

An abstract painting of a chair, rendered in a collage-like style with visible brushstrokes and torn paper textures. The color palette is dominated by earthy tones: various shades of red, orange, and brown, with a large, dark green section on the left representing the chair's seat. The overall composition is complex and layered, with some areas appearing more defined than others.

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Table of Contents

Front Cover, Painting by Eunjung Son

Innocence, poetry, David Rumph.....	4
Couple's Therapy, Painting, Ha Kyoung Kim.....	5
A Witch's Window, Photograph, Sarah Johnson.....	6
End of August, Poetry, Anna Aning.....	7
From Cape Cod, Photograph, David Tsai.....	8
Assateague Island, Poetry, Yakov Shteynman.....	9
New American, Short Story, Leyla Durmus.....	10
Warm Winter Vibrance, Photograph, Yahdani Mejia.....	14
The Sum of My Parts, Poem Yahdani Mejia.....	15
Women's March I, Photograph, Victoria Bednarz.....	16
Women's March II, Photograph, Victoria Bednarz.....	17
To My Single Immigrant Mother, Short Story, Cassie Lacsina Guinto.....	18
Life in Bloom, Photograph, Amanda Kulesza.....	21
Three Days, Poem, Luis Parra.....	22
Long Legged Fly, Photograph, Maximus Kajiwarra.....	23
Untitled, Photograph, Rachel Stuhmer.....	24
In the Twilight of My Years, Poem, Christopher Gagliardi.....	25
Ducks in Motion, Photograph, Yahdani Mejia.....	26
20 Y.O., Poem, Isaael Sanchez.....	27
Compact Carpenter Ant, Photograph, Maximus Kajiwarra.....	28
Desert Psalm, Poem, Nailah Shabataka	29
Lovers, Painting, Ha Kyoung Kim.....	30
The Trade Off, Short Story, Hailie Arias.....	31
The Train Station, Photograph, Jesus Mercado.....	38
Confessions on a Rainy Night, Play, Anthony Bertollo.....	39
Coachella Outlooks Clear Kindness, Photograph, John Evered.....	43
The Naturalness of Love, Poem, Jay Figueroa.....	44
Solemn Moments, Photograph, Sarah Johnson.....	45
First Gathering After Pandemic, Photograph, Yahdani Mejia.....	46

Fishing for Answers, Short Story, Melissa Glitner.....	47
Paris From the Top, Photograph, Briana Onoche-Onyetenu.....	58
Colors, Poem, Katherine Priegue.....	59
Reflection of Us, Painting, Rana Cemre Kizil.....	60
Mad Mad February, Poem, Ines Avila Mota.....	61
Peeking In, Painting, Sarah Johnson.....	62
You and Father Time, Poem, Somali Findlay.....	63
The Stars, Short Story, Rose Morreale.....	64
Civil Hubris, Digital Art, S.P.....	73
Lovely Gift, Visual Arts, Grigory Vyazovskiy.....	74
Summer Remains, Poem, Amma Aning.....	75
Forest Girl, City Boy, Poem, Nicole Swan.....	76
Uncertainty, Photograph, Sarah Johnson.....	77
The American Dream, Yahdani Mejia.....	78
Sunny Mornings, I Value You So Much, Prose Poem, Giavanna Paparozzi.....	80
A Father's Light, Photograph, Fatima Green.....	81
The Last Note, Short Story, Kleiver Martinez.....	82
And Then It Was Dark, Poem, Gabrielle Cruz.....	86
Rush Hour, Photograph, Jason Avia.....	87

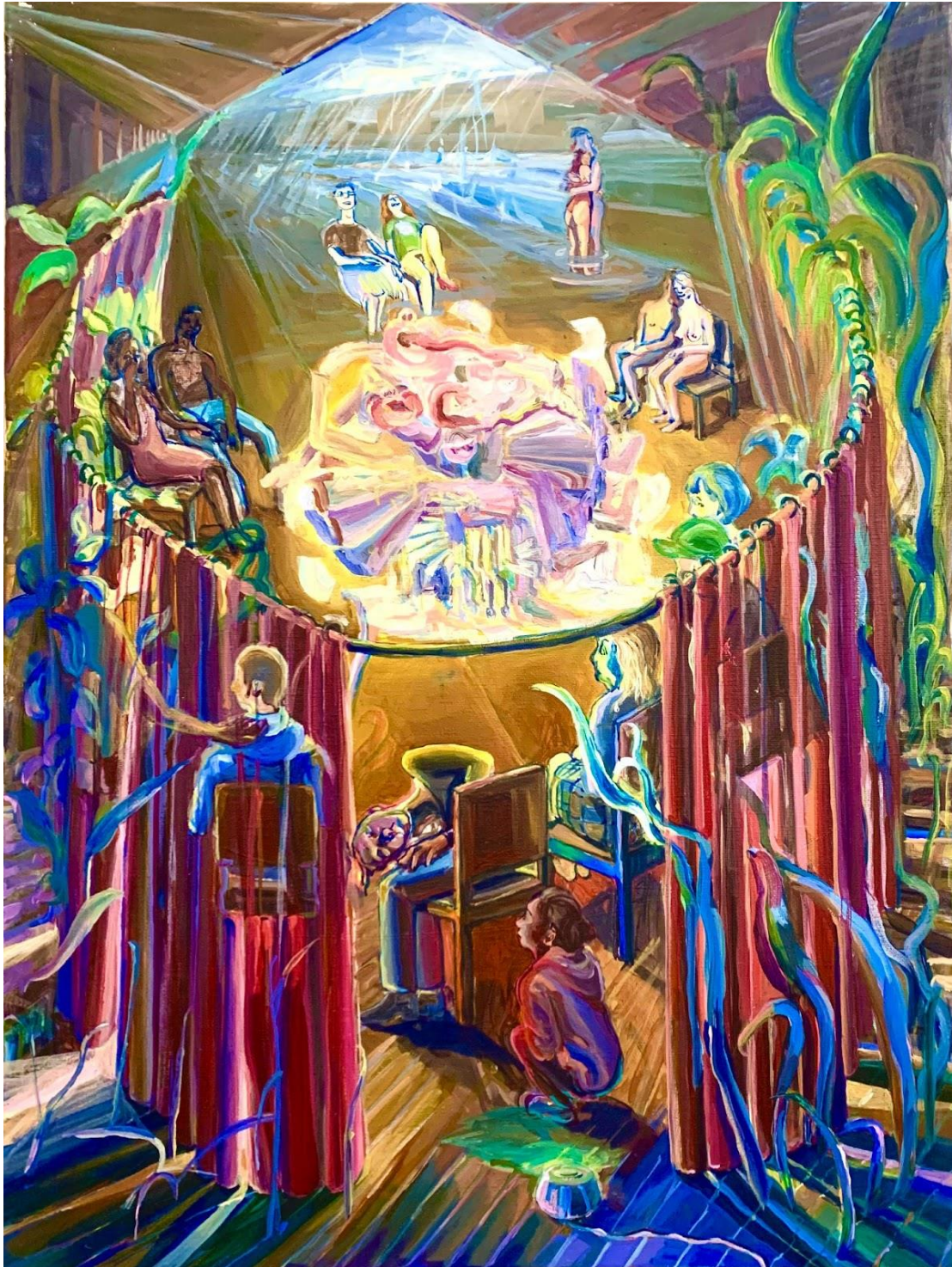
Innocence

After Carlos Drummond de Andrade

*“How he wondered, can there be a being
who so negates existence in the act of existing?”*

Life as we know it
is purely at the extent
of the eye.
A soul may be windowed,
but it's cold outside.
Way too cold
for open windows.
we question the heat
and the eternal embers.
We question the clouds
and those who live upon them.
We question ourselves,
though we're the only book
we will ever finish.
We long for times
that can never be
like a person surviving
a sword to the liver.
We have no doubt about daffodils,
we know their petals, their roots.
We know they're there
for unlike God, and ourselves
they're in our touches.
We do not know,
what it means to exist.

David Rumph



Couple's Therapy, Ha Kyoung Kim, acrylic and watercolor



A Witch's Window, Sarah Johnson

End of August

Your mother still sends me the vegetables from her garden

She feeds me like my mother did, like she fed you

The same hands that brushed your hair and buttoned your shirts tends to the tomatoes I put in my pasta sauce

That's all I think of now, how far you are, how incredibly close

I try to live for the day, but it's hard

As soon as today starts, it feels like tomorrow

And next month and next year when I'll finally be there

There which has no shape except one where I will fit without squeezing myself in

But sometimes, too much, I want to be in the yesterday where you're proud of me, you love me, and you'll see me tomorrow

Amma Aning



From Cape Cod, David Tsai

Assateague Island

The only way to wear those shoes,
is drive back where I'd born anew.
Where the horses walked and came the tide.
When it was new and so was I.

But here I walk, again in time, through what was once so vitalized. I see myself

and what I thought, and how I walked.
In these moments of art, an idled flock.
Like birds, who glide amongst the stars.

Yet even in this favorite crime, may we hope we're never paralyzed: or dumb

enough to look down.

Yakov Shteynman

New American

Year 2005.

I looked at the image in my hands and could not recognize my father's face.

"He's fat," I told my mom.

"It's all the American food he's eating," she replied with a chuckle.

As the sun came up and shined through the white curtains of our living room, my mother pulled my golden blonde hair up into a tight ponytail and adjusted my cobalt blue uniform dress. My brother and I walked out of the apartment and saw the milkman drive up our street in his big white truck. While he stopped at every home on our street, the milkman delivered a glass of milk to each one of the neighborhood kids — except us. I turned to my mother and looked up at her. As our eyes met, I could see the sadness as tears glossed over her beautiful hazel eyes. I knew better than to ask.

I knew she missed my dad more than any of us could possibly ever imagine. She had to sleep in an empty bed every night, counting down the days until she could reunite with the father of her children, her lover, and her best friend. We were far too young to comprehend what we were feeling, but I remember the heaviness in my chest. I remember the nights of hearing my mother cry because she didn't know how much longer she could wait. My brothers and I would cuddle up next to her in the small bed and hold each other tight. She didn't have much to give —yet, she gave us everything.

2006.

As the plane landed, I looked over to my brothers and could see the exhaustion painted across their faces. My mother held us tight as we stepped off the airplane and took our first step onto the land of the free, home of the brave. Conversations that I could not make sense of flew

over my head and people of diverse features blurred into distant crowds. I could feel my mother's anxiety as the air around us got thicker and her hand was tightly wrapped around mine. My head began to spin. *Was this real life? Was I expected to adjust to a whole new setting at the young age of seven? How would I make friends? What if the kids in school didn't want to be around me?* Before the thoughts in my mind had a chance to run wild, I finally saw the person who we came here for — my father. The air suddenly felt lighter and the people around us became nonexistent. There stood the man who had to leave us several years ago in pursuit of building a better life for our family. I could feel the release of my mother's hand as we all walked towards my father. We hugged and there was an outpour of emotions — for a brief moment, everything was *calm*.

2007.

We were new to everything here: the culture, the foods, the language, and the people. Everything was exciting to us. However, people weren't so excited to see a new family of Muslims moving into the neighborhood.

The tragedy of 9/11 gave people a reason to be blatantly racist and islamophobic.

"Your mom hides snakes in her turban."

"Your uncle is Bin Laden."

"Your family killed people."

Truth be told, you don't need to speak a language in order to understand someone. In fact, our bodies do much more of the talking than our words ever will. The kids who would laugh in my face and point fingers at me have hurt me far worse than the words they painted in my head. I wasn't able to understand what they got out of being so mean to a child who couldn't

stand up for herself; however, I now understand it well. Children are a reflection of their parents, especially at such a young age. The words they were speaking weren't their own; instead, they were the words that were taught to them. How sad.

2009.

My mother stood by the stove as the milk in the pan came to a boil. She put three cups out and my siblings and I were eagerly waiting for her at the table.

"You will grow tall and strong," she would tell us with a smile plastered across her face. Oh, how times have changed.

2010.

America was slowly but surely becoming my new definition of home. Our next door neighbors quickly became our best friends as we spent nearly every day together. Thanks to them, we learned what it was like to be children growing up in America. They welcomed us with open arms and never judged us for where we came from; all that mattered was that we made each other happy. On Christmas day, they would invite us over to their home and we'd unwrap gifts together. Every Easter, painting eggs and an egg hunt was a must on the list. As Muslims, we didn't celebrate these holidays but there was something so beautiful in sharing those moments with them.

As time went on, other families moved into the neighborhood. Soon enough, we had more than fifteen children playing in each other's yards. Life felt beautiful. Life felt easy. It hadn't felt that way in so long.

2017.

High school graduation. As I stood at the podium ready to recite my speech, I was overfilled with emotions. How did I get to this point? I could barely speak English ten years ago;

now, I'm at my graduation and about to speak in front of hundreds of people. I could feel my heart pounding in my chest. I took a deep breath.

“Congratulations, class of 2017...”

2022.

Sixteen years. Sometimes, this life doesn't feel real. Maybe someone will pinch me and I will wake up from my sixteen year hibernation. As I look back on my life, the people I've known over the years have become a puzzle I can no longer complete. The faces I once recognized are now strangers to me — a compilation of features that I cannot put together. Throughout the years, so many chapters of my life have been opened and closed but this book has many more pages yet to be filled with adventure.

Leyla Durmus



Warm Winter Vibrance, Yahdani Mejia

The Sum of My Parts

I am
I am loved
I am created
I am decorated,
colorful, eye catching, sophisticated
But I am also severely underestimated, unappreciated
The prying eyes and puzzled faces stare back at me

Do they know my story?
Are they even interested?

Would they even care to know what it is like to be-
Before they even read my description a classification has been designated to me

They underestimate me,
Assuming that I lack complexity

But they don't know the history behind each aspect of this finished piece
They don't know the meaning behind each magazine and newspaper cutout

The determination behind each stroke of paint
The past and future that make up what I am and what I will be

Because I am

I am from everywhere and nowhere
I am a coincidence
I am greater than the sum of my parts
I started as a blank canvas
Now I am a work of art
And I will continue to be and become.

Yahdani Mejia



Women's March I, Victoria Bednarz



Women's March II, Victoria Bednarz

To My Single Immigrant Mother

On Intergenerational Trauma and Healing

"Dear Asian diaspora family, please remember we are much more than our Asianness and the limits of our immigrant story. Our people existed long before the white narrative decided to water down our stories for their agenda and comfort. Finding who we are starts with turning inward and dreaming expansive stories for ourselves."

– Jenny T. Wang, PhD (@asiansformentalhealth)

To my single immigrant mother,

Your biggest sacrifice wasn't moving from the Philippines to the U.S. That part was easy for you. After all, you've always had a case of wanderlust. No one could hold you down. But from the moment you stepped foot on American soil, you were diving headfirst into a world you didn't know, for a child that wasn't born yet.

Growing up, I wasn't aware of what kind of sacrifice this was, However, I don't think you were aware either.

To my single immigrant mother,

It's okay if you weren't prepared to bear the weight of your sacrifices.

You were almost completely alone in this journey, as the second generation of single motherhood in our lineage. It had to have been as painful as the first. A curse you couldn't break. I wonder if you allowed yourself the luxury of feeling this pain. Or, did you swallow it the same way that you swallowed all those nights with no sleep because you were too busy trying to make a living?

To my single mother,

There isn't a man in the world with the capacity for all of You. You had me at 22, and my sister at 19. Now, my sister is 22 and I'm 19. Somehow, we both made it to college okay. Many people would have quit by now. You are far from perfect, but your grit is unmatched. You kept your head above water in an endless sea of doubt, so my sister and I could make it to our island without a single droplet on our heads.

But that's the thing, mom: you are far from perfect, and it didn't always work out the way you planned.

When grandma raised you, she set aside very little time for play. You were alone for a lot of your childhood, so you learned to lie your way out of the house. She paid for tutors to help you with math, but nothing clicked so you learned to cheat on tests (don't worry though, your daughters are just as bad at math).

However, there are no shortcuts to raising a child. There was only so much you could do to raise two young girls when you were just barely growing out of being one.

My sister and I were both in middle school when you stopped buying us toys for Christmas and instead got us designer wallets. For years, we'd talk about how pointless it was to do that for us at that age. But now I wonder how much it hurt to not see smiles on our faces after spending so much money on us.

I still use the wallet today. I wasn't mature enough at the time to appreciate what I was given, and you weren't immature enough to know what a child could have wanted. It was like you imagined your daughters skipping years and becoming young women faster than we wanted to be. In actuality, I wonder if that's how you felt instead.

To my immigrant mother,

In many ways, I feel like you projected a lot of your frustrations onto us. After some of our worst arguments, I would walk away thinking to myself, *it's not my fault you didn't get to enjoy being my age*. In those moments, we were exposed to the least evolved parts of you. It was like meeting the adolescent version of you, whose life you were stripped from having. It felt like, at times, you blamed us for it.

One of the most common generational curses in an immigrant family is the untreated emotional wounds of the parent, which inevitably bleeds onto the child. Then, when we wipe the blood off of our faces, it feels like we are wiping a part of you away as well. How can we confront this pain without ridding ourselves of each other, bit by bit? Why must the child pick up the broken pieces of their parent, who is still grieving the parts of themselves they left at home?

Our story is reminiscent of the collective "immigrant narrative" that many are familiar with, but in a multitude of ways, it also isn't. In the same breath I use to criticize your unevolved ways, I thank you for not being like other parents. I used to be so mad at you for not acting as "motherly" as the typical Asian mom would. Instead, we worked together like colleagues, gossiped like friends, and fought like siblings. Yet somehow, we ended up alright. One way or another, we made it across the water. Maybe the goal wasn't to stay dry, but to bear the stubborn push and pull of the tides together. I bless the mess that has brought us here.

To my single immigrant mother,

Now that we're both a little smarter than we used to be, let's talk about those lost dreams. Somewhere along the line, I heard that you dreamed of being a flight attendant and traveling the world, but you were pressured to choose stability and become a nurse instead. That must have been so heartbreaking.

Growing up, you told my sister and I to choose the career that makes us happy and to chase it relentlessly. It makes all the more sense now why you put everything into supporting our education, while still keeping yourself at a safe distance. You wanted us to have choices. Choices that you didn't have the luxury of having for yourself.

In the same way that our parents project their unconflicted pain, they project their unmet hopes and dreams onto us. It's a bittersweet, melancholic affection. In the time we spend healing the intergenerational trauma in our "broken" families, our parts come together like a mosaic. Some parts are a little more broken up than others, but the collective unit remains bonded nonetheless.

I say "broken" in that phrase in the same way that we say "broken" English. As Amy Tan once said in reference to her own mother's English-speaking skills:

"It has always bothered me that I can think of no way to describe it other than "broken," as if it were damaged and needed to be fixed, as if it lacked a certain wholeness and soundness. I've heard other terms used, "limited English," for example. But they seem just as bad, as if everything is limited, including people's perceptions of the limited English speaker."

– Amy Tan, "Mother Tongue"

Likewise, to call a family "broken" limits our perception of the family structure. Many of our pains go unhealed for so long that they become collective burdens. It is not brokenness that fosters this. It is our humanity in its most visceral form.

I will say, it is unfair in many ways. No child should have to carry the burdens of their parents who could not heal in time to raise them. Mom – I am sorry that your inner child has called for help in places where her needs could not be met. But my inner child has called out to you as well, to no avail. There is only so much we can do for each other in circumstances that just keep taking and taking from us.

Our relationship is a maze. We're still figuring things out, but we can be confident in the fact that there is at least a destination. You are the embodiment of getting what we need, not what we want.

To my mother,

You turned 42 today. In the Kabbalistic interpretation of the Bible, this is the number with which God has created the Universe. Moreover, the most significant name that appears in Kabbalah is Ein Sof, meaning infinite or never-ending. Likewise, despite how much we've given and taken from each other, that is how our connection remains. Endless.

Cassie Lacsina Guinto



Life In Bloom, Amanda Kulesza

Three Days

I only have three days
I shall reach what I have been wishing for
I only have three days
I shall know what all this work has been for
Before I fly onto the sky
Or hit the floor
Life did not start
Nor will it end with me
I only hope I am remembered
From here to eternity
I only have three days
To say what I've been thinking
I slowly feel it happening
This world is sinking
I only have three days
Tears will start to flood
People will forget all
Cause I wrote in the sand
Thinking it was a stone wall
I only have three days
The curtain is to close
They'll walk out the door
Never knowing
My book is sold at the store

Luis Parra



Long Legged Fly, Maximus Kajiwara



Untitled, Rachel Stuhmer

In the Twilight of My Years

I sit and ponder,
my body near broken
my mind though clear, my words
not lost nor unspoken.

Time yes has been kind
through days of youth
but now my body ebbs away
yet I do not give in.

Yesterday, I was young,
with dreams to profit from
But along comes that gift,
which was my son.

I did not lose those dreams.
They were transferred to him
like a spiritual and eternal account
to be used wisely.

No, I am not discouraged by this
final fight which will take me.
I see my wounds as victory
from the battles I endured
Seven decades and multiple seasons come and pass
and now, I begin to see at last
the glory in which my work
and my labors can prosper in my son.

For this I can shed joy filled tears,
and cheer
for I smile proudly
in the twilight of my years.

Christopher Gagliardi



Ducks In Motion, Yahdani Meija

20 Y.O.

I'm entering a new kind of home
A whole new group, yet so alone
I meet my dreams for the first time
Yet tryna find a place in these lines
And even now, I am just talking to whoever listens
Hoping to find those who share my vision
This is how it is 20 years old
Truly starting to come into my own
Now I can say that grown
Now I got responsibilities and much more I need to know
Like there are rules I unlock when the clock strikes twelve
But that's the thing about being 20, there are some thoughts you can't let dwell
It can be so easy to become stuck in the pressure, to go back into your shell
The old way you used to be, the comfortability
Reminiscing on the ease, the nostalgia of living life in the breeze
But now you're seeing how you never really were free
So to be 20, is to define me
To cut loose the bad habits that suppressed me
To experiment, and express all sides of me
To enjoy every step I take on the path with me
Truly, undeniably, sincerely, honestly, unapologetically,
From me to me,
Welcome to your 20s

Isaael Sanchez

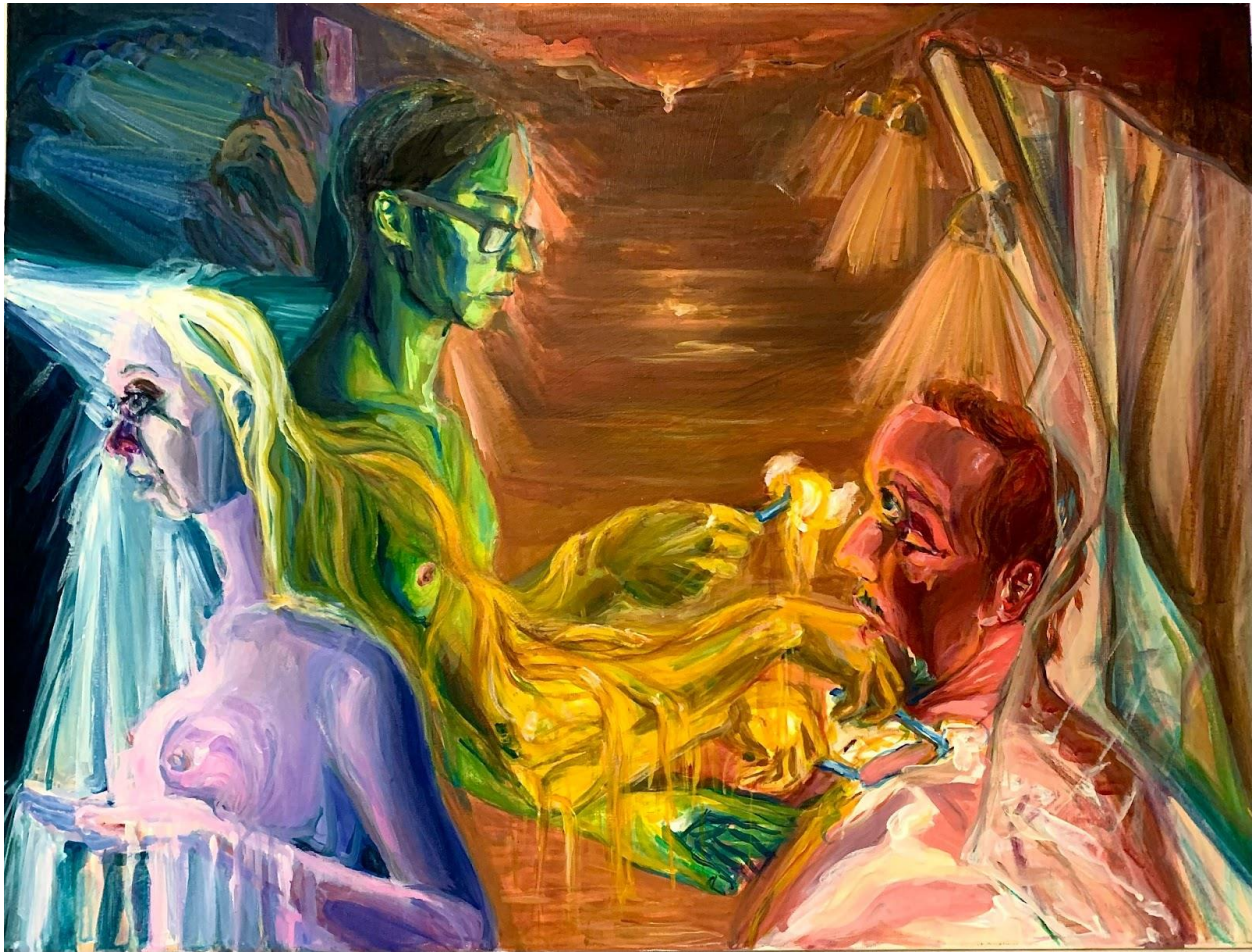


Compact Carpenter Ant, Maximus Kajiwara

Desert Psalm

You are allowed to die in the desert
You are given credence
And a bucket
Told to scrub the dirt off your fingernails before you lie in your casket
You've never seen a flower look so harsh
Sunburn look meaningful
Your skin was born darkened
This is your holy land
You screech alongside vultures and coyotes
This yankee might get her stripes
you smile and gaze upwards,
heat grazes your collarbones, tickling you
You remember headlights,
blinding stars in the desert
There are empty coke bottles decorating your front porch
Tiny army of
Windchimes singing "there were people to love"
You burn red and yellow underneath a midday sun
a chameleon
You still surprise yourself
when you drive over 80
Or curse in front of your mother
You remember being young
you still are
Remember when love was a thing untethered to mourning
Remember what it felt like to smoke
To stand in the river and ask more out of it
full of life
bored
There was always another day to be

Nailah Shabataka



Lovers, Ha Kyoung Kim, acrylic and watercolor

The Trade Off

My own voice became disoriented over the centuries. At times, it becomes replaced with others, but perhaps it is only the dismissal of my humanity. I believe my own sanity faded during my time of death, when I was met with a heavy sense of relief and release, hearing my background fading out of existence. Realistically speaking, I forgot much of my old life including the names of my children, friends, and family; I still remember her name. My soul and consciousness will not allow her name nor presence to escape my memory.

It wasn't painful or scary, but a refreshing beginning to another passage. When I first met my own reflection, my nose seemed to flatten, the reflection shaken and stirred, shriveling to nothing, and in my own eyes I saw an empty glance of defeat. To meet my own reflection after the end felt like meeting a deformed homunculus, and it left a grotesque impression on my emotional state; if I still even have one. I expected to meet god and to be carried up by angels, but death was extremely underwhelming; think of it as finally taking a rest when you have finished a long day of labor. That is death. Afterwards, I remember looking down on my hands and no longer seeing the old creases on my knuckles and fingers, and it took me a moment for it to hit me that I regained my youth. How odd it felt to be young! Then, I simply walked the golden saffron fields of the unfamiliar realm to be met by complete and blissful silence; humans would appreciate the bliss. Beyond the fields held no trees nor animals, but it ended in a cliff with a deep oak bridge, yet across the bridge it became an empty sky. It took me what felt like decades to gain the courage in order to cross the bridge. Believing that I'll take the wrong step and fall into the vacant abyss below, with each steady and sketched out step, I crossed the forsaken bridge.

Instead of falling to my inevitable doom, I was met with the shape of a large man. For a few seconds I believed I was hallucinating. I have not seen another person besides my own shadow for decades while being stranded in the fields, and to suddenly run into one out of the blue was startling; the man did not seem to acknowledge me. I straightened up and took a deep breath, regaining my composure and readying myself to speak to the unbothered stranger. Midway through my rehearsal, I saw another man in front of him, and then a woman, a man, a young boy, a soldier, and a fading line of people. Fueled with anxiety, I tapped on the brute in front of me with haste, "Have I gone to purgatory? Are we waiting to be judged?" Those

questions escaped my gasp quickly, and now I remember just how idiotic I must've looked to be so shaken up, especially since I had nothing to lose.

"We're all waiting for what's next." The brute man spoke softly, his voice was opposite of his appearance entirely. He didn't turn around to respond to me, but instead he moved his head to the side to crack his jaw. When he spoke, my head moved down to the glass floor below me and my eyes began to explore its' turquoise tint and transparency. Beneath me I saw my children walk around the old vintage Victorian home that still rots under my name. The eldest was measuring out the cedar flooring, and the youngest searched through to find any antique worth the resell. It confused me to see them older, as I passed when they were young adults but then I remembered that I wandered the fields aimlessly for years. My children already mourned, and moved on to the next stages of their lives and left me as a distant memory with no legacy. I swallow my sorrow and look up to meet the back of the brute in front of me. "How long have you waited," I paused and stepped back, "When it is our turn?"

"I can't give you an estimation, as our perspective of time has been warped compared to how it is on Earth," He said with an empty tone, "It is best to not think about the time or you will turn mad and fade out."

"We cannot turn mad when we're already dead...it's common anatomy and psychology." "Your education and physics don't exist here, all I am familiar with is to keep your soul pure until the next." My sense of pride felt wounded.

Getting ready to respond, I felt another presence arrive behind me; the line is getting longer and I am moving up slowly. I look down again and begin to view the lives of my children play out, the eldest has begun to grow her own family in my old estate, and the youngest has begun to create his own robes for sale. While viewing, a pit in my stomach formed; my late wife must've viewed me on this very line. My beloved died long ago, back when I was grown and well established in my profession. She left me with our proclaimed wealth and children, unfortunately I couldn't handle the loss. I drank with such shame, I avoided my kin and trapped myself in my lab with empty vials filled to the brim with grief. I wrote useless formulas and medicines thinking it was a proper way of coping. Hearing the children bang on the weighted doors to come outside, hushing them away and pouring my soul into endless manuscripts. That distant memory floods into me as if a dam has been cracked.

I lived my remaining life in isolation, with my only company being an old bottle of bourbon and a dried quill. To think my wife must've cringed and pitied my downfall causes me to ache with an unspeakable shame. Watching them, I am entranced and lost in my own thoughts. I break the silence.

"When you looked down, did you feel any guilt about your previous decisions?" I ask the brute with a curious tone.

"I have not looked down since my arrival. There is no need."

"You must've had a family, perhaps a cousin or two you must wonder about."

"I have no curiosity, I would prefer to finish this term of my existence without any guilt." Says the brute firmly.

Odd. I did not further question him about the current topic, I instead switched to another one.

"Do you have any remembrance of your livelihood?" A long silence followed, finally he let out his response.

"I have lived a life of guilt and horrendous misanthropy in which it has overwhelmed me to mutilate and dismember my brothers. And during my time of death, the relief washed over me greatly to know it was all over; I was lost in those fields for so long sobbing away the pain and everlasting anger that haunted me."

"In my lifetime I would've never thought a murderer would have a sense of empathy."

"You are the most wrong then, in every bloodthirsty being there is always a small glimpse of it."

Our silence was still for a few years while we moved up the line. In the distance I saw a bright tunnel that became bigger each time I moved up. In the distance I heard wails of both happiness and grief, and unlike the whispers of confusion in the back, I am surprised with the distant chatter. For the final time, I looked below, my eldest gave birth to a girl, and my youngest brought a manor. I felt proud, a sinful pride a pastor would've scolded me over.

"Did you live a good life?" Says the man in front of me; he has not spoken to me at all for a long time.

"I have, I was given great opportunities, and had an amazing family too."

"Those are simplicities in which we all strive for, but did you really live a life in which you can ponder your good deeds? We've waited here for a very long time and all we can do is think to ourselves; I did not have a great life."

I remained struck, and left to contemplate his words. I was not a great father to my children, I left them alone for such a long time which makes me any less than a man.

“No, I did not have a good life.” I spoke with a crack in my voice.

“I’ve heard many speak about their own memories on this line, most cry through their regrets while some peer below and cheer on their own families. I began to think of my own choices, trying to validate any pain I felt, thinking ‘I had a reason to act the way I did’ but my actions deserve no sympathy. Have you thought similarly when you looked down on your children?”

“I mainly thought about how pathetic I looked, and how much my wife must’ve hated me when she watched me curl up in my own self pity. I shouldn’t even be allowed to call myself a man, I did not excel in my sciences or watch my children grow; I died from an alcohol-ridden liver instead. I questioned my livelihood and duties as a man, and I find it only riddled with embarrassment. And I certainly did not think that once I died I would be lectured by a man like you!”

“Yet despite our brutal differences, we have one thing in common, neither of us died repenting or paying for our mistakes and effects in the lives of others. We both died with regrets and inner jealousies making us unrest less even in death.”

He was right, I would’ve hated to admit it during my old days. I did not live a life that is satisfactory, but simply lived a life of material needs. I did not feel any sadness despite my emotional self-discovery, I must not weep over actions and decisions that have been thought and executed many times over. I stopped looking down and faced the bright lights head on, and in the distance I began to notice beings with the eyes of a serpent.

These beings are not to be comprehended by the naked eye, all I view are voids in the shape of a human and their eyes glowing with a shade of dark jade green. These creatures were perplexed by the line of flesh and spoke in syriac whispers; in their hands were piles of sheets created with black python skin. The papers are flimsy and thin in their long slender fingers, some were ripped and some of gold.

“It’s time to be handed out the next life.”

“How do you know for certain that those demons are holding our reincarnations?”

“I’ve heard the whispers along the line, those scrolls hold the full story of our next lives.

We will be shown whether or not we will have a good life or a bad one. It doesn't matter our positions in the past, we are given the next chapter on an equilibrium."

"What of the pastors and popes? Are they not given special treatment?"

"While you were peering down below, I've seen many pastors ahead on the line, and from what I heard they also received the same."

"What do you think you will get?"

"I don't know."

"Are you scared?"

"Yes."

"Why are you?"

"I never paid for the pain I caused."

The brute finishes the conversation sternly and holds a tremble in his voice. Our silence filled the tight space between us and I heard more cheers and sobs further up the line. Our turns were up next and my anxieties rose to my throat thinking about this unholy lottery. A gamble of lives being given out by demons that stand in a malicious silence. We move further up the line and the people two places in front of us receive their papers; one cried and one laughed in relief. I saw the brute begin to tense up before me as the demon brushed by us both.

The eyes of a snake watched us with curious and judgmental eyes. Eyes of wonder and pity met our nervous gaze and reached out to us both. I was met with a scent of rotting corpses, similar to the human bodies I would perform autopsy on during the experiments I once hosted. I look closer and notice the non-binary sexuality of the creatures, with both female and male genitalia along with having the voice of them both. There were no whispers but only pure silence while they handed us the tickets. Feeling the silk textures in my grasp, I flipped over the ticket immediately.

I will have a pitiful existence. Beaten and abused by my family, and a fallen human who will live on the city streets until I am killed by hyperthermia. I will be a blonde boy, gray eyes, fairly attractive, and have a lot of potential; I can't change the script. The brute next to me frowns and holds up his ticket to which I take a peek, he will have a good life. He will be a young girl, brown hair, rich family, successful career, and all the other riches life will bring. Seeing our opposite results brings me no sadness, but I see it as a karma these demons have given me.

Perhaps others have gotten worse lives, I should not whine over this one, it was given fairly. The brute and I exchanged glances, nothing else was to be said about our destined fate, only that we were given it rightly by the hand of the damnation.

There is simply nothing else to converse about with the brute, he whispers to himself in his native tongue; took me a while to guess Russian. When we get closer to the bright light, I begin to take note of the final steps you must take in order to cross into the next life. We hand in our sheet to the gatekeeper, they then press their palms against our temples, from my observation my memory will be erased and I will be tossed into the light. A scary thought, but almost exciting.

“What is the likelihood that maybe I will remember something?” I say sarcastically.

“I hope I remember nothing of this, or I will simply hate myself down the line.”

“You can’t hate yourself when you will be born into wealth.”

The brute did not respond. He instead took a step forward up the line, and I realized just how close we were to the end. The woman who is five people ahead of us has been tossed, we’re almost there. The child behind her is crying softly in fear; he received a bad ticket. Next thing I see is his body being swung into the light. My heartbeat rang in my ears, how cruel is it to be a dead man with a heartbeat. The soldier two places in front of the brute laughed while the palms embraced him and I watched him fall silent. While watching these rebirths, the brute pushes me onto the glass below with full strength.

It was a startling blow, the sheet fell out of my hands and onto the unholy ground. For the first time, I look up to see the face of the man in front of me. My gaze shifted to the tears in his eyes, the veins popping out his neck, the scared smile on his face, and his cheeks which were dampened with tears. I could not speak nor could not act in time once I saw him switch out our tickets. “Brother, do me honor of letting me end this existence as a good man and not as a murderer. I enjoyed our long wait together, and I do hope you hold no ill-intent. Do not mess up your next chance, and I shall live my next life as a payment for this one.”

The man on the floor was in such shock of my trade off. The scientist who chatted up the whole wait suddenly forgot his words, but his gaze spoke millions. I will live badly, awfully, horribly, but I smile with relief. Such a quick ending, as this moment has happened within seconds. I ran quickly towards the demon, hearing the scientist call me many profanities to highlight my idiocy; sounded like a father. The next thing I will feel is the cold palms.

I was told to be nice to everyone. That's what mom says all the time too, she was proud when I helped the poor boy in class.

Hailie Arias



The Train Station, Jesus Daniel Mercado

Confessions on a Rainy Night

It is a stormy night on a city street. Pouring rain and whistling wind can be heard. A woman in her mid-twenties wearing a silk pencil skirt suit, ELYSE, holding a large briefcase is struggling to walk home during the storm.

ELYSE: This is a nightmare; I don't think I'll ever get home with this relentless rain pouring down.

During the struggle, she loses her umbrella to the wind.

ELYSE: *(frustrated)* Are you kidding me? Could this day get any worse?

In a fit of anger, ELYSE throws her briefcase on the ground, causing the contents inside to come spilling out. Realizing what she has done, she frantically collects all of the spilled contents. As she does this, a man in a trench coat, jeans, and work boots, TONY, approaches with an umbrella and puts it over her.

TONY: I think this would be of assistance.

ELYSE looks up and gasps. She addresses TONY with caution.

ELYSE: *(stuttering)* Oh...tha tha tha thank you...

TONY: So what brings you out here in this dreadful storm?

TONY addresses her gently, putting the otherwise startled ELYSE at ease.

ELYSE: I just got off of work, I had to stay overtime because we are understaffed. I don't have a car and I don't like taking public transit, so I always walk home.

TONY: Well you certainly picked a bad night to do that. Where do you work?

ELYSE: I work at an office building down the road. I live six blocks away from where I work so the walk isn't too bad. I'm an accountant and I have a lot of paperwork to do, which is why I have this huge briefcase.

ELYSE finishes gathering her belongings and stands to look at TONY.

TONY: You don't sound like you enjoy it. What made you want to be an accountant anyway?

ELYSE: I never wanted to be an accountant. My mother was a successful accountant when I was growing up. Since she was so good at it, my father thought I would be a good accountant too. So, he sent me to college for a business degree.

TONY: Have you ever thought about doing something that you actually enjoyed?

ELYSE pauses for a moment.

ELYSE: Ummmm...I don't know. I gave up on my dreams a long time ago. It's a long story.

TONY: Well I have all the time you need.

The two sit on a bench in a nearby bus stop shelter.

TONY: So, tell me about yourself. What were your dreams growing up?

ELYSE: Well, I grew up in a small apartment with my parents and my younger sister. For as long as I could remember, I always wanted to be a professional artist. I always loved drawing and bringing my creativity to life on paper, while adding various colors into the mix.

TONY: That's awesome. How come your parents weren't on board with that?

ELYSE: They've never been supportive of me. My parents were only focused on my sister. She was the baby of the family, so they always spoiled her. She got everything she ever wanted. Meanwhile, I was always ignored and brushed to the side. My parents and I would argue all the time. They would tell me how much of a failure I was and that my life would never amount to anything. They never thought being an artist was a serious career and would throw out my drawings. That's why my dad forced me to go to school to be an accountant and follow in my mother's footsteps.

TONY: That sounds awful. How come you couldn't just pay to send yourself to school and follow your dreams?

ELYSE: My parents never let me get a job growing up, so they were the ones paying for my college expenses and got to choose where I went to school. But for as cruel as they were, my parents thankfully let me live on campus. And that's where I met...*(she pauses)*.

TONY: Met who?

ELYSE: No no, I've said too much. I'll be going. Thanks for keeping me dry.
As ELYSE stands up from the bench and turns to leave, TONY grabs her arm and she turns around in shock.

TONY: Ma'am, you seem like you're very distraught. I can tell you've needed someone to talk to for quite some time. Please sit back down, I won't tell another soul about your life's stories. I'm happy to listen to whatever you say.

ELYSE hesitates, but eventually sits back down and continues.

ELYSE: Well...there was this guy in one of my classes. His name was Jason. We sat next to each other on the first day and we started talking. What started as a mutual friendship turned into a serious relationship. And that's when things took a turn for the worst.

TONY: I'm listening.

ELYSE: One night, we were studying in my dorm for an upcoming exam, and then things got a little...intimate.

TONY: Go on...

ELYSE: A few weeks later, I was cramping and I felt nauseous, so I went to the doctor. After telling the doctor my symptoms, he gave me a pregnancy test, which came back positive. When I told Jason the news, he immediately abandoned me. I was crushed, the one person I thought who truly cared about me the most discarded me like a piece of trash. My parents also disowned me, so I had to move into a homeless shelter. From that moment on, I went through college as a single mother and I had to work two jobs and attend school to support my daughter and I. After graduating, I was only able to afford a small crappy one-bedroom apartment. (*tearing up*) It's been very hard lately because I've tried so hard to make the best life possible for my baby girl but no matter how hard I try nothing seems to go right.

ELYSE puts her face in her hands and begins crying. TONY pats her knee.

TONY: I'm sorry to hear about that. I felt the same way when my wife cheated on me.

ELYSE: (looking up while sniffing) What?

TONY: A few years ago, I had a wife and three children. One day I came home from work and I called for my wife, but she didn't answer back. I went into our bedroom and saw that she was having an affair with another man. Words could not express the disbelief and heartbreak I felt. After that, my wife and I got divorced and she took the kids with her and I haven't seen them since. (he looks at the ground with sadness) A day hasn't gone by where I don't think about my children. I just wish I could see them again.

ELYSE: That's terrible, I'm so sorry you had to go through that.

TONY: Thanks, I appreciate that. I just pray that I'll see them again one day.

ELYSE: I know you will, I can feel it in my heart that you'll be reunited with them.

TONY: *(he pauses for a moment)* You know, you and I aren't so different. I think it's great that we found each other.

ELYSE: *(smiling)* Yeah, I guess it is.

TONY: *(checking his watch)* It's getting late, want me to walk you home?

ELYSE: I would love that.

The two stand and begin walking, facing away from the audience. As they are about to exit the scene, they hold each other's hands as the lights slowly go down.

Anthony Bertollo



Coachella Outlooks Clear Kindness, John Evered

The Naturalness of Love

Love is like Earth's nature,
Always blooming with never-ending growth
That is as stunning as a cherry blossom tree.

A comforting sense of warmth
And guidance that makes us feel grounded.

It is a pleasant sight to the eyes,
Bringing us security in our hearts.

When love is maintained,
It can last us a lifetime.
The beautiful feelings of peace
Bring us inner happiness.

Jay Figueroa



Solemn Moments, Sarah Johnson



First Gathering After Pandemic, Yahdani Mejia

Fishing for Answers

The year is 2021. I'd like to say there's a pandemic to the person reading this, however that's blatantly obvious. Dating is almost impossible. Everyone's wearing masks in public. This means that even if you try to pick a guy or girl up, you don't know if they have sparkling white teeth or a mouth like a kid at Easter time, filled with black licorice jellybeans. The only upside to this is we now know how important it is to have good breath.

Anyway, to the story. Something happened earlier this week that some may find remarkable. I went back in time. No, I'm not crazy. This happened. It all started when I needed an escape as well as much anticipated relaxation. You see, I'm a mother of four who's been home with the kids since the schools shut down last March. Don't get me wrong, I love my kids. However, liking them? That's a different story.

To make matters worse, my fiancé became my ex last January. Just before the pandemic hit. Only issue was, I don't think he got the memo. He used the plague to his advantage by seeing the kids at my house. Like old, moldy leftovers that sat in the fridge too long, he'd linger. The only difference was he smelled better. Yet again, I was a single mom. This time to four children. Hey, it could've been worse. I could've been his wife. I still shudder at the thought of his last name attached to mine. Like those leftovers, he should have been thrown away long before he actually was. You're probably sitting there thinking, 'wow, she really hates this guy.' No, I don't hate him, I just loathe the fact that he breathes the same air as me, even if it was air filled with a virus.

I needed some alone time. Having four kids, I forgot what it was like to use the bathroom in peace. My two youngest were practically mini parole officers, watching me pee like it was their job. Everywhere I turned there was a kid! Even if that wasn't the case, it felt that way.

The only thing that gave me relief was fishing. While other moms were purchasing vodka by the bulk, I was busy in the fishing section at the local store, scanning the shelves for all sorts of lures. Anything to soothe my mind, and bring me peace.

Unfortunately for me, the peace I'd seek from fishing was often disrupted by the thorn in my side that I called an ex. After learning that fishing was my favorite pastime, he suddenly decided to pick up the sport. Due to social distancing, he had to give up his favorite past time, chasing women. To be quite honest, he wasn't good at either. They say one of the symptoms of the virus is a loss of taste. If that was the only symptom, I obviously was riddled with it by falling for him.

Shortly after I arrived, my fishing buddy a.k.a. my ex sent me a text message letting me know he'd be coming to meet me. Now, before you judge me, I can explain. He's the type of guy who can be compared to a pimple that pops up, directly in the middle of your forehead. His sole purpose is to aggravate. He usually accomplishes that mission. We have two children, and while

most parents who split up land up with joint custody, I get to be one of the fortunate few who get joint custody of him! What a way to spend the summer.

During a plague, no less. He pulled up, blaring music, as usual. He stepped out in his typical fishing attire. A camouflage bucket hat with sunglasses as well as a watch to match. I'd like to say he looked like a soldier ready for war, however I don't know of any members of the armed forces who wear slides. Slides with socks, which is even worse.

I glared at him. My nostrils flared as he made his way towards me. I could feel my pulse start to beat faster.

"What?!", he shrugged.

"Shouldn't you be with the kids?", I shouted back at him.

"I was, how do you think I knew where to find you?", he shrugged.

Amazing, isn't it? They invade my body for nine months apiece, swelling my ankles, giving me heartburn, and hours of pain just to sell me out for a 69-cent candy bar from the local supermarket.

A smile ran across his face.

"I even bought them breakfast." He boasted.

"You....bought them breakfast?", I asked, baffled.

"Yup, he continued , "a dozen donuts."

Okay, I was wrong. It wasn't a candy bar, it was donuts. He must have used his stimulus check.

Go figure.

Most fathers gave guidance. This one gave diabetes.

My head shook with disgust as I made my first cast into the muddy water. I gazed at the horizon, with earbuds on, music, playing. This was going to be a long day. There went my peace.

I must have lost track of the time, because when I looked up around me, the scenery was no longer the same. My fishing buddy wasn't next to me. I saw people with oversized jeans and t-shirts way too long. Baffled, I took my pole and approached some teenagers sitting nearby on a park bench.

“Excuse me, do you have the time?”,

I approached the young man in pants way too big. He removed his arm from the girl he was sitting next to. Her hair was in braids, fastened with little butterfly clips. Her earrings were too big and had a name in the middle. She was Hailey. He pulled out his cell phone, flipping it open to see the screen

“Yea, it’s 3:30.”, he said as he closed the screen.

I was confused. No one had flip phones. Not nowadays. I rubbed my forehead. Okay, backtrack. Think. Did I have a heart attack? I mean, my pulse was racing. Yes, that must be it! I died. Then again, if I’m dead, and this is heaven, why is everyone in baggy jeans? Perhaps, it’s hell. No, it can’t be. My ex isn’t here. Amnesia? I don’t recall bumping my head. Then again, if I had amnesia how could I remember bumping my head? This was getting more confusing by the minute.

“You okay, lady?”, the young man asked, looking just as puzzled as I did.

“Huh?”, I blinked. “Yeah, I’m fine.”

“You wouldn’t happen to know the date, would you?”, I asked, still confused.

“Yea, it’s June 20th ,” he shrugged, as if he was stating the obvious.

I repeated the date back to him, gesturing for him to continue.

“June 20th, 2000.” He went on. “You sure you’re okay?”

My eyes widened along with my mouth.

“Two...thousand?!?!”, I barked back. My eyes blinked as I tried to process the information. At that point, I walked away. My mind was racing. I thought I’d cracked up. I went to my car, but it wasn’t there. I walked halfway up the hill, and turned to the right. I headed to my mom’s place. I knocked on the door.

A woman who was not my mother answered.

“Can I help you?”

“I’m looking for Joanne, is she home?”

“There’s no one here by that name, next door, perhaps.”

I asked her the date and she said the same as the teenager at the park. This lady must have thought I was a nutcase! Walking away, I was still confused. I needed to sit, anywhere.

After buying a drink from a nearby store, I took a seat on a bench the owners placed in front. I scanned the cars parked on the street. They were mostly late 90's models as well as some late 80's. A few from the early 2000's were parked here and there. They were mostly in the driveways. That's when it dawned on me. I was back in time. Twenty-one years, no less. My next thought was how much power this gave me. If I could convince everyone that I wasn't insane, I could prevent so much.

How much? Who knows? Perhaps, I could even prevent the pandemic of 2020. No, that would bring too much notoriety. Well, if I couldn't do that, at least I could save myself.

That's exactly what I would do. Don't get me wrong, I know you're not supposed to tamper with time, I saw the movies, and knew the story. But it was too tempting to pass up. I had to find myself. Seventeen-year-old me. Where would I be at this time? Bingo! Outside my mother's place a little up the hill, on the stoop. That was my next stop.

Approaching my old house, I could hear hip hop playing. As I got closer, the music played louder. I began to sing along to a song from my youth. I squinted my eyes, still singing along, to a younger me also shouting the same lyrics. One thing's for sure, I couldn't sing then, and still can't now. I was surprised every stray cat wasn't in that driveway. However, that was nothing compared to the astonishment of being in the same place as myself twenty one years prior. It was as if I was staring into a mirror from the past. Only, this was reality.

Now, the question was, how to approach my younger me? Was that even possible?

She or I, paused her vocal torture, and took a long drag of a cigarette. There it was. My connection. Placing my fishing stuff down in the front of the house, I made my way to the side of the house.

"Hey, you have an extra cigarette?", I requested from younger me.

"Sure, here you go" she said, reaching in her pack and handing one over.

"Thanks." I asked, lighting mine.

"No problem. My mom will get me more later on."

Sitting there, I couldn't muster up the courage to tell her that I was her, twenty one years later. I sat for a few minutes, listening to music I already knew.

I figured I would head home. As I arrived at what now is my home, I couldn't unlock the door. My key didn't fit. Looking at the mailbox, my name wasn't there. Neither were my children. I'd forgotten it was 2000, not 2021. My eyes watered as a lump formed in my throat. As much as they drove me crazy, I missed them.

I still had my fishing gear with me. In addition, I had a smartphone that was totally useless in 2000. Luckily, I had cash on hand. I used a payphone and called a cab. Checking in at a nearby motel, I couldn't sleep no matter how hard I tried. Reflecting back on the last twenty-one years of my life was like opening Pandora's box. Every choice that led to twist and turns, weaving through time. I thought of all I could prevent as well as what I could change. What would the result be? I may have completed college the first time and been successful, but what about my children? They probably wouldn't have been. I drifted to sleep finally from exhaustion.

Getting up the next morning I tried to figure out where 17-year-old me would be. This was no easy task. Twenty-one years had come and gone. I figured I'd grab breakfast at a diner I used to frequently eat at. In 2021, this place had closed down, like many others due to the pandemic. However, in 2000, it was open for business. Thank God for time travel!

The coffee was fresh and hot, and the omelet was just as I remembered. Oozing with cheese. The home fries were a little salty. "Oh God, I'm getting old!", I thought as I never had this response before. Reading the local newspaper, I figured out it was Friday. My first thought was that I hoped Jared and Jazmine, my two older ones, knew to log on. I was certain they'd called Sally the night before. She's about as close to a co parent I'd ever had throughout four children. Believe me, I would've called home. Except there was nowhere and no one to call. Sally existed.

However, she was a teen. Just like I was. School hadn't been let out just yet. The year 2000 had a bad winter, and I remembered using all the snow days rather quickly. If memory serves me correct, today was the last day. So, I hung around the old neighborhood, waiting for Melissa to come home.

She came home earlier in the afternoon. I watched her meet up with her so-called friends. These were the ones she'd label the best. Four years later, they'd disappear like imaginary friends always do. With Jared's birth, Melissa would know what true friends were. In the meantime, she'd walk right past them. The girls next door who'd become sisters. Sally being one. They too had lessons to learn. I should know.

I wanted to tell them that life was going to give them more dips and turns than any old Rinky dink thrill ride at a local carnival. To stay away from the bad boys, as enticing as they may seem. To finish school and hug their parents more. But kids don't want to hear things like that. Besides, even if I tried, they'd just look at me the way I looked at the old whinos who loitered near the bus stops.

In the years to come, we'd endure loss, as well as watch one another give life. Our children would look to each other as cousins. For now, the bond wasn't formed just yet. In that moment, they were just girls I knew by face, and perhaps even a name. Funny how life works.

I didn't speak to Melissa that day. I watched. Every move she made. They were movements filled with no worry, just joy. To be young and carefree again. A feeling came over me. It was one I was familiar with. I've had it from time to time, more so recently. Last January to be exact. It was the feeling of regret. It's a heavy feeling that was becoming a burden to carry.

That night, I sat by the water, fishing gear still in tow. This was a local hangout for the homeless, as well as teenagers who snuck out to meet up with their boyfriends or girlfriends. An older gentleman, for lack of a better term, approached me after seeing me light a cigarette.

"Hey, pretty lady, can you spare a smoke?" He asked with a grin that bore nothing but gums. Oh, boy, this homeless guy was trying to pick me up.

"Yea, sure.", I responded as I reached in my pack.

He sat next to me. He wreaked of a combination of odors that I'd rather not describe. Whatever it was, it sure wasn't cologne.

Before he could go on, I stopped him.

"I'm not homeless.", I blurted out.

Come to think of it, it kind of made sense, since I was wearing the same clothes for practically three days now. Besides that, the mosquitos were biting me left and right. The only option left was another night in a motel. Time traveling sure was expensive.

The motel I stayed at the night before was all booked. So, I found one on the nearby highway, and prayed they didn't have bedbugs. I didn't know if they could travel through time. Besides, they were just as impossible to get rid of as my ex. It was bad enough I had him. The next morning was Saturday. I decided that day I was going to stop Melissa from making the choices I'd made. This was going on the third day I'd been away from my kids. Why I was sent here, I didn't know. But I did know I wanted to get back home to 2021. To whatever life there was waiting for me.

On Saturdays in 2000, I could be found at the bus stop, usually headed to the mall or out of town. I took one last cab from the motel to the bus stop. However, I got dropped off a block away, so it wouldn't be so obvious.

I noticed myself clad in baggy jeans and an oversized tee sitting there complete with a discman bulging out of her pocket.

“Hey, kid.” I said sitting next to younger me once again.

She didn’t hear me. Typical of me. I always had music blaring. In fact, I still do.

I waved as I yelled, “Hello?!”

“Yea?”, younger me said , pulling one headphone from her ear.

As I took a deep breath, she continued on.

“Didn’t I see you the other day by my house?”

“Yes,” I answered.

“What are you a kidnapper?”, Melissa asked me.

“No. Believe me, honey. The last thing I need is any more kids.”, I chuckled.

“A stalker?”, she shrugged.

“Definitely not a stalker.”

“Well, then who are you? My guardian angel?”

“Look, Melissa. I don’t know why I’m here. Maybe to teach you a lesson, perhaps to see where I went wrong.” I answered.

“What?! What does that mean? Who ARE you?!”, she demanded.

Well, I was always rather aggressive.

“I’m you. Twenty-one years later.”

“You’re me?” She asked.

“Yes, and you’re me.”

“You’re nuts, that’s what you are.”

“No, listen,” I began to plead.

Younger me sat quiet and obviously afraid.

“You have neighbors, two girls. They’re a bit younger than you.” I said as I tried to convince her that I was telling the truth.

“Their father drives a maroon car from the 1970’s, painted black. But they did a shoddy job. Their mother’s a little off.”

She shrugged back, “Okay, all that proves is that you’re a stalker.”

“You’re 17. You were born on April 26, 1983.”

Younger me nodded back, obviously still not convinced.

“Your mother and father are divorced; you have a stepfather. But they too recently split up.”

I could see I was finally getting through to younger me. It figures. I was always stubborn.

“You’re considering a career in law.”

“Now, this is getting creepy.” She answered.

Melissa shut off her discman and removed her headphones. She reached in her pocket, for a cigarette.

As she lit it she asked me if I was really from the future. I nodded yes. She said that it was really weird. I agreed.

“So, is there anything you can tell me?” She shrugged, curious of her future.

“Like what?”, I asked back.

“Do I become a lawyer?”

I sat there looking straight ahead, remaining silent. I knew this story all too well. For god sakes, I lived it. I didn’t have the heart to tell her the truth. That would mean admitting it to myself. Well? Do I?!, younger me demanded.

Just in that moment, the sky became grey. Thunder rumbled, as rain began to pour from the heavens. I looked up, becoming soaked. That was when I realized what I’d been missing. The answers were clearer than ever.

“Only you know that, Melissa.” I finally answered.

‘Well, obviously we both do. If you’re me, as you say.’ She said as a matter of fact. I was always sarcastic. The funny thing was Melissa was right.

Narrowing my eyes, I stared up at the dark grey sky as it rumbled. A

mixture of tears and rain filled my eyelashes. I pondered the last twenty-one years. All the stories I had to tell younger me.

I thought of my accomplishments as well as my defeats. The loves I had and the loves I lost. The fathers I had chosen for my children. Most of all, I thought of my children. I took a look at her. I knew what she was about to endure.

“Melissa, what I can tell you is that your life is your story to tell.”

“Really? That’s it?!”

There’s going to be some good as well as bad.” I continued on.

Melissa sat quiet.

“Well, sometimes you have to learn to let things be.” I answered. “We all have lessons to learn through life. One thing to remember, never regret it. Any of it. Take the good with the bad, because you only get one chance at it.”

“What type of crap is that?!” Younger me shouted, agitated.

“The truth,” I answered. “All good things come with time.”

As my bus pulled up, I bid farewell to younger me, as well as the past twenty-one years. Before I did, I had one request of Melissa. A smile came across my face as I yelled for her.

“Hey Melissa!” I shouted waving her over.

She walked up to me.

“Yes?”

‘One thing. In a few months, you’re going to work at a fast-food place.’

‘I walked all the way over here for this? She replied.

“ No, listen. There’s going to be this tall guy in the drive through. Silver car. Get his number.”

“Get his number?”, she repeated to me.

“Yes, just do it.”

“Okay, got it.”

“Don’t forget.”

“Wait! Is he cute?”

I laughed and shook my head as the bus doors closed.

Arriving back at the park, I sat, and casted out my line. Once again, I lost track of time. Twenty-one years to be exact.

“You know, you could be nicer,” my ex said.

“Huh?”, I replied, startled.

“You never did listen to me,” he said, shaking his head.

“How could I? I don’t understand you.”, I replied.

“You’ll never change, will you, Mel?”

“No, and like a kool aid stain on the rug, you’ll never disappear.”

We both sat quietly for a few minutes, fishing poles in hand.

“Hey, question.”

“Ask, and you might get an answer,” he replied.

“Do you remember where we met?”, I asked.

“Yeah, you were working at a fast food place in the drive through.”

“Do you remember what color car you were driving?”

“Silver, what’s with all the questions?”

“One last question. Do you remember what happened that night?”

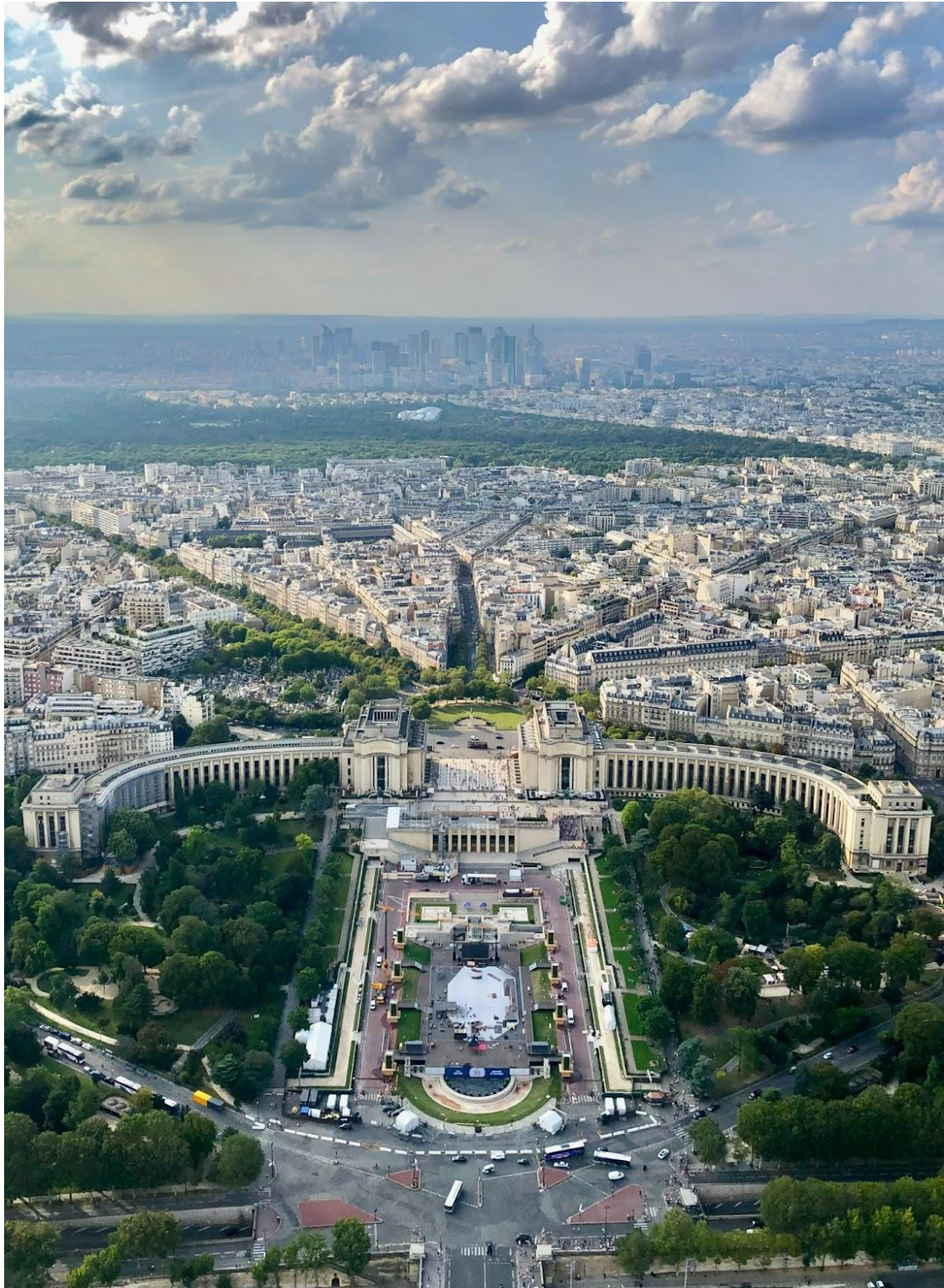
“You asked me for my number.”

As he spoke those words, my mind began to sit at ease. We may have split up, and he may be a thorn in my side, however, sometimes you have to let

things be. Life is both good and bad.

That night I went home, I hugged each of my four children. Then, I went on the computer and signed up for college courses. Why? Because all good things take time. This is my life, my story to tell. No regrets. A wise woman once told me that.

Melissa Giltner

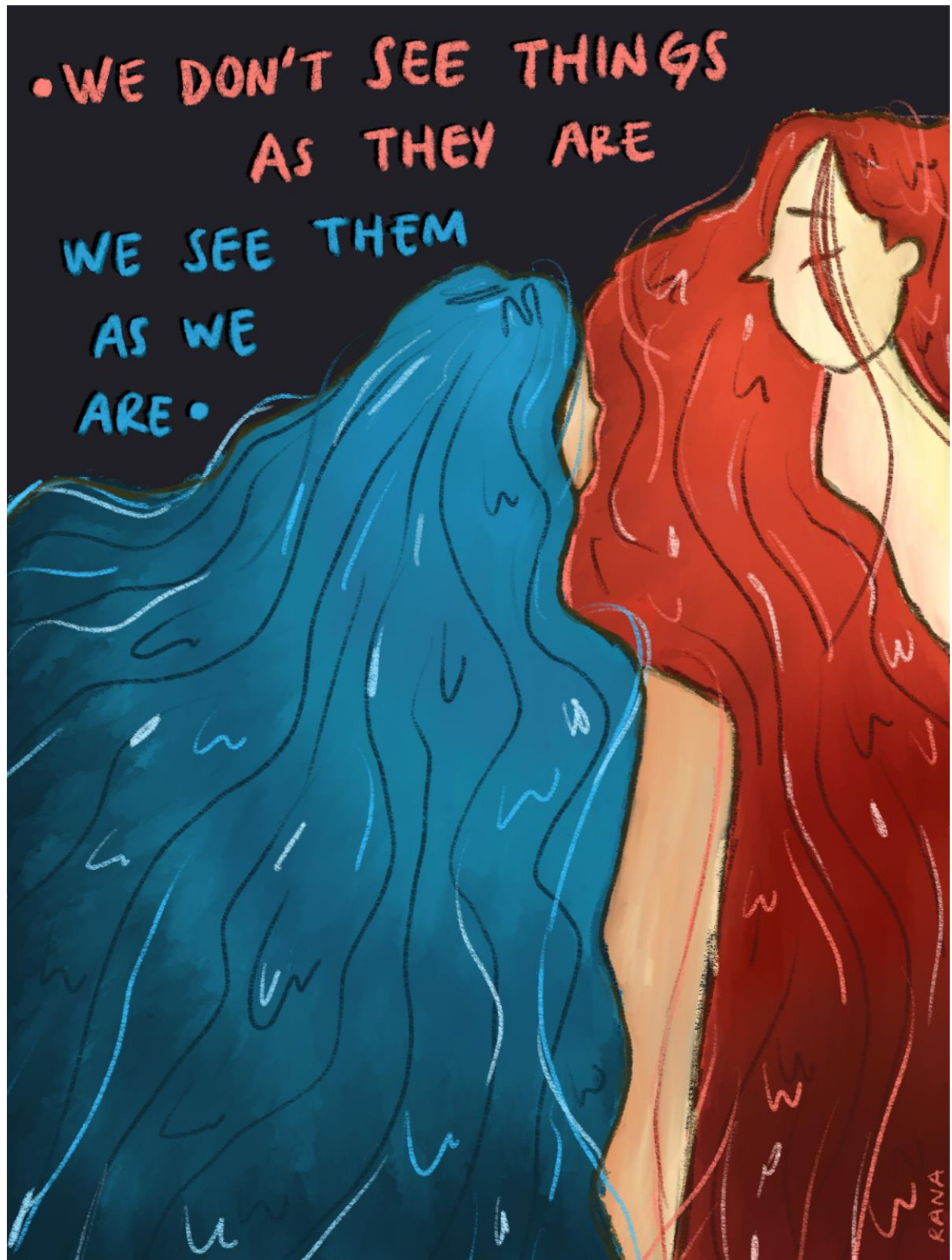


Paris From the Top, Briana Onoche-Onyetenu

Colors

You Love the color Black,
But you are Scared of the Darkness.
You Love the color White,
But you stray Away from the Light.
You Love the color Red,
But you Don't claim your Power.
You Love the color Green,
But you Betray Mother Nature.
You Love the color Orange,
But you Cannot Allow yourself to have Fun.
You Love the color Blue,
But Won't set foot in the Water.
You Love the color Purple,
But Forget to wear your Crown.
You Love the color Yellow,
But you Cannot Love the Sun.
You Love the color Brown,
But Can't Stand the Warmth.
You Love the color Grey,
But Hate the Storm.
You Love the color Pink,
But Reject Love from Others.

Katherine Priegue



Reflection Of Us, Rana Cemre Kizil

Mad Mad February

With snowy days

And a sudden burst of sunny rays.

Unbecoming Winds

and shivering afternoons.

Lovers go mad to be in tune,

Singles hoping to be swoon.

February is it truly necessary for you to be this mad?

When you are so goddam temporary.

Filling our eyes with lies,

For your blue skies are just a disguise.

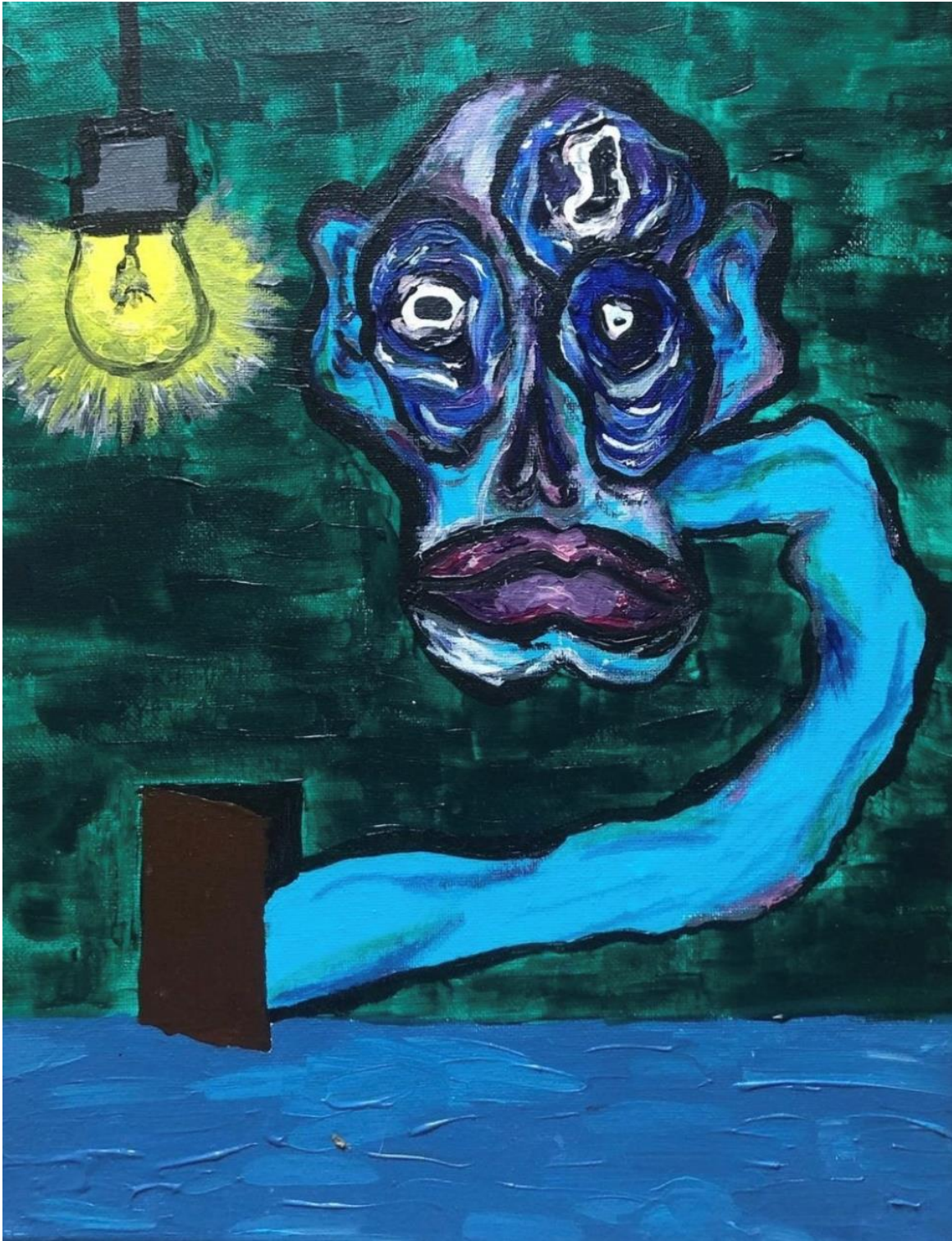
What lies beneath is anything but nice.

Raging storms rise then die.

February when will you hear my cries?

This madness will only bring our demise !

Ines Avila Mota



Peeking In, Sarah Johnson, acrylic on canvas

You and Father Time

You come to visit me every night,
You & Father time,
To keep me company by my Bedside.
Your presence faint yet evident
Reminding me of my morality
I grow old and you witness
The end of my days amongst the living
As my flower petals begin to wither
Your hollow face gets clearer & clearer
I take a look back at the life I created,
Destiny claps singing,
“You made it”.
I do not have the strength to fight what’s planned,
I am just a man.
In agreement I shake your hand & smile at father time,
And with my final breath...
I Die.

Somali Findlay

The Stars

Somewhere in a semi urban town in Illinois, there was a peculiar kid named Jamie. He had a pretty normal life, happy and tantrum prone as any other kid.

That was until his parents tragically passed on in a house fire. No one knows how it started and it was deemed an accident.

He was about eight when his aunt ended up taking custody. She was lower middle class working as an assistant to a small corporation that made kids toys. You would think she'd be a prime example of a mature, middle-aged woman, but was by no means a role model. Work was the only place you'd find her half sober, the rest of the time she was out gambling, wasted at bars, or throwing her own drug fueled parties.

Jamie didn't cry, nor did he talk much, he didn't do much of anything a normal kid would after the accident, which sat well with Shirley.

Four years passed and Jamie had long been used to his aunt's reckless nights. He'd casually step over the blacked-out adults and puddles of whatever was on the floor to get to the bathroom. If there was food, it was usually his aunt's leftovers or a can of something he could easily make.

Sometimes on nights like those, with drinks, food, loud music, and his aunt pretending he didn't exist, he'd go to a small park a few blocks down from the house. It had two swings, one slide, a worn-down seal statue that spat water in the summers, a few writings like hopscotch on the floor, and a basketball hoop with no net.

On a certain one of those nights, he was sitting on one of the rusted metal swings in a hand-me-down blue sweater—that fit a little too big—looking up at the few stars in the sky, trying to figure out a certain feeling he couldn't put his finger on.

That's when he saw a figure walking towards the park. He couldn't really see them due to the one dimly lit lamppost and they were walking really slow. He was getting ready to just walk back home when a girl came past the light. He sat back down, no danger he thought. She caught his glance and he briefly looked away, all he heard was her footsteps approaching.

"Can I sit too?" She asked. He just sat there nodding silently. She sat and started looking at the sky just as he was. He couldn't help but peek over at her, as if she was there to help him decipher this disconcerting feeling. The first thing he noticed was her knock off collared polo shirt that almost went to her knees with an equally sized sweater over it.

"Do you think there's more?" The girl looked back at him.

He sat there wide eyed for a second before he asked “m-more what?” She looked back up “More stars” he then looked up too.

“Yeah, there are. I used to have a book and it showed pictures of skies filled with a lot of stars and colors”

He kept his glance towards the sky, and it was eerily quiet. When he looked back at her, she had the biggest smile on her face “really?! You mean it?!” He didn’t understand what she was so excited about but he humored her.

“Yeah um you’d have to travel pretty far from the city, but there’s tons and tons, you can’t even count em” She looked back up to the sky mumbling under her breath with her fingers out.

“Hm, I can count these stars,” she scowled.

“Yeah, it’s all the pollution”

Jamie wasn’t the kid who played outside with friends or with toys or games, not that he had those things. Instead, he read a new book every few days, taught himself math, reading, and writing above his grade level, and he even put on the news channel—on the one tv they had—in the morning before school. These were the only accessible things he had to fill up all the empty time.

“Pollution huh?” from her tone Jamie could tell she didn’t know what that meant but he let it slide “don’t you wanna see more?”

“I don’t think about it. I just wanna grow up” he said with a straight face.

“You’re weird, why that? Grown ups are...boring” her tone got somewhat sad.

“Well, I guess it sounds nice, the freedom”

She looked at him all funny and said “jeez you sound like a grown up. Well I wanna stay young and have freedom. I’ll just run away, find some stars” looking right back up at the polluted sky.

Without thinking he responded with “That’s dumb. Uh I mean-” and before he could say anything else she gave him a good kick to the leg. He let out a small ‘ow’ holding his leg, she didn’t kick that hard but it still hurt.

“I didn’t mean it like that, god, just that you nee-”

“NO, you’re just a big dream destroyer. I’m only twelve. I’m not smart like you seem to be, but at least I have a real dream. Hmph, now you owe me one”

“I’m sorry, you’re right” that escalated quickly he thought, but he barely knew her to say something like that.

It went quiet for a little while as they shifted into the sky again. He kept thinking about how weird this girl was, they were the same age but she was so different from Jamie. He thought maybe because she was a normal happy girl, but he couldn’t tell.

“I can’t wait to go see them” she then hops off the swing with what she thinks is the best idea she ever had “hey! Why don’t we go together?! THAT’S WHAT YOU COULD OWE ME”

“What? The stars? For a few truthful words? Pfft” This time she just stares at him really long with her arms crossed.

“Why? Not like you have anything better to do. You just wanna grow up ‘pfft’” mocking him.

“I don’t know why I’m here, I should get home” he’d been out for a while and it was getting chilly, he could notice her shivering too.

“Wow, you’re gonna leave poor old me to walk alone, that’s gonna be two debts buddy!” pointing at him with her floppy sweater sleeve as he walked off.

Jamie didn’t know why but that made him smile “I already paid one with that kick” he kept walking slowly towards the direction of his house. He then heard those familiar footsteps again, this time loudly stomping on the ground, he quickly ducked her attempted ‘sneak attack’.

“What’re you doing?! You really don’t think do you?” he tried helping her up off the ground but she slapped his hand away.

“Listen here! You either agree or I will chase and tackle you your whole trip home”.

Why was she trying so hard? and why me?.

“I know you barely know me but wouldn’t it be fun? We can even find you a dream!” she wobbly stood back up gasping for breath.

He started feeling something new, it kind of felt like he was holding a ball of sand, holding it so tight as to not let one grain fall, then...he let it all go.

“Maybe, maybe one day, if we saved and-“

“Noooo, no maybe, yes or no?!”

She got a little too close for comfort and it didn’t take him too long to just agree.

“GREAT, ok, let's meet at this park allll the time, and then we can...”.

Her words started to fade through him and there it was again, that feeling he tried pinpointing earlier. He still couldn’t grasp it but he didn’t see a need to linger on it anymore and just let it go.

They did meet up at the park more, looking and talking about the stars, planning, laughing, running, sometimes he’d even bring a book and read to her, most of the time about stars (at her request of course). She grew on him and he looked forward to those nights in the park.

More than a few weeks went by when he realized he didn’t know her name.

“Hey uh, what’s your name?” he awkwardly asked. They were laying out on the concrete basketball court, looking at the stars like they always do.

“Hm, nope” she looked away towards the ugly seal.

“Ok, well my name is Jamie” she quickly bounced back “that’s a cute name!!” then looked him up and down “Too bad you’re a serious grump”

“Yeah yeah, so are you gonna tell me your name?”

“Nope, let’s just look at the...what’s it called? Little Dipper?”

He just let out a deep breathe “Yeah, and that one I think is orion's belt”

She never talked much about herself; Jamie still couldn’t read her well either. She was sassy, funny, overdramatic, hyper, immature, yet somehow, he couldn’t tell who she really was. She knew all the basics to his life, now even his name. He might’ve thought about these things a lot but wasn’t the type to push for things like her.

What does she have to hide?

She could sense his overthinking somehow so she took a deep breath too.

“I know it’s hard to take me seriously but I’m happy we met Jamie. I’m glad I get to share my dream with a friend, makes it realer”

He smiled but couldn’t help correct her, “‘Realer’ isn’t a word Z”

“Ugh whatev-Z?”

“Yep, that’s what I’m gonna call you. Z”

“Hm, I like it. Better than my name.”

He never gave someone a nickname; he was surprised he even thought of one so quickly. To him it seemed to fit her. Z is a letter you don’t see or use too often and she wasn’t the kind of person you meet too often.

He decided to wrap up some thoughts and finally ask, “why don’t you talk about yourself? We talk about a lot of things but never about you”

There it was again, the silence and that shift in character she brings out here and there.

“Well, you never asked and my life is boring, not a lot to say” keeping her gaze up she realizes he won’t ask any further unless she talks and she knows he’s curious.

“I live in a normal house a few minutes from here, I am an only child with two normal parents, I go to a normal school, I like stars of course, and I have a normal dog named buddy”

She turned her head towards him with a half smile and he didn’t show it too much but he was glad to know, even if it was just the small things.

“You have a dog? How have I not heard you rave about this?” he chuckled a little.

“Well, I guess my mind goes away from all that stuff, I like to think of other stuff, like-”

“Stars I know but I wouldn’t mind hearing about your ‘normal’ life.” he takes a few steps back in his head as to not be too pushy and says “Not that you have to”

“We’ll see” she quickly changes the subject with a new energy “Didd you bring another book to read? Is it another one about stars?!” She sat up with that same floppy sweater the first time they met, waving around the sleeves to feel if he had one on him.

He did bring one, not about stars though. He found it in the very back of the library,

somewhat dusty but it stood out from the rest with its big size and faded gold spine. It was an old book of fairytales, ones his parents and him would read together. Due to Z's childish demeanor, he thought she'd like it. Z laid her head on his lap as he read a couple of the stories and to his surprise, she didn't know any of them, "Wait! The wolf ate the grandma?! How could she not see that it was the wolf?!" and she didn't just like the stories, she loved them.

"I'm surprised you never heard these stories; they're known by everyone" slightly closing the book after finishing up another story.

"Well.." she took a little more than a second to give a response "I don't like reading" raising her eyebrows and closing her eyes.

"I knew that but you had to have heard it from somewhere"

"Nope, parents aren't big on tv or stories, don't talk to people at school, and again reading isn't my thing" quickly shutting down the conversation.

He wanted to pry but then he had a serious question to ask with that reminder she gave that they were very different.

"Why do you want to see the stars with me? I mean you had just met me and we aren't that similar. In fact I think we're complete opposites"

"Oooo deep talk"

"I'm serious" he looked down at her, right in the eyes. She looked past his stare and to the stars, her comfort place.

"I think 'cause you accepted me, I think anyone else would've called me crazy or walked away. You think I'm crazy, star crazy, and you're ok with that. It makes me happy, like I belong somewhere. Wouldn't wanna see the stars with anyone else...in fact let's make it official" she sat up and held out her pinky.

"Let's promise."

"Promise what?"

"We have to promise to each other that we'll see real stars together one day and not these polluted ones, that nothing will stop us ok? Not even you being a boring grown up" she

rummaged through her big pockets “and take this, to remind you of our promise.” It was a small torn out photo of some random stars, but it was quite beautiful.

He smiled and linked his pinky with hers and “I promise” came out effortlessly. They laid back down under their polluted sky, both filled with simple joy, holding their pinkies together.

A few days later Jamie felt this churning pain in his stomach, he didn’t realize it but it was the same one he felt right before he knew his parents had died. He just dealt with it and thought about Z and their promise. It became his happy place, a place he didn’t even know existed.

I’m gonna see her tonight.

He subconsciously counted down the hours and minutes till he had to walk to the park. When it finally got about that time, he raced out the house, not even noticing another big party Shirley was throwing. He had another book to show her, this time about the best places to watch the stars. He couldn’t wait to see her reaction.

He arrived and waited on the swings for her to show up. He got there a little earlier than usual so he opened up the book and started reading through it.

The book showed beautiful photos of auroras and constellations. He couldn’t help but get lost in the thoughts of him and Z laying down on actual grass, looking at real stars, and making their promise come true.

After looking through the book for a while he realized that an hour or two might have gone by and she still didn’t show up. He didn’t put too much thought into it and decided to go home.

She does this, she’ll tell me what happened tomorrow.

He was a little disappointed but just started counting down the time again.

The next morning he did his usual routine, brushed his teeth, fluffed his bed head, and looked for some cheap cereal on top of the fridge after putting on some decent clothes for school.

He took his bowl of cereal and navigated to the couch, turning on the television. A telenovela was the first thing to pop up, his aunt liked those when she was either too drunk or too high to entertain her guests, not that they weren’t in the same state of mind.

He lowered the volume and turned the news channel on, eating his cereal and trying to remember if there was any homework due.

“Last night a home was raided after a 9-1-1 call from a neighbor just a house over...”

He turned the volume up a bit.

Wonder what someone did now.

“When the police arrived something disturbing was discovered. They found twelve-year-old girl, Kilo Hill, beaten to death in the bathroom of her home at 11:39pm. The father with previous criminal records had apparently kept this girl hidden in his home and away from the world, assaulting and beating her...” that’s when a picture of the girl popped up on the screen.

For the first time since before his parents’ death, he cried. Not a breakdown but the tears just wouldn’t stop as soon as he’d recognized who the girl was.

It was Z.

His cereal bowl was already drenched into the carpet and he couldn’t move.

His mind went blank and he couldn’t hold back the shaking.

“Kilo?” was all he could mutter out, tears streaming.

He didn’t know why this came to mind but he finally figured out that feeling he had right before he met Z.

Lonely.

He felt dumb, as hard as he worked to become smart and be all knowing, he barely even knew himself.

That’s when the regret swooped over and he just fell over onto the couch, numb with regrets. He kept looking back at everything, piecing things together.

Baggy sweater = hiding the scars and bruises.

Wanting to see the stars = the only way out of her unfortunate life.

Getting upset over being a grown up = her abusive father.

Not talking about her life = she lived a terrible one.

Not knowing well known stories = she didn’t get a chance to know them.

Shirley walked out from her room in a robe “Hey kiddo-oh why are you crying?”

He ignored his aunt who was obviously hungover, weakly putting her arm around him.

The only word he could think of was lonely, and he wished he never found out about that feeling, never.

“She just wanted to see the stars...she promised...Ki-kilo promised”.

Rose Morreale

Mask hold still
peace is off
past forgotten

returns,

be still

will you remember
before it's too late
ease of amnesia
awaits your fate



Civil Hubris, SP



Lovely Gift, Grigory Vyazovskiy, paper

Summer Remains

I remember the water, don't you?
all I can remember is the water, crystalline,
I'd place my fingers along the cold edge of the tub
I used to pretend we were rich so much I convinced myself it was true
coming home was a punch to the stomach
and my whole life was a jar filled to the brim with spite
if there was ever anything for me to learn it's passed me by
now every day stings
a wrong word makes my eyes swell with tears
i used to have a whole life planned
but now all I can do is pretend I'm back there
head against the wall, speckled sunlight coming through the windows
behind my eyelids I am twelve again, still stuck inside you, wriggling, molting out of
your shell
every summer i am left waiting for what i cannot have

Amma Aning

Forest Girl, City Boy

Forest girl, city boy
Show me your world
Buildings that reach the clouds
and synthetic jungle trees
Show me your world
Where the crawdads sing
and forests span for miles
I'll teach you
To navigate this concrete jungle
and avoid the dark places
I'll teach you
To follow deer trails
and catch fireflies
Watch the city lights twinkle
Count the stars
This is our world

Nicole Swan



Uncertainty, Sarah Johnson

The American Dream

The first step is right in front of you, which path will you take?

The first steps on the stairway look different for each traveler

For some, they are cracking, deteriorating, nearly falling apart with the weight of each step

The distance above or below unclear, foggy

Some begin, not at the first few steps, but taking an elevator to the floor that they will start off on

Pristine and clear steps marking their way as they confidently strut to their destination

Much like the first steps, the final destination is a different floor for each individual

Nonetheless, the goal- the highest point- is a fantasy that alludes many

Few will attain it, although those who chase the dream of reaching it are plenty

Older ladies- backs curved like the empanadas they sell

Trying their best to support their families in chasing that dream

Much like nurses; tired, kind eyes offering comfort to sick patients

Carefully checking their vitals just as their children carefully mark off answers on their exams

Carefully walk across the stage to accept their diplomas, aware of the weight that such a small
piece of paper carries

And just as aware of this are the parents pushing piragua carts on hot summer days,

Sweet ice treats as cold as the early morning breeze biting the skin of students catching the bus
on their way to

secure a degree

Rising early in the morning just like small business owners, determined to start the next empire

What do older ladies selling empanadas, parents pushing carts of flavored shaved ice, nurses,
sedulous students, or

ambitious entrepreneurs have in common with each other?

They are each climbing their own stairway, each on their way; chasing a dream

Each longing to achieve hope, opportunity, comfort, happiness

Not everyone is traveling to the same floor or stop, and that is fine

We might be climbing the same staircase, but we will each get off on different floors

The stairway is in front of you, the journey is yours.

Yahdani Mejia

Sunny Mornings, I Value You So Much

On a sunny morning, in utter silence, aside from the occasional cars passing by, and the birds chirping; I soak it in. It feels nostalgic to me. With every fiber in me, I focus on all of the birds chirping, the essence of the bright, rising sun, the serenity. I cherish it for the simplicity of the moment, the stillness. I am a structured person, I like routines. When they are disrupted, I fixate on it. So in these mornings, with everyone at home asleep, it is just me, my morning routine, the morning sun, and the birds. It removes me from the loudness of my home, the chatting, the TV, the music. Sometimes, all that noise is too much for me. Why can't mom handle sitting in silence? The longer the day gets, the morning leaves and the humidity comes. As the sun grows stronger, it takes me to the lonely summers being by myself, the envy I would be high on, watching my classmates stay in touch and go to the beach together. I never had that, the community that one would make with their classmates. But, I don't care anymore because I still have the sunny mornings, with the fresh morning air, give me the alone time I need. I don't ever want it to leave.

Giavanna Paparozzi



A Father's Light, Fatima Green

The Last Note

After an exhausting three weeks of packing and unpacking, I was finally able to enjoy the fruits of my labor. It was due for rain later in the day, and the gloomy, gray light that entered through the patio doors seemed to confirm the predictions. Although the day was chilly, I could feel the heat radiating from the fireplace. I walked over and extended my hands towards the steady flame.

As the warmth took its time traveling through my body, I began to study the collection of family photos that rested above my fireplace. I had a whole bunch of random family pictures at my old apartment, but never made the effort to actually frame them. After a recent trip to the local arts and crafts store, I picked a whole bunch of frames and decided to properly exhibit these photos. My life in pictures. They deserved to be shown off.

My 11th birthday, which I celebrated in the classroom with my elementary school pals, was catered with an assortment of cheese doodles and off-brand Oreo cookies. The aftermath of this feast hung near the bottom right corner of the wall. In the lower middle section, a photo captured as my brother Aaron and I shared a memorable hug at his military graduation ceremony nine years ago.

While glancing at the photos, I noticed one of the pictures was slanted at an awkward angle, so I reached up and balanced it evenly on the pin that was stuck to the wall. It was a photo of me lying down on the grass in the backyard of our old house. But there was an odd detail about this picture. I took the photo off the pin and brought it closer to my eyes. As I stared deeper and deeper, the front door creaked open behind me and I heard a heavy footstep at the entrance.

";You said ten minutes Timmy.";

If not for the fact that I knew only one person would actually call me Timmy, I might have passed out in fear of the moment. ";My bad A, I totally forgot you were still in the car waiting for me."; Aaron let out a sigh of disappointment at my faltering memory as he stepped inside the house completely. ";I got carried away looking at these old pics"; —finally turning my body towards him—"; but take a look at this."; Aaron took the picture from my hands and noticed it quicker than I did. ";I don't remember ever seeing that in our backyard. Is that...?"; Planted in the background of photo, next to the giant spruce tree that gave us occasional shade, was a short tombstone sticking out of the ground.

";We played there a million times Tim. That was never there."; Aaron whispered.

Even with the countless days I spent out there, I had never, ever seen that in our backyard. Aaron let out a chuckle. " ";Listen man, we're going to mom's place right now anyway, let's just check it out while we're there."; I had totally forgotten why Aaron had been waiting for me in the car. I had called mom a few hours earlier and told her we'd go down there for lunch. "Damn,"—I snatched my keys off the coffee table—";let's go before she starts blowing up my phone." I walked outside the door, making sure to check I still had my phone and wallet in my pockets. A strong breeze whistled through the air as Aaron closed the door behind us. I got in the car, turned

the key in the ignition, and waited for Aaron to get in the passenger seat. “Why’d you call me Timmy?” I asked as he slammed the car door. “It’s been years since you’ve called me that.” Aaron just stared at me as if the answer was written in his eyes. I gave him a weird look and then pulled the car out the driveway.

“I don’t understand why she still lives here when she could just come stay with one of us. Look at the place, she can’t be there by herself anymore.” Aaron was right. Although I paid for landscapers to come once a month and keep the house presentable, our childhood home had aged with time and was in desperate need of rejuvenation. We got out the car and crossed the quiet street when I noticed Mom’s car wasn’t in the driveway. “I think she’s still out food shopping.” I reached under a weirdly shaped rock on the front deck and found the spare key.

The house never really changed much anytime I visited, but it was always clean and tidy. Judging by how warm the house was, I could tell it hadn’t been long since the cleaning lady had left the house. The heater was set to sixty-eight degrees, but it felt a lot warmer. I took my jacket off and walked to the kitchen.

Mom always made the same meal every time Aaron and I visited, but even after being served chicken parm millions upon millions of times, we still loved it all the same. I took the pans and trays out the oven and set it to preheat to save Mom some time once she got home. As I’m doing so, Aaron stands in the middle of the kitchen and stares outside the window above the sink. “Look outside” he said. I close the oven and look through the window. There, as seen in the picture, was the tombstone. We opened the backdoor and made our way there.

Although the photo was taken nine years ago, the stone looked brand new. Nothing was inscribed on it. “Did we bury Toby?” I asked. “No, we cremated him, remember? The ashes are back at your place.” Due to how busy it had been moving into the house, I hadn’t found a proper place for the ashes of our childhood dog and had forgotten about them completely. Aaron put his hand on the stone. “I think we put this here, during like a game or something. I’m pretty sure we were pretending to be pirates during like Halloween time and decided to mark this as the spot for the treasure.” *This isn’t exactly the most kid-friendly way of marking treasure*, I thought to myself. But even so, as Aaron said that I began to merge my memory with his and remember the missing pieces. “I think ... I’m pretty sure we buried a box mom had given us with a bunch of our old toys and stuff inside.” I wasn’t sure at all, nor do I have any memory of doing that. It just seemed like the normal possibility in the moment. A makeshift time capsule in our backyard. The idea of it brought me a smile, but amongst so many items that could’ve marked the spot, we chose a headstone. I walked over to the shed and brought back a shovel that was resting on the door. I looked at Aaron. “We’ll take turns.”

We didn’t dig for long. It had already started drizzling by this point, so the soil was damp and easy to shovel. After about three minutes, we spotted something in the dirt. It was baby blue, very much like the Scooby Doo Mystery Van kind of blue. I tapped it with the shovel and whatever it was sounded like a metal tin. Aaron noticed it and reached down and grabbed it. As he pulled it up, and the excess dirt fell off of it, we noticed what he was holding in his hand. It was Aaron’s old lunchbox. “You remember this Tim?” he asked as he inspected the rusty, old

box. “Yeah, how could I forget all the fruit snacks I stole from here.” Aaron glared at me for a second, right before we broke down in laughter. He passed me the lunchbox. “I want you to open it.” I hesitated for a second. For some reason I felt like it was wrong for anyone else but him to open it. I shook off the second thoughts and grabbed the box. It was much, much, much heavier than Aaron made it seem. I rested it on my lap since my hands could not handle that weight for long. In bright, bold red letters across the face of the lunchbox read the letters **“LUNCHTIME IS THE BEST TIME.”** I unbuckled the metal locks on each side and flipped the cover open.

A day with a little more sunlight would have done justice to the gold coins that fell out of the box. Such a dull day, yet so much potential to blind a man. Upon further inspection, I noticed the coins were each engraved with the names of different countries across the world. While only around ten coins fell out the box, the instant relief I felt on my legs was priceless. It wasn’t a big lunch box, but there was no waste of space. Coins lined up like poker chips surrounded a black item in the middle. Careful not to drop any more coins I pulled out what seem to be a black notebook.

Surprised, confused, and in disarray I looked over to Aaron to see his response.

“Aar... what the hell is all th—”

I looked to my right and my left and all around. Aaron wasn’t there. He was just at arm’s length from me, yet I didn’t notice him leave at all. It was strange, but I just assumed he had gone inside to use the bathroom. I looked at the notebook in my hand. A high-quality notebook but by the looks of it had been mistreated. I opened to the first page. “Dear Tim...”

I was holding a journal. My question of who the diary belonged to was answered once I looked at the bottom of the page. “... from the big man, A,” it read. I flipped through the pages scanning the words that Aaron scribbled. He wrote about his trips to different countries and missions while in service in much detail while careful as to not to expose any confidential information. As I began skimming, the exciting army cadet older brother I once knew slowly turned into a traumatized and destructive man. Gruesome and gory details filled the pages, and I could feel the pain that grew with every letter he wrote. After a while, the entries seemed repetitive, and Aaron seemed to write less and less. My brother wasn’t like this. He was light and bountiful. The author of these entries was a man tormented by the devil himself.

In less than twenty minutes, I had seen my brother become a mad man. I flipped through the pages faster and faster as the entries only became shorter, all of them written to me.

The last entry was followed by many blank pages. It read:

“I’ve forced myself to write these for a while now. After some time, it just became a habit. Probably the only good thing I’ve brought myself to do. I’ve filled up a hefty amount of these pages, but this will be the last note. I’ve tried Tim, I really have. Once I came back, you and mom and everyone called me strong and brave. But it’s the furthest thing from the truth. I wish I could help you understand, but I wouldn’t even want my worst enemy to understand. I’m a

coward. Not only for the things I've done, but also for what I'm about to do. You always use to write to me and remind me to bring you souvenirs from all the places I was stationed at. I had hoped to save them until your birthday, but I think now will be just fine. I love you, Timmy. You and mom. But I would hate to leave mom suffering because of the idiot I am. She's in enough pain as it is, and she's in the hospital more than she's in the house. I know me and her are going to different places once all this is said and done, and that's okay. I'll make sure you're able to find this. Just do me one last favor, and make sure this stays between us. Thank you, Tim."

This entry was much neater than the previous ones. I looked at the date at the top of the page and then pulled out my phone. "Oh yea, I forgot," I whispered under my breath. "That's today." I stood up and looked up to sky. By this point, the rain had become merciless. "It's already been five years." I bent down and put all the coins that had fallen out back in the lunch box with the notebook right in the middle as it was before. I locked it, gently placed it back in the hole and used the shovel to cover the hole back up. I reached in my pocket and pulled a piece of paper out from my wallet. It was a strip from the local newspaper I had cut out a few years ago. The headline in bold letters,

"27-YEAR-OLD RETIRED US ARMY VETERAN AND MOTHER DIE IN FATAL CAR ACCIDENT".

I dropped the piece of paper on the ground and watched as it became transparent in the rainwater. The strip dissolved seconds later. I rested the shovel on the shed door and made my way to the kitchen to make the weekly chicken parm. I'd always make just enough for three, yet there were always leftovers.

Kleiver Martinez

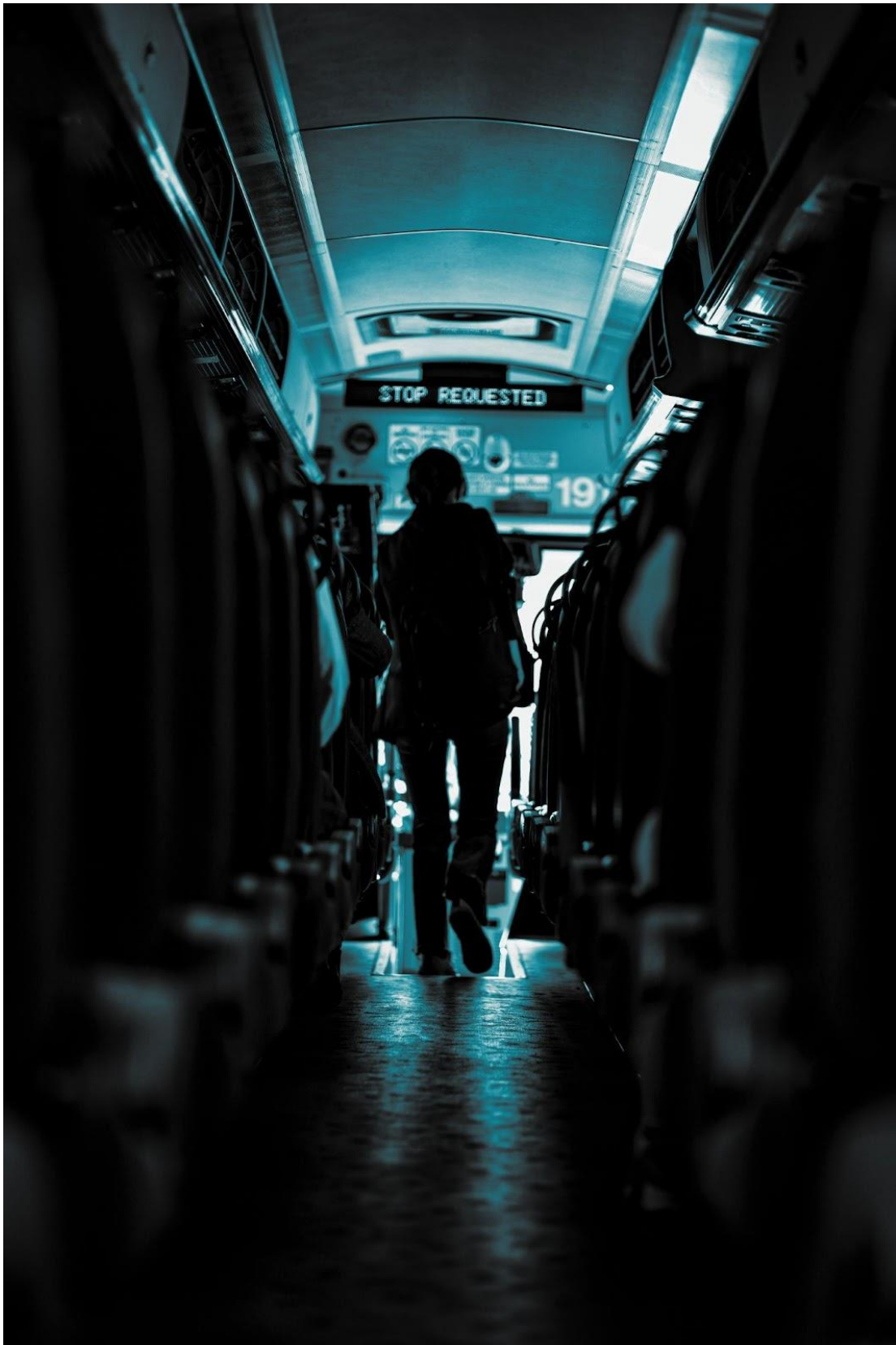
And Then It Was Dark

In this Technicolor world
My head seems to twirl
With thoughts of you running rampant
Summer nights, endless fights
Reaching for a love that is seemingly absent

Perfect lies between your lips
Nothing faltered with your whit
A flawless illusion to the naked eye
A manipulative mastermind

2am and the sky is still dark
How are our lives so different apart?
I once said that fate brought us together
But know you're the biggest storm I couldn't weather

Gabrielle Cruz



Rush Hour, Jason Avia

Biographies

Art & Writing Judges:

Timothy Blunk is the Director of Gallery Bergen and has curated over 60 exhibitions and performance series in the US and internationally. He is also an Assistant Professor of Visual Art. his artistic work to acting, set design, screenwriting, installation art, and performance art.. He is the editor and author of several books including *~~Fire a Poem~~/Fire 1000 Poems* (Grossmanns Büro, München, 2021) and *Given to Fly*, a forthcoming book of essays and short stories to be published by Terra Nova Books (MIT).

John Findura is the Writing Center Supervisor at the two-time national award-winning Cerullo Learning Assistance Center at Bergen Community College. He also teaches writing at Bergen. He is a poet and has published in many literary journals such as *Verse*; *Fourteen Hills*; *Copper Nickel*; *Pleiades*; *Forklift, Ohio*; *Sixth Finch*; *Prelude*; and *Rain Taxi*. His first poetry collection, *Submerged*, was published in 2017 by Five Oaks Press.

Interested in submitting to next year's LABYRINTH?

The Labyrinth is published each year in the spring semester and seeks poetry, short fiction, one-act plays, creative essays and artwork. In addition to publication, accepted works will be automatically considered for the Annual Creative Writing and Visual Arts Contest, sponsored by The Labyrinth in association with Bergen's Creative Writing Program, Bergenstages, and the College's Art Department.

The deadline for submission is usually March 1st.

Submit work electronically to thelabyrinth@bergen.edu

Guidelines:

Contest and publication in The Labyrinth are open to full- or part-time Bergen students enrolled in the 2022 or 2023 academic year.

All work submitted must be original and previously unpublished in any form.

Only electronic submissions will be accepted. Word length: fiction and essay, 5,000 words maximum; poetry, 25 lines maximum; play, 10 minutes performance time.

Artwork in any two-dimensional medium will be considered.

Maximum number of submissions per student: three in each prose category, five poems.

Multiple submissions in fiction, poetry and essay are permitted. Artwork submissions, maximum three in each category.

All text submissions must be typed. Prose must be double-spaced.

For further information contact Professor Mary Crosby (at mcrosby@bergen.edu) or BCC's English Department.

The Labyrinth is waiting for you!



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