aside to cool slightly.

When the cinnamon flavored liquid has cooled, stir in coconut milk, until well mixed. In a serving bowl, combine the coconut-cinnamon mixture, the yolk-evaporated milk mixture, sweetened condensed milk and white rum. Chill well and serve!

Story behind this Coquito recipe

This is my mother's 22-year-old go-to recipe for coquito that she had discovered online in December 2004!

My mother's parents immigrated to New York City from Puerto Rico, with my grandmother coming from Cabo Rojo and a member of the indigenous Guainía Taíno Tribe, and my grandfather coming from Loíza and was from an Italian-Puerto Rican family.

Coquito is a traditional Winter holiday drink commonly consumed during the Christmas and New Year season throughout the Spanish-speaking Caribbean and the diaspora community, but with its initial origins in Puerto Rico.

My mother has touted this recipe for coquito as far back as when I was around 5 years old, with both sides of my family immensely praising how good it tastes and begging my mother for her specific recipe!

Most coquito recipes from Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, and the Virgin Islands rarely call for the use of egg yolks, which this recipe uses. Egg yolks are the key to this coquito's creamier texture, but requires more effort to make because it needs to be cooked down in order to reduce the possible risk of salmonella.

My mother has sworn by this recipe for many Christmas and New Year's Eve gatherings throughout the years, and as soon as I was of age, I began to enjoy this drink with the family as well. I'd look forward to smelling the heavy cinnamon and coconut fragrances as my mom would make it - which has now become my holiday responsibility to make each year!

A Pot of Jollof Rice, A Pot of Memory

Chiamaka Ebelebe



In my family, Jollof rice is not just a meal. It is a presence. It is a statement.

It shows up at weddings, birthdays, graduations, and Sunday gatherings.

Whenever there is something worth celebrating, there is a pot of Jollof on the stove. The aroma of pepper and tomatoes filling the house means people are coming together.

Growing up Nigerian, I learned early that Jollof rice carries pride. There is always the playful debate over which African country makes the best Jollof, but in our home, there was no argument. Nigerian Jollof rice is rich, bold, and full of flavor, it is cooked with patience, stirred with care, and made to be shared.

Personally, Jollof rice represents more than a dish. It represents family

conversations in the kitchen, laughter in the background, and the comfort of knowing that wherever Nigerians gather, Jollof will be there.

A pot of Jollof is never just rice.

It is memory. It is a celebration. It is home.

Some things in life are negotiable. Nigerian Jollof is not one of them.

Traditional Nigerian Jollof Rice

Ingredients:

- 2 cups long-grain parboiled rice
- ¼ cup vegetable oil
- 1 large onion (sliced)
- 1 red bell pepper
- 2–3 Roma tomatoes
- 1 scotch bonnet pepper
- 3 tablespoons of tomato paste
- 2 cups chicken stock
- 1 teaspoon of thyme
- 2 teaspoons of curry powder
- 1–2 bay leaves
- Salt to taste

Instructions:

- Blend tomatoes, red bell pepper, and scotch bonnet.
- Heat the oil and sauté the onions. Add tomato paste and fry until deep red. Stir in the blended mixture and cook until thick.
- Season with thyme, curry, bay leaves, and salt. Add washed rice and stir to coat. Pour in stock, cover tightly with aluminium foil, and cook on low heat until tender and slightly smoky.

Optional: Serve with fried plantain and grilled turkey or chicken.

Farm to Table: Bibimbap

Esther Haeun Kim

At six in the morning, while the air is still cool and sunshine mellow, the eight of us gather at the shed to plan the day's work. Judy on the lettuce, Michael on the spinach, Gina on the squash, Hannah and “Hanner” (also Hannah) on the cucumbers, and Tim and I on the chards. Each of us load up buckets and baskets on the wheely cart, and we roll it up the hill to our designated field in twenty acre farmland. Everyone needs to get working to bring food to the tables of 300 people.

Friends who live nearby arrive at eight to help us get the market going. Susan on the delivery bags and Mary Agnes on the herb field, making cuttings of the most aromatic stems of basil and parsley varieties.

All of us work relentlessly in the field and none of us mind getting covered in dirt and sweat because surely, the earth rewards us with what our hands worked for.

At eleven, Gina reminds me it's time. It was my turn to cook lunch and I must go and prepare. Every day we have lunch together, and we take turns being the chef of the day. It was my very first time cooking for everyone, and I thought very hard on how I can use our harvest to create a dish that everyone would enjoy.

What can I make with farm vegetables that are nutritious, energizing, and bursting with flavor?

Bibimbap.

It's a Korean dish where vegetables of rainbow colors are assorted on the bed of rice and protein, usually served with gochujang, a sweet and spicy red pepper paste, and a drizzle of sesame oil to finish.

The name translates to “mixed” (bibim) and “rice” (bap)—a dish intended to be mixed until the ingredients merge for a balanced flavor.

I go down to our storage room, a giant walk-in refrigerator where all of our harvest is stored

safely. I carefully pick out some vegetables: carrots, zucchini, radish, spinach. I also select the imperfect, “ugly” vegetables that are still perfectly delicious to eat. What’s wonderful about bibimbap is its versatility; you can use any combination of vegetables you have on hand.

Eight eggs from the coop; one egg per person. Maybe I’ll get few more extras.



There’s something special about cooking and dining at the farm. Seeing the full cycle of growth, harvest, and to our table is what makes the experience so worthwhile. From chopping the vegetables, each sauteed and seasoned, I made a platter of vegetables and eggs for a “deconstructed” bibimbap. And a batch of rice, of course! Thank God Tim came in to help, because I underestimated how much work went into cutting those carrots and radishes in julienne. I prepared two sauces: one with spicy gochujang base and the other soy sauce based for those who prefer something milder.



In ninety minutes, the lunch table is set. Hungry farmers walk in to the dining room one by one, getting themselves settled and cooled off from working for hours in the sun. Only a few heard of bibimbap, but every plate was left spotless before we headed back to the field.



O is for Oi Muchim (Cucumber Salad)

Minami Gonzalez

Yields 2 Servings

Ingredients

- 4 Persian or mini cucumbers
- 1 tbsp kitchen salt
- 2 tbsp garlic chili oil
- 2 tbsp rice vinegar
- 2 ½ tsp sugar
- 2 tsp gochugaru (Korean chili pepper flakes)
- ½ tsp sesame oil
- ¼ tsp MSG
- Toasted sesame seeds for topping

Instructions

Rinse the cucumbers, cut off the ends, then cut into ½ inch-thick slices and transfer to a bowl. Add salt and mix well, then refrigerate for 30 minutes. In a separate small mixing bowl, combine the garlic chili oil, rice vinegar, sugar, gochugaru, sesame oil, and MSG and mix well. Rinse the salted cucumber slices with cold water, drain well, and transfer to a bowl. Pour the sauce mixture over the cucumbers and mix well. Transfer to a serving plate and top with toasted sesame seeds.

Story behind this Oi Muchim Recipe

Oi muchim is one of my absolute favorite Korean banchan dishes to eat, mainly because cucumbers are one of my favorite veggies! When I was living in South Korea as a young kid back in 2001, my aunt would always make this cold, cucumber salad for us among her typical banchan dishes, like kimchi (fermented cabbage), eomuk-bokkeum (stir-fried fish cakes) and danmuji (pickled radish). I would let the spicy, vinegary brine soak into and flavor my white rice (an Asian cultural faux pas, I know...) as I ate my meals with my family as a kid.

After leaving Korea to live in Japan for two years until 2003, I hadn't eaten oi muchim again until my late teen years when I returned to New Jersey to go to college. This recipe is another one that I had pulled from TikTok culinary content creator Newt Nguyen's self-titled cookbook that I had bought a year ago, and I was extremely surprised to find this dish's recipe there! To this day, visiting staple Korean restaurants in New Jersey such as So Gong Dong in Hackensack, Bunsiknara in Little Ferry, or Hama in Ridgewood; as soon as I see a plate of oi muchim hit my table, my disposable chopsticks will break apart quicker than the speed of light to reach for my first bite!

Right before the COVID-19 virus wracked the world, in 2019, I had trekked all the way back to Icheon to visit my aunt and two cousins over my Winter break for the first time in 3 years. The night that I had arrived, I unpacked my luggage into the room I was staying in, took off my coat, settled in, and then smelled the warm aroma my aunt's cooking wafting throughout the house. I scuttled over to the table, sat down in anticipation, and the first plate of banchan she had laid on the table was oi muchim! "Mina-ya, it's your favorite~", my aunt told me, giving me a smile and a wink. Oi muchim will always be a food that reminds me of my family in Korea.

Ube

Joana Constantino



Kalamay (Purple Yam).

Ingredients:

- 4c coconut milk
- 1c water
- 2c glutinous rice flour
- 1c sugar
- 1c purple yam (grated)

Latik Topping: 1 can coconut milk & 1/3 c brown sugar (Boil & stir until brown)

Instructions:

1. Combine coconut milk, water, and rice flour. Boil, then set aside.
2. In a kawali (large pan), boil 2c coconut milk, then add yam.
3. Pour contents from step 1 to the pot and stir.
4. Stir in sugar and mix until thick.
5. Place in a serving tray and add topping. Enjoy when cool.

Kalamay is a sticky rice kakanin and is one of my favorite Filipino desserts. Just like family, it symbolizes unity and sticks together. Bonds are closer when life stirs things up and temperature rises. I love kalamay because it is purple, and the color symbolizes royalty and in the family I feel like a princess.

M is for Miso Soup

Minami Gonzalez

Yields 4 servings

Ingredients

- ½ oz of kombu (7x8 inch piece)
- 4 cups of water
- ½ oz (1 ½ cups) of bonito flakes
- 4 oz of soft tofu, cut into ½ inch cubes
- 2 tbsp wakame
- 2 tbsp white miso paste (shiro miso)
- 1 scallion (green part only!) sliced

Instructions

To make the dashi (soup stock/broth); in a medium pot, combine the kombu and water and bring to just under a boil over medium-low heat (approx. 10-12 minutes). Remove and throw away the kombu from the broth, and add bonito flakes to the broth and leave on the heat for 30 seconds, then remove from heat. Strain the dashi through a fine mesh strainer into a bowl.

Return the dashi to the pot, place over medium heat, and bring to a boil. Once it's boiling, add diced soft tofu and wakame. Cook for 3-4 minutes, then remove from heat.

Stir in white miso paste by pushing it through a strainer into the dashi broth to remove lumps and make the miso smooth. Then serve, garnishing with the sliced scallion greens as a topping.

Story behind this Miso Soup recipe

Miso soup (or in Japanese, miso shiru) is a staple favorite soup dish of my father and myself, as it is flavorful, filled with probiotics, and very warming especially for the cold weather. As my father didn't learn how to really cook until very recently in our lives, we would only ever get the chance to have miso soup at Japanese or Korean restaurants.

I had found this recipe in a cookbook written and published by TikTok cooking content creator Newt Nguyen that I had purchased a couple of years ago, as I felt empowered by and connected to his own story and journey of embracing cooking cultural dishes that have impacted his life through his lived experiences in California, Hawaii, and his mother's own background as a Vietnamese immigrant and restaurateur.

He writes in his self-titled book that his experiences visiting Japanese American communities and restaurants in both California and Hawaii formed a good portion of his overall Asian American identity and upbringing in the U.S, and has several other Japanese and Japanese-hybrid recipes in cookbook, such as chicken katsu and spam musubi.

As someone who was born in New Jersey, but raised across Jersey, New York City, a suburb called Icheon near-ish to Seoul in South Korea, and Central Tokyo in Japan; and who has frequently visited extended family 'Ewa in Hawai'i and Shigatse, Tibet - I can relate to Newt's experiences of relocating and connecting with the locales in which both he and I have lived in and visited - both culturally, and culinarily. Whether it is Puerto Rican sancocho stew, Hawaiian manapua steamed buns, Japanese miso ramen, Korean bibimbap, or Tibetan thukpa soup - I fondly, warmly, and openly embrace each of the ethnicities and cultures that have helped to form who I am, and that have provided me memories and moments of interacting with my family, my friends, and my overall community - each of these places and their food remind me of home.

Pancit “Noodles”

Joana Constantino

Ingredients:

- 1 pack of Pancit noodles
- 1 thinly sliced chicken breast (or any meat)
- 1 chopped small onion
- 2 minced cloves of garlic
- ½ cup thinly sliced carrots
- ½ cup chopped cabbage
- ½ cup chopped green beans
- 2 tbsp soy sauce
- 2 tbsp olive oil
- 1 cup water
- 1 lemon/calamansi (garnish)

Instructions:

1. Heat oil in a large pan over medium heat.
2. Add chick (meat) and cook until fully cooked. Set aside.
3. Caramelize onion and garlic in a pan.
4. Add carrots, cabbage, and green beans. Stir for 3 minutes until vegetables are tender.
5. Add Pancit noodles to the pan and stir.
6. Pour water and add soy sauce. Stir well until noodles are soft.
7. Add the cooked chicken (meat) into the pan and stir.
8. Transfer to a serving plate and garnish with lemon or calamansi.

Kain Na Tayo! (Let's eat!)

Pancit is a common Filipino dish served in family gatherings, birthdays, celebrations, and holidays. Noodles symbolize long life and good health, so it's fitting to cook it at joyous moments and share it with special people around you. This is a family recipe that brings families together.

P is for Pasteles (with Gohan)

Minami Gonzalez

I have very fond memories of visiting my father's parents in Chinatown to celebrate Christmas Eve together as a family when I was younger. My grandmother, as a testament to our mixed cultural heritage of being Asian-Caribbean, would make huge feasts for the family that blended foods from both cultures together. She would start cooking early in the day, ensuring that every dish would be at least near-ready for once we all arrived; *tostones* (fried plantains), *arroz con gandules* (yellow rice with pigeon peas), *viandas encebolladas* (a medley of boiled starchy root vegetables that are later sauteed with onions and olive oil). However, two dishes of paramount importance were *pasteles*, and a large bowl of *gohan*.

Pasteles are a traditional Caribbean staple food with origins from the *Taíno* indigenous peoples, of which both of my grandmothers have direct ties to. With a relation to similar dishes like Mexican *tamales* and Venezuelan *hallacas*, they are made of boiled *guineos* (green bananas) or *yuca* (cassava root) which are mashed up into a dough, filled with meat and other small veggies, and then tied closed in a banana leaf, molded into a rectangle, before being boiled once again. It has always been a tradition in our family that we eat this dish only during the holidays, and I always reminisce and associate the scent of boiled green bananas with my grandmother's tenderness and fondness for cooking.

Alongside this, as is tradition from the Japanese side of my father's family, my grandmother would also cook an enormous bowl of *gohan* - steamed white rice - for us to have with our holiday meal. *Gohan* is a word in Japanese that means "cooked rice", but also refers to just "a meal" - which carries the heavy cultural connotation and importance that a meal is never complete without rice. Despite her passing away in 2020, my family continues both of these important and touching food traditions carried on by my grandmother to this day.

My Father's Traditional Dumplings: A Story of Family and Home

Joan (Tsung-Hsuan) Liu

Dumplings are the ultimate comfort food in Chinese culture, and making them is a cherished weekend tradition for families in Northern China. More than just a meal, dumplings represent reunion, remembrance, and love.

My father was from Shandong Province in China, near the border with Korea. In 1949, he and my two uncles relocated to Taiwan to flee Communist rule in China. To preserve their heritage and to ease their deep homesickness for the parents and family they had left behind, we gathered every weekend to make dumplings together. From as early as I can remember, these gatherings were among the happiest moments of my childhood.

As we folded dumplings around the dining table, I listened to the stories my father and uncles shared about growing up in China. They spoke of their childhood memories, the parents they missed so dearly, and their dreams of one day returning to China to reunite with my grandparents, relatives, and friends. Those conversations, filled with longing and hope, became woven into the rhythm of our family life.

It wasn't until the late 1980s, when China and Taiwan reopened communication, that my father and uncles received the heartbreaking news that my grandparents had been killed during the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s. The hope they had carried for decades was suddenly replaced with unimaginable grief. That was the first time I ever saw my father cry.

After that, the atmosphere of our weekend dumpling-making gatherings changed. The tradition continued, but it carried a quieter, heavier tone shaped by sorrow,

grief, and regret. My father grew more anxious whenever my sisters and I left home for school. I still vividly remember when my eldest sister left for New York to pursue her master's degree; the heartbreak on my father's face as he said goodbye to his first daughter at the airport nearly broke my own heart.

My sisters and I were always reminded by our mother that the first thing we needed to do upon arriving at our destinations was to let our father know we had arrived safely; otherwise, he would not be able to sleep. His love was constant, protective, and quietly profound.

My father passed away nearly twenty years ago. Yet through the simple act of making dumplings, he passed down the most important values in life: family, love, resilience, and forgiveness. This is my family's traditional dumpling recipe. Whenever I feel homesick or miss him, I gather my children around the table and make my father's dumplings. In those moments, I hear his stories again, feel his presence, and remember what truly matters.

I hope to pass down the values I learned from my father to my children, so that this family tradition shaped by love, memory, and perseverance will continue for generations to come.

Pork and Cabbage Dumplings (餃子)

Dumpling fillings:

- Minced pork 1lb
- Cabbage 4 cups (chopped into small pieces, dry before marinating)
- Salt 1/2 Tbsp
- Fresh ginger juice 2-3 Tbsp (from ~2 inches chunk)
- Light soy sauce 1 1/2 Tbsp
- Rice wine 1Tbsp
- Sesame oil 1/2 tsp
- White pepper 1 pinch
- 1 egg

Dumpling wrappers (makes 24-28, 4" diameter circles)

- All purpose flour 2 cups
- Salt 1 pinch
- Hot water 2/3 cup

Instructions:

1. Add flour and salt to a medium bowl, make a hole, pour boiling water and quickly mix with spatula or chopsticks to make into a dough. Cover with clean towel and rest for at least 20 min.
2. Wash cabbage. Cut into small (1/8") pieces. Put in a medium bowl. Mix with salt to marinate and sweat for 30 min.
3. Meanwhile, grate ginger to extract the juice. In a large bowl, combine pork, ginger juice, soy, wine, sesame oil, and white pepper.
4. Dough should be ready. Knead for a few minutes to make it smooth and not sticky. Make 2~1" diameter cylinders. Divide into 24 equal parts.
5. Cabbage should be ready. Squeeze extra liquid out and add to pork. Whisk egg to mixture. Mix well. Filling is done!
6. Take a piece of dough. Roll into a 4" diameter circle. Take ~1 Tbsp of filling to make one dumpling. Place it on a cookie sheet dusted with flour.
7. Boil. Add water to a pot and bring to a full boil. Add enough water for all the dumplings to float freely. Add dumplings and boil for 20 min.

How to make the worst Irish soda bread

Kelli Hayes

for my Gram, Joan Salek 1942 - 2025

it's easy—if you care enough
to make something awful

the heart is a bad compass
and a worse measuring cup

luckily, three *scant* cups of flour
a *smidge* of baking soda
and a *pinch* of salt
are forgiving measurements

sorry tastes better
with practice—and margarine

and *without* raisins
the only instruction that matters
though it's not written down
but inherited, like a crooked bite

bitter bread is an acquired
love language

but it's *mine*, learned
off coffee-tinged lips and cursive
on recipe cards so slanted the words
lace, woven memory now

these awful things
feed us, too

Turon (Plantain Lumpia)

Joana Constantino



Ingredients:

- 3 plantains
- 1 cup sugar
- 1 pack of spring roll wrapper
- 1 cup oil

Instructions:

1. Cut plantain in $\frac{1}{2}$, then slice in 3 pieces.
2. Coat each plantain in sugar
3. Wrap each plantain.
4. Heat oil and fry the wrapped plantains.
5. Caramelize sugar on top, then enjoy.

Haiku:

Golden turon bright,
Blessed at dusk by gentle light,
Sweet grace in each bite.

Poem:

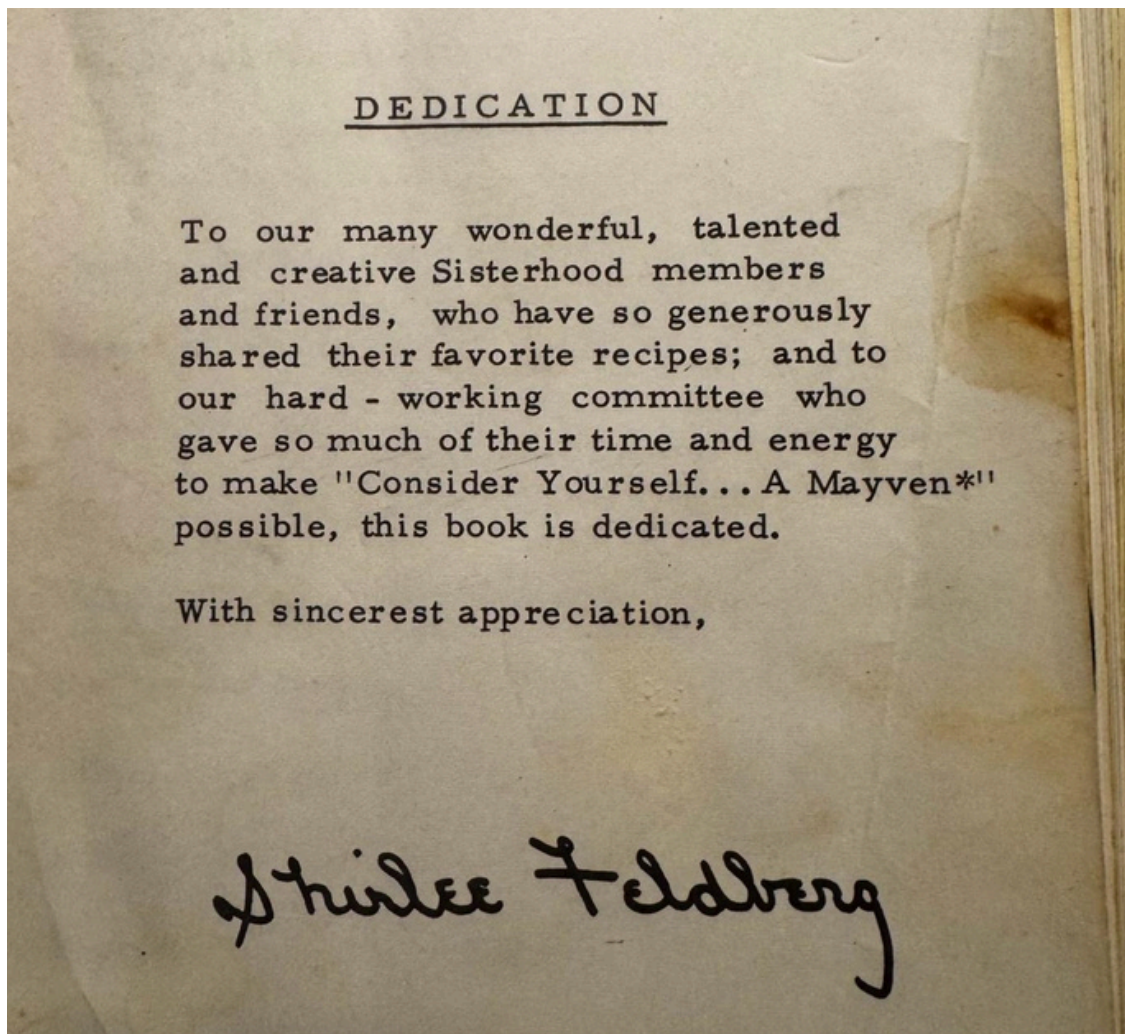
Turon is a lot like me, strong on the outside,
but sweet and warm inside.
Filipina flipping tightly-wrapped plantains,
passed from hands that pray, held together by a love that lasts.
Like turon in its collective glow,
I am refined, entwined, and rendered gold.

Family Recipe

Melanie Sloan

This submission is of my family's cookbook, which has been passed down to me. I remember making this recipe with my mom in the kitchen on Friday nights. Each time I try my grandma's favorite mashed potatoes, I'm instantly brought back to those days. My grandma (Bernice Sloan) worked with my cousin (Shirlee Feldberg) to make this classic cookbook.

- Melanie Sloan



MASHED POTATO PIE -- Bernice Sloan

4-6 cooked, mashed potatoes
1-2 tbs. chicken fat
2 med. onions, sauteed
Salt, pepper
1 egg
Matzo meal, to thicken

Combine all ingredients and place in greased Pyrex dish. Sprinkle top with breadcrumbs and paprika. Bake for 1/2 hr., or until nicely browned, at 350°.

NOTE: This dish can be prepared the day before and then baked the next day.

The Labyrinth Team

Maximillian Venskus - Managing Editor

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Maximillian Venskus (he/him) is a current student at Bergen Community College studying history, with plans to transfer to a four year institution next spring to continue to pursue history. He is dedicated to being a peer tutor and academic coach, as which he was able to present as a keynote speaker at the 2025 4C Virtual Tutoring Conference. In his free time, he enjoys playing video games, writing, and archery.

Dedan Choezom - Layout Editor & Technical Designer

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Dedan Choezom (she/her) is a first-year Biology student at Bergen Community College and serves as the *Labyrinth's* Technical Designer. She hopes to transfer to a four-year institution after graduating in Spring 2027. On campus, she is a peer tutor and academic coach in the CLAC, a director on the PTK board, and a STEM Center volunteer. In her free time, Dedan loves to cook, edit videos, and go on long hikes.

Natasha Stremel - Technical Designer

--

Natasha Stremel (she/her) is a current student at Bergen Community College who plans to transfer to a four-year university to earn her bachelor's degree in literature. She is deeply passionate about reading and enjoys exploring how stories connect people. She hopes to become a future high school English teacher, where she can share her love of literature with others and inspire future generations.

The Labyrinth Team

Dylan Rehm - Content Editor

--

Dylan Rehm (he/him) is a current student at Bergen Community College, finishing his fourth and final semester this Spring. He will be transferring to Bowdoin College in the fall and plans to major in Biology and Environmental Studies. He is dedicated to his role as Co-Vice President of the Honors Association and as a peer tutor in the CLAC Writing Center. In his free time, Dylan enjoys gardening, studying natural medicine, baking, and crocheting stuffed animals. He also loves to mention that he is a certified forklift operator whenever he gets the chance.

Vanessa Wood - Content Editor

--

Vanessa Wood (she/her) is a current student at Bergen Community College studying General Natural Sciences with plans to transfer to a four year institution in the future. She serves as Co-Vice President of the JKW Honors Association and is a peer tutor and academic coach in the CLAC. Off campus, she spends her time listening to music of all genres, reading, watching movies, and sewing.

The Labyrinth Team

Dr. John Findura – Faculty Advisor

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Dr. John Findura (he/his) is the author of the poetry collections Submerged, Useful Shrapnel, and the forthcoming The Only Map You'll Need. He holds an MFA in Poetry from The New School, an M.Ed in Clinical Counseling from William Paterson, and an Ed.D in Educational Technology from NJCU. His poetry, criticism, and essays have been published in numerous national and international literary journals. Since 2009 he has been the Writing Center Supervisor at Bergen's national award winning Cerullo Learning Assistance Center. Currently, he is patiently awaiting the full disclosure of the fact that aliens exist and have been visiting Earth for thousands of years.

Kelli Hayes – Faculty Advisor

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Kelli Hayes (she/her) received her M.A. in Writing Studies from Kean University in 2019 and her M.S.L.I.S. from the Pratt Institute in 2021. While studying at Kean, she also completed a minor in Fine Arts with a concentration in Metalworks & Jewelry Making. She has worked at Bergen Community College since 2018. Currently, she is the Academic Coaching Supervisor at the Cerullo Learning Assistance Center where she supports students in creating and pursuing futures for themselves. When not working or writing, she enjoys curling up with her cats and reading a good book.

Spring 2026 Category Judges

Seamus Gibbons - Fiction

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Seamus Gibbons is the Director of the Judith K. Winn School of Honors and an Associate Professor of English. He teaches Composition, Literature and Creative Writing courses. He has been published in both the US and Ireland.

Christina Masucci - Creative Non-Fiction

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Christina Masucci (she/her) received her M.A. in English & Writing Studies from Kean University in 2020 and is currently working on her M.I.L.I.S. from Rutgers University. She has also completed minors in both Music and Theatre, and utilized her multidisciplinary college experiences to explore the humanistic nature of fan behaviors in her thesis, *Dichotomy of Fan: A Snapshot of Interaction, Participation, and Belonging in Modern Fandom Culture*. She is currently an Evening & Saturday Supervisor at the Bergen Community College Cerullo Learning Assistance Center, a Library Assistant at the Glen Ridge Public Library, and enjoys writing short stories and playing roguelites when she's avoiding her homework (which is often).

Spring 2026 Category Judges

Catherine Park (Alum Judge) - Poetry

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Catherine Park is currently a junior at Bowdoin College majoring in English. She graduated from Bergen Community College in Spring 2025 with an A.A. in Literature. At Bowdoin, she writes for The Bowdoin Review and the school's official literary magazine, The Quill. She is also an Associate Member of the Peucinian Society. Most recently, she participated in the Sancho Panza Literary Society's winter residency at Trinity College Dublin. She is currently producing a poetry portfolio under the mentorship of poet Danez Smith, whose poetry collection *Don't Call Us Dead* (2017) was a finalist for the National Book Award. Her other interests include translated literature, directing, playwriting, social justice and public advocacy, and folk music.

Shiwa Yangzom (Alum Judge) - Photography

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Shiwa Yangzom is an undergraduate at Williams College majoring in Comparative Literature and East Asian Languages and Cultures. She graduated from Bergen Community College in 2024 as class valedictorian before transferring to Williams. As a photographer and filmmaker, her work engages visual storytelling across documentary, narrative, and experimental forms, with particular attention to memory, place, and cultural history. In 2025, through the Wilmers Fellowship, she conducted research in India collecting Tibetan oral histories and narratives for a documentary project in development. Her other interests include diasporic literature, photography, and knitting.

Spring 2026 Category Judges

Jim Bumgardner - One-Act Play

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Jim Bumgardner (Director/Producer) earned an MFA in directing from Sarah Lawrence College in Bronxville, NY and a BA in Theatre and Romance Languages from St. Andrews Presbyterian College in Laurinburg, NC. He is the producer for the theatre arts program here at BCC as well as a Professor of theatre studies. Some of his directing credits have included *Murder on the Nile*, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, *Man of La Mancha*, ...and the *World Goes Round*, *The Crucible*, *A Christmas Pudding*, *Into the Woods*, *Guys & Dolls*, *Oh, Coward!*, *South Pacific*, *Company*, *The Threepenny Opera*, *Making God Laugh*, *The 1940's Radio Hour*, *The Heiress*, *The Hollow*, *A Murder Is Announced*, *Cabaret*, *Brigadoon*, *Kiss Me, Kate*, *Damn, Yankees!*, *Godspell*, and *Kindertransport* to name but a few.

Lillian Venskus - Visual Arts

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Lillian Venskus is a lifelong horror enthusiast with a Master's in Film and Media Studies and a background in art history. She teaches Introduction to Cinema in a community college setting, where she often uses horror as a lens to examine social anxieties, historical trauma, and the power of visual storytelling. Lillian is passionate about demystifying film theory and helping audiences uncover what our favorite nightmares say about us.



Thank you to all the participants and congratulations to all our winners.

The Labyrinth contest is held each year and all are welcome to compete. For more information, please visit our website.

www.bergen.edu/labyrinth/