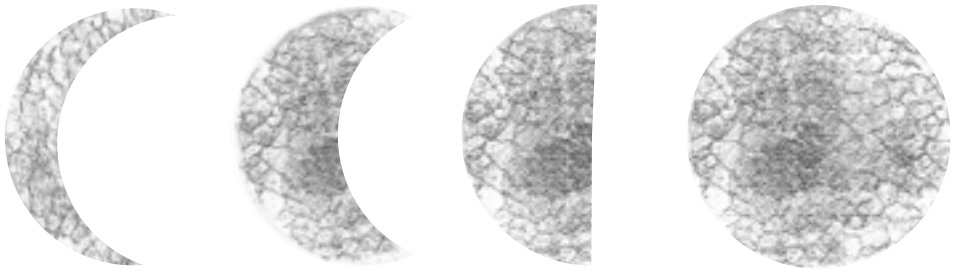


WALL

LITERARY JOURNAL



2024

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WALL is a student-produced literary journal of Saddleback College.
All entries were submitted by students of Saddleback College.
Submissions to WALL are reviewed, selected, and edited
by the students on the journal staff.

We accept entries that embrace all viewpoints and walks of life.

However, the opinions and ideas contained
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To submit your work for the 2025 edition of WALL,
please see the guidelines for submission at

<https://www.wallliteraryjournal.org/submissions-1>

The deadline is February 25, 2025.

WALL

is a community space for creative displays.

It is a fresh canvas,
a blank surface
begging for decoration,
a vast white page
awaiting our words and images.....



MISSION STATEMENT

WALL Literary Journal is dedicated to providing an open space for creative experimentation. We encourage the unfettered expression of ideas, images, and emotions in literary and artistic works that explore and illuminate the human experience. Aimed at a multicultural, cross-generational audience, the works represented in the pages of WALL encompass a diversity of voices and visions. This is art in the raw and in the round. We want our readers to laugh and cry, smile and sigh as they immerse themselves in the pleasures and power of art and literature.

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“It’s just a phase....” Underlying this commonly used phrase is the notion that we go through life as a developmental process. From childhood to adulthood, from innocence to maturity, we’re continually experiencing changes in circumstance, attitude, and state of mind. Our trajectory through time is not static but instead involves moving back and forth, forwards and backwards, sometimes toggling internally between the phases. This year’s journal traces this trajectory through stories, poems, and artwork that collectively depict this developmental process as illustrated by the four quarters of the lunar cycle. As you’ll learn in the Editor’s Note on the next page, a metaphorical moon provides a connective link among the literary and artistic immersions on the pages of WALL 2024.

While our lives and fortunes remain perpetually in motion, what remains constant and consistent is the support WALL receives from faculty, staff, and administrators at Saddleback College. The staff and I express our gratitude for the steadfast support of Dean Christina Hinkle and Assistant Dean Jessica Kaven of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences; Dr. Elliot Stern, President of Saddleback College; and Tram Vo-Kumamoto, Vice President for Instruction. We also deeply appreciate the ongoing support of Chancellor Julianna M. Barnes and the district’s Board of Trustees: Timothy Jemal, Terri Rydell, Carolyn Inmon, Ryan Dack, Barbara J. Jay, Marcia Milchiker, T.J. Prendergast III, and Sharla Clemente.

Special thanks goes to professors Suki Fisher, Catherine Hayter, Jennifer Hedgecock, Bridget Hoida, Brett Myhren, Shellie Ochi, and Ray Zimmerman of the English Department; Professors Karen Taylor and Louis Bispo of the Graphics Department; Scott Farthing, Dean of the School of Arts, Media, Performance, and Design; Professors Barbara Holmes (Art); Ariel Alexander (Music); Deidre Cavazzi (Honors Program Chair); Ryan Even (Photography); and Tim Posada, Chair, and Ali Dorri (Journalism and New Media Department); Matt Brodet and Randy Van Dyke (Cinema-TV-Radio). Additional benefactors include Christopher Hargraves, Jacqueline Zimbalist, and Rachael Roberts of the Student Development Office; Kristen Bush and Donna Pribyl of the Creative Services Department; Bruce Parker of PJ Printers; Khaver Akhter, Karen Yang, Joyce Speakman, and Angel Granados.

As you encounter the lunar cycles in this year’s WALL, the staff and I hope you find the words enlightening and the images illuminating.

Gina Shaffer
Faculty Advisor
WALL 2024

EDITOR’S NOTE

With each edition of WALL, a deliberate selection of Saddleback student works are put on display, creating a one-of-a-kind look into the culture and personality of our student body. This is what immediately struck me before I was ever a part of the editorial staff; reading the 23rd edition, I felt a deep intimacy with individual authors and submitters, yes, but I also felt a strong connection to our campus as a whole. After my time as editor-in-chief, I’ve come away with the understanding that it is the purpose of a community-driven literary journal like WALL to continue this trend of connecting readers to the ideas and attitudes of others in their community. Our newest edition fulfills this purpose and continues to innovate in its form.

Our 24th edition serves to capture the pent-up energy and bursting wanderlust that is associated with our time in college. It captures the inescapable need to go somewhere we’ve never been or feel something we’ve never felt. But this is not all. Moving throughout this edition, you will quickly notice the shift in the shading of the pages from section to section and the recurring moon motif. This edition may start on a new moon, emphasized by new beginnings and youthfulness, but with time it will wax into a different stage. And as the full moon approaches, the consequences of change begin to set in, culminating in a profound sense of longing. The following short stories, personal narratives, poems, and art pieces describe the complex transition between running from our past and longing for it. They speak to the reality that it is only after we’ve made our great escape that we’re able to soberly look at what we’ve left behind.

In the following pages you will find a story about starting a new life through a spontaneously purchased one-way train ticket, a deeply contemplative personal account describing the background behind a prison name, a post-apocalyptic western with an emphasis on karma, a heartbreaking poem about parental end-of-life care, and so much more. Each piece is carefully placed in order to emphasize the overall theme and shift in attitude. In this edition of WALL, there is a fundamental connection between the contents of the pages and the form of the delivery. Be it through the shading of the pages, recurring motifs, or the arrangement of pieces, there is a story to be told and followed throughout the journal as a whole. Pay close attention to the way that each piece transitions into the next, keeping a pulse on the movement of the overarching story of this year’s edition.

It can be easy to become overwhelmed by how quickly life moves—to feel like the future we dream of is impossibly out of reach and the past that we long for is inaccessibly behind us. However, this sentiment stops us from enjoying our lives as they are. Use this edition as a reminder to savor the current moment and understand that you’ll one day miss it.

I want to share my deepest thanks to Professor Shaffer and the colleagues who worked with me on the 24th edition of WALL. Their passion for creativity and devotion to creating a superb issue endlessly inspired me.

We hope you enjoy this exciting addition to the legacy of WALL.

William Stanley
Editor-in-Chief
WALL 2024

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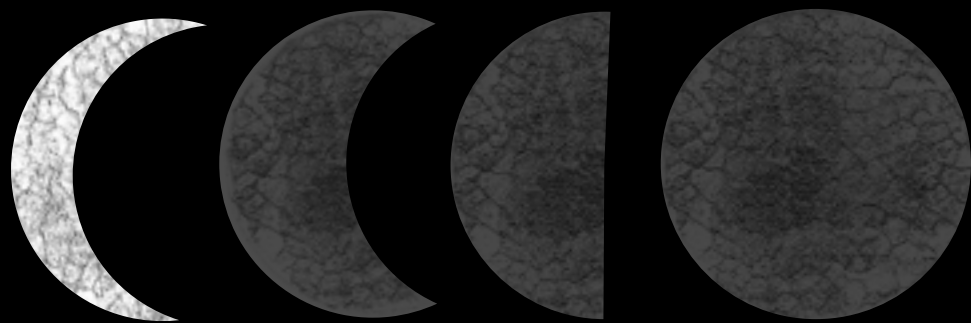
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The Maple Leaf

Lucy Roth

5:43 a.m.

Sam's train is boarding in 22 minutes. The station is his personal purgatory of rumbling vessels, obnoxiously fluorescent lights that pinken his pale skin and linoleum floors, overwhelming his senses, rendering him thoughtless and unable to plan for further actions that are better left to chance. His travel partner has found new tickets and accommodations, leaving Sam to brave the station on his own, and return to a life he only tolerated with her presence.

Her shrill, disembodied voice still pierces his mind, the only suggestion that she ever really existed. "Sam, are you even listening to me? Sam, get off your phone! Jesus, it's like I'm not even here." Of course, she didn't understand that he was not texting another woman but furiously crafting the next great rock opera, though it probably wouldn't have made much of a difference. He replays the last words she said to him, the words he'd heard a hundred times before and gave no mind to as she stated, "Fine, if you're so busy, then I'll just stay out of your way. I hope your phone keeps you warm tonight."

A toddler crashing to the ground in front of him pulls him back to the present moment as he sits on an empty bench, hoping not to expend any more calories than he does in his self-pitying as the events of the weekend continue to consume him. From his coffee-stained canvas bag he carefully extracts a notebook to write in, or rather perform with, as meeting gazes with those passing by is far too intimate an encounter.

It wasn't my fault and now I am stuck with the mess that she has dropped into my hands. I tried to level with her, be a voice of reason, but she's always too sensitive. And I can't help the fact that she hates herself so much, but I wish she could leave it there and not hate me too. She takes everything I say or do and twists it. I'm always walking on eggshells around her and it's like I can't even breathe... how am I supposed to behave when the oxygen flowing to my brain is cut off by her. It's not my fault but I wish that she didn't leave.

5:50 a.m.

The lights in the station have somehow become brighter and Sam's eyes wander from his page, each word that he writes becoming increasingly illegible. He looks at his phone, which stares back, taunting him with its emptiness. Sam's train is boarding in fifteen minutes. As he extricates himself from his

familiar fortress of comfort, his coffee-stained canvas bag rattles rudely, reminding him of its contents.

“What the fuck do I do with the ring?” he groans. Traversing through determined businessmen and irritatingly attractive college students, he makes the trek to the coffee stand across the way. Surely he can muster enough strength to stand in line.

A voice calls out, “Sam? Sam Wright?” Sam, who knows nobody in New York besides the woman who just left him there, looks around anxiously, disturbed by the notion that someone clearly recognizes him. She stands just a few heads behind him, looking exactly like she did at their college graduation. Kelsey Miller, the girl he was in love with, the girl he was not meant to propose to.

“I thought that was you! You know, I think you were wearing that exact outfit the last time I saw you!” Donning blue jeans, a gray sweater and black Converse sneakers, Sam stands perplexed as to how this occurrence was worth a remark. “Oh my gosh and you still have that dirty old bag. You really haven’t changed at all, have you?”

Kelsey had no idea how true this statement was. Standing there, feeling entirely naked despite his warm winter outfit, Sam can’t spit out much. “Uh, Kelsey. Haha, yeah well you still look, you know...” His eyes shift frantically, from the refrigerated parfaits to the barista suffering from secondhand embarrassment, back to Kelsey who by now is surely regretting her decision to strike up conversation in the first place.

“So, what are you doing in New York?”

Here enters Sam’s forte, making up a quick lie to conceal the unfortunate truth, that he has just been abandoned by the woman he planned to marry. “Uh yeah, I wanted to see the big trees with all the lights. And the crowded malls. I love being surrounded by hordes of people spending money on pointless tokens of affection. What about you?” Sam is a bit off of his game.

Kelsey chuckles nervously. “Wintertime in New York is hectic. I actually live here now. I’m working at...”

Sam’s eyes wander down again from her face to the shiny rock on her left ring finger. All at once it’s his turn to order, which is fortunate given the sudden defeat that washes over him, rendering him uninterested in continuing the conversation. He orders, steps a respectable distance away from the line that Kelsey still stands in, granting her only a coy smile signaling goodbye. Sam cautiously retreats to the safe bubble that encases him as his gaze meets his phone screen.

6:01 a.m.

The barista calls out Sam’s name, saving him from the unwavering stares of Kelsey and the refrigerated parfaits. He awkwardly waves goodbye to them both as he exits the coffee stand. Sam’s train is boarding in four minutes. Ambivalent towards the fact that he must make haste in his walk to his platform, he stops a moment to notice a peculiar character. An old man dressed from head to toe in clashing patterns and colors, with a newsboy cap that seems perfectly out of place, holding an untimely cocktail in one hand and a small dog in the other, no bags in sight. This guy knew what he was doing. Sam watches him carefully, wondering how someone could be so carefree, so unattached from the physical realm that Sam was so uncomfortable in. He watches him walk over towards the Maple Leaf, headed to Toronto, and for a moment considers following him. This time of year it would be freezing there, a good excuse for him to stay inside and wallow all day. Of course, he doesn’t know anybody in Toronto either or have any job prospects or much money to tide him over. As people rush by him, he is reminded that he must decide quickly. He reaches for his phone and opens his Notes app, the notebook too demanding at the moment.

What if I ran away? I never liked Pennsylvania anyway, I don’t need to go back there. There’s nothing there for me. Toronto just sounds better. I could eat Tim Hortons any day of the week and the people there are supposed to be friendlier, right? Maybe I could start over, maybe everything has gone to shit just because I was in the wrong place and in Toronto things would’ve just worked. Maybe I could find a new girlfriend, a better job...at the very least I’ll be further away from everything I know I already hate. And if this guy with the clothes and the hat and the drink at 6 a.m. is any indication of what Canadians are like, I think I’d like it there.

6:07 a.m.

Uncharacteristically resolute in completing his journal entry, Sam finally closes his Notes app and checks the clock on his phone screen. Sam’s train boarded two minutes ago and is leaving the station. He glances back towards the coffee stand. Kelsey is long gone. His ex-girlfriend is probably already back in Pennsylvania, waiting for him to return just to remind him of his newfound loneliness as she drops all of his stuff in boxes on the stoop of the apartment he’ll have to move out of. All that’s left is a bunch of gray sweaters and blue jeans, and a few unfinished notebooks, abandoned for the ease of the Notes app on his phone. What’s one more life left un-lived, Sam wonders. With his coffee-stained canvas bag in tow, he heads towards the ticket counter.

“One one-way to Toronto, please.”

Illustration by SJ Abrams

WHEN THE CIRCUS CAME TO TOWN



Sophie Matossian

WHEN THE CIRCUS CAME TO TOWN

There was a man in the circus who I didn't mind
He was tall and handsome and usually kind
His act was impressive, he even sang a bit
But I realized early on, his act was bullshit
For he could not cry or make good conversation
Just being near him induced intellectual constipation
Words and thoughts were shoved down inside
While my snickers and giggles fed his pride
He did make me laugh, he was a somewhat funny guy
But under all that funny, the painted smile was a lie
He didn't care about me; he was just passing through
I wasn't a heart or a woman, just something fun to do
But I didn't mind, or at least, that's what I said
My heart wasn't broken, it only bothered my head
The show eventually ended, and the circus left town
He said no goodbye, just a "see you around"
And though I promised I wouldn't cry, I let myself frown
But not for too long, for he had always been a clown



One quarantine-fading July afternoon, I decided to finally invite some family friends to the beach and dig our feet in the sand. We drove to Laguna Beach where the golden sun was warm and the air cold. Surrounded by the squawking seagulls and washed up seaweed, I unraveled my towel.

Touring the beach before our adventure into the water, I walked up to the abandoned lifeguard tower bearing a waving cherry flag, looking inside and out for any people. I sat on the rickety and waterlogged wood, swinging my legs over the edge and watching the sun sink into the ocean. But that low lull of the thirst-quenching water would not stop my nerves from building. I imagined my friends laughing at my jokes and kicking at the water with me in the shallow blue. It had been so long since I had been around my friends due to the pandemic that I had forgotten how to talk to people. So all I wanted was to serve up happiness on a plate. I was determined to be fun.

We played games like Uno, ate cheesy grilled sandwiches, and indulged in chocolate strawberries I had brought. As we huddled in a circle, I longed to get into the refreshing water. “Hey, do you guys wanna head in?” I asked, pointing into the blue in the distance. “The water looks so cold though,” they said. But I insisted, “It won’t get any hotter now anyway.” My head burst with delight as I finally convinced them to get in. We walked up to the shore and I watched the water creep up to my feet. When it hit my toes, I bit my tongue at the sting. It was quite a few degrees lower in temperature than I anticipated. I watched my friends hop into the water without flinching and beckoning me into the blue. “You were right, Nicole, it’s not that bad.” I felt a sharp ache when I walked deeper, but I continued to wade my way into the depths. I struggled to move forward through the sand.

Coming to a stop and shivering in my swimsuit, I thought, It’s so cold. How are they already over there? My friends called me again in a sing-song voice, “NICOOOLE, get over here!” They were so far out from the shore. Yet they kept insisting, “What are you looking at? Hurry up!” I waded faster through the water, kicking up sand and shuffling closer with my arms crossed at my chest. Before I was halfway to them, my toe stubbed against a hard object under the hip-high water. I could feel it break through my skin. I gasped in surprise. “Ooowauch!” I lifted my foot and saw cherry juice stain the arctic water when, suddenly, a strong current caught me off guard and swept me off my only good foot.

The water hit like a boulder to my chest and swam into my rasping throat with what felt like a shot of salt. My eyes opened in an attempt to find the sky but were only met with a burning sensation. It was cold and my teeth were chattering faster than a static television. I watched my friends easily bounce in the water triple my current depth glancing toward me as though to mock my slowness. I continued struggling to move toward them. The water in my ears made it hard to hear the waves creep up on me. My throat was now dry and hollow. I

kept my eyes on the dark blue seafloor so as not to trip again.

The water finally reached up to my neck until I became just a bobbing head in the current. I dragged my eyes off the ocean floor and looked up to see no pink swimsuits, shaggy brown hair, or any freckled faces, only the saltwater. “Rebecca?” I called, “Gabe?” I turned around and couldn’t seem to find them anywhere. I was spinning in circles in an attempt to see anyone.

“Guuuuyyys?” For all my spinning around, I probably started the break in the water that became a rip current.

The first one hit me hard. It snuck up from behind, tapped my shoulder, and then slapped me over the head, jolting me forward with legs and arms a blur as I spun under the hand of the waves. The wave fisted and held me under its grasp. When it finally let me go, I swam up towards the surface and gasped for air. I took a deep desperate breath just before the next one, even larger than the last, charged at me. I took in a couple of short bursts of air and dunked under the waves before they could tear me apart. I held my breath for as long as I could before I breached the surface. Somewhere in the tumble of limbs, my heart became ferocious. It spasmed in my hollow throat like a hairball accumulating, tickling me from the inside. And even as I found oxygen again, my heart would not slow its race.

┌ *“I came up to breathe when another wave hit again...”* ┐

With a grimace, I recognized another wave coming over my shoulder. Its shadow took on the soul of a blue whale, its mouth swallowing me whole as I slipped down and down the tongue. The sickeningly cold water dove in between my pores. I looked towards the shore to see if anyone was there, but my mouth wouldn’t open. Frozen by salt and self-consciousness, I was too scared to ask for help. I told myself, I’m p-probably just over-r-r-r-eacting. It’s n-n-no big deal. I focused my attention back on the wave again. I hadn’t realized until that moment how much worse it could get. It took over any chance I had at seeing the sky.

Finally, I took a deep breath, filled my lungs, and dove under the tongue of the beast. With my eyes sewn shut, I pushed myself to what I thought was downward. My cheeks became bloated like balloons floating upward, drawn to be one with the sky. As I was being tugged under the water, my brain screeched at me to let go of the air. Bubbles peeked out from my mouth and flooded to the surface faster than I anticipated.

My skin went from a sickly white to blue blubber and I very nearly became camouflaged with the ocean, but I began kicking upwards, reaching for a non-

existent ladder. I came up to breathe when another wave hit again before I could touch air, and instead, I breathed in water up my nose, making my head stab with pain. I frantically kicked my way up to the surface again. This time I made it and I realized that I was stuck in a growing riptide. The shore was no longer in sight; left and right had become the same direction.

As if I couldn’t decide whether or not I was truly in danger, I called out in a measly voice, “Help!” But when all was quiet, I yelped this time, “Help!” No response again. When I looked back and saw the next wave build, without hesitation, I waved in all general directions and screamed “HELP!!!” I continued to search desperately, but I didn’t see anything past the blue oscillations.

As I stared into the indigo ripples, I saw a flash of red. I jumped at the movement as a woman with a red lifeguard vest swam toward me. She inched closer and helped me place a float around my middle, clicking it into place. “I need you to swim with me,” she said. I paddled as hard as I could but felt like I was not pulling any water. With my body drained from trying to stay above water, she mostly dragged me to the shore.

“You can stand up now,” the lifeguard said as I planted my feet into the sand, clicking off the float around my stomach. I almost dropped from exhaustion. It felt like I had spent hours in the waves. The water had sucked the energy out of my limbs, leaving me feeling like I was pulling rocks over my shoulder back up the beach.

My family reached me in flying whoops and shouts. As they shouted at me for getting lost and then pulled me in, I stared wide-eyed at the ground and watched the woman in red just walk away. I felt bad for getting her wet and cold because she had to save me. As we trudged back into the tent, lugging my limbs with me, I collapsed and slept for two hours, placing a towel over my face.

As I woke up, I stared up at the sun through the blue towel. I was afraid of inconveniencing everyone else and it nearly cost me. I had been caught in a riptide and I didn’t want to ask for help from the lifeguard.

The reality of what I experienced didn’t hit me right away. I thought my friends were lying when they told me, “You could have died. ... OMG, that was crazy ... Thank God you’re okay.” ME dying? No way, I thought to myself. But as I played the scene over and over, those waves became more menacing. And the cold wasn’t uncomfortable; it was unbearable. I had escaped death by the skin of my teeth, and I almost let it happen.

I am reminded of that day often, of how badly I wanted to perform for everyone else. I’ve run through the events and seen that there were a thousand warnings. I surrendered much too easily. I was so detached from myself that I couldn’t see the danger right in front of me. By wanting to satisfy the needs of others, I had forgotten my own. I no longer hear the crashing thoughts of self-consciousness. I no longer wait to ask for help. I no longer let myself get waterlogged.



My world didn't turn black and white overnight, nor was I born into the dark void that would eventually envelop my eyes. No, it began as a slow and arduous process. Colors around me dimmed, faded, lost pigment gradually. The change planted its insidious seeds in my childhood and grew stronger with each dismal year.

I started as a happy child, my knees bruised from climbing the sturdy trees that littered my parents' farm, dirt caked in thick clumps that stuck to the handmade boots I was gifted for my seventh birthday. My mother would call my siblings and me in for dinner at the same time every night, herding us like we were farm animals. She would examine us with a stern look after our day of fervent adventuring and tend to any cuts or scrapes, firmly slap us on our small heads and make a gracious remark, "Go wash up. You all smell like the pigs."

But when I reached an age where I could begin attending school, I lost some of the innocent glimmer in my eyes. I never felt like I belonged amongst my peers. When they wanted to play tag, I wanted to jump rope. When they wanted to play chess, I wanted to play hide and seek. They all seemed to think along the same lines and have a tacit rule that they could never want to play the games I wanted to play. Once they began to realize I was different, they began to target me. I became the subject of ridicule. I isolated myself and kept my head down, not wanting to draw any attention.

During our school years my brothers and I would walk to the schoolhouse. They would chat amongst themselves; their youthful voices tumbled off the popular trees that inhabited most of our barren town. The rural place we called home would later be developed into a semi-populous city, but in my younger years it was comprised of farms, a school, a post office, town hall and about three other insignificant buildings. My family lived a short trek from the schoolhouse, a shabby wooden one-room building. The outside was originally painted a light purple, but by the last year of my education the lilac plank boards had been infested with mold from the damp summers leading to the paint flaking off in large sections and the wood being left with long winding patterns of rot. My eldest brother, Tom, would run his hands along the decayed planks, collecting splinters on his hands and laughs from his puerile friends. He would frequently rush into the classroom with a tempestuous gust of wind following him and sit in the chair furthest from me, struggling to use his chalkboard with his sore hand. And despite his complications with handling the chalk, he would answer every question correctly with certainty. I hated him for that. Adam, my other brother, would sit beside me in a wordless haze. I can picture him there with hunched shoulders, his neck inclined, allowing tufts of brown hair to cover his owl-like eyes that bore holes into the chalkboard before him. I, like Adam, would hide away in the corner, averting my gaze from the other children around me. It seemed to come easily to them, being carefree, conversing and laughing. I

watched as their world revolved for them while mine remained motionless for me, not existing in the same continuum.

The first time I noticed the colors shifting was on one of our many walks to school. My feet felt heavy, heavier than they did the day before. I remember looking down at my scuffed leather boots, convinced they were filled with lead or that Tom had managed to sew bricks into them without alerting me. But my shoes looked like they always had, if anything a little bit more worn than I had realized. I continued inspecting my footwear, my scrutinization unbroken as I tried to figure out what was causing my heavy feet. The grass crunched beneath my steps, leaving slight impressions of the soles of my shoes. Has the grass always been this dull? I recall wondering as I trampled on through the dewy field. There had been heavy rainfall a few days prior. The present clear sky should have brought a lively verdancy to the vegetation that surrounded us. But instead, much to my vexation, the grass was giving an unenthusiastic display of its recent hydration. When I finally broke my eyes away from my shoes, I looked at my brothers to see if they had noticed the rather dull surroundings. Their faces remained animated while they were engrossed in a conversation about a baseball game they had participated in the day before.

┌
*“There was a stark shift
that startled me to the core.”*
└

“Everything looks so boring today,” I said in an attempt to make them take in their surroundings. They both looked around unenthusiastically.

“It looks like any other day this time of year,” Tom remarked.

Adam, who had always had more of a soft spot for me than Tom, asked, “What makes you say that?”

I shook my head in response, wanting to drop the subject. At that moment, I brushed it off with the explanation that I was coming down with a cold or that I simply had something in my eyes. In retrospect, it’s clear this was the first time the changes to my vision became noticeable.

The changes seemed to happen at a steady pace until one particular day. There was a stark shift that startled me to the core. I would typically wake up to the slight dulling of the world having already increased, the change presumably happening in my sleep. But on this particular day, at a particular moment, something happened that made it undeniable...I wasn’t making it up: the world really was turning black and white.

My father was in the dining room, seated at the table he had built himself long ago using the hardwood from a poplar tree in the surrounding woods. He would brag about how it took him longer to pick out the tree to cut down than it did to build the table and that he had done such a fine job that he could’ve gone into woodworking. Tom and Adam sat on either side of him, listening to him read the daily paper with admiration in their eyes. My mother was bustling around in the kitchen to prepare dinner. She would always make it a point to bang the corroded copper pots together as loud as she could to disturb any peace the family, my father in particular, could attain. I was sitting in the oak press-back chair that sat adjacent to the dining table. I had turned the chair around to face the wall, hoping to focus on the pillow I was sewing. But the commotion in the kitchen had my attention drawn elsewhere.

“Would you quiet it down in there?” my father said in a scolding tone. “I’m trying to read.” My mother ignored his request and continued on crashing about.

I continued to idly work on the pillow in my hands, practicing the ladder stitch pattern my mother had spent so long demonstrating for me. The ruckus in the kitchen made my hands tremble, and when I attempted to pull the thread taut through the fabric, it still managed to coil, pushing tufts of cotton through the gaps. I threw the pillow down in frustration and wallowed in self pity. That pillow was supposed to be my magnum opus, proof to my mother that I had been paying attention in those hours that she had spent teaching me, evidence to my father that I could do something right.

My father turned his attention to me after my sudden outburst and said, “Is everything all right, Lydia?” I gave him a docile nod. “How was school today?” he asked.

My face got hot, and I could almost feel the blood rushing to my cheeks. I remember swiveling around, my legs dangling on either side of the chair, looking at my brothers for assurance but both of them were sporting smirks.

“Lydia had to wear the dunce cap today,” Tom sneered. “And she cried in front of everyone!”

I clenched my teeth in response. It was true. I had gotten so many questions wrong in class that day, which resulted in me having to wear the oversized cone-shaped hat with the word DUNCE painted vertically in big blue letters. The other children laughed and mocked me. I felt utterly ostracized; I wasn’t even the same species to them.

My father gave me a disappointed look. “It really is a shame, Lydia, that your head is so big only for it to be empty.”

There was ringing in my ears and a cold sweat began to break out all over my body. Tears burned in my eyes but I refused to cry in front of them in fear of more torment. So I closed my eyes and held them tightly shut for a few minutes. I could hear my father and brothers talking, but the ringing grew so loud that I couldn’t make out what they had said. When the ringing noise became so loud that I thought I was going to implode, I opened my eyes. At first I couldn’t see anything, but when my eyes adjusted and the static disappeared from my

vision, my surroundings had no color. I blinked rapidly, rubbed my eyes, and shook my head until I felt dizzy. But it remained the same.

They won't believe you. They wouldn't understand. My mind was racing; I wanted to scream for help. But instead, I stood up from the chair and walked to my room in silence, as if I was being led by an invisible leash. I closed the door behind me, got into bed, and stared at the wall.

After that day, I began a new routine: Wake up, go to school with my head down, walk home, lock myself in my room, stare at the wall, repeat. I didn't get out of bed because I wanted to. It was an obligation. I spoke only when I had to. I was a child, and a girl at that, so I was allowed to be quiet. I didn't want to go out and play. How could I pretend and let my imagination run wild if I could barely remember the greenery of post-spring showers or the many bright skies I had taken for granted.

Just like that, my life continued on, not fully present but existing just enough to get by. I didn't allow anyone in and I never told them of the new world I was subjected to living in. Each day continued the progression of the world diminishing.

I never thought that there was a color darker than black. Not until the void began to spread through my eyes. It began by encircling my vision, slowly closing in. One day, for no apparent reason, it closed in on itself and buried me in perpetual darkness that was all encompassing, taking away my surrounding awareness and sending my head reeling just by standing. In the first moment of complete blindness, I threw my hands up in the air to surrender. I no longer cared what happened. Whatever had plagued my mind and my vision had won. Before I had the chance to develop and live life, I became a shell of who I once was. I never regained my sight and I never broke out of that shell. I allowed the darkness to wrap its arms around me, fill my eyes and lungs and mind with its heaviness and sink me into the ground permanently.

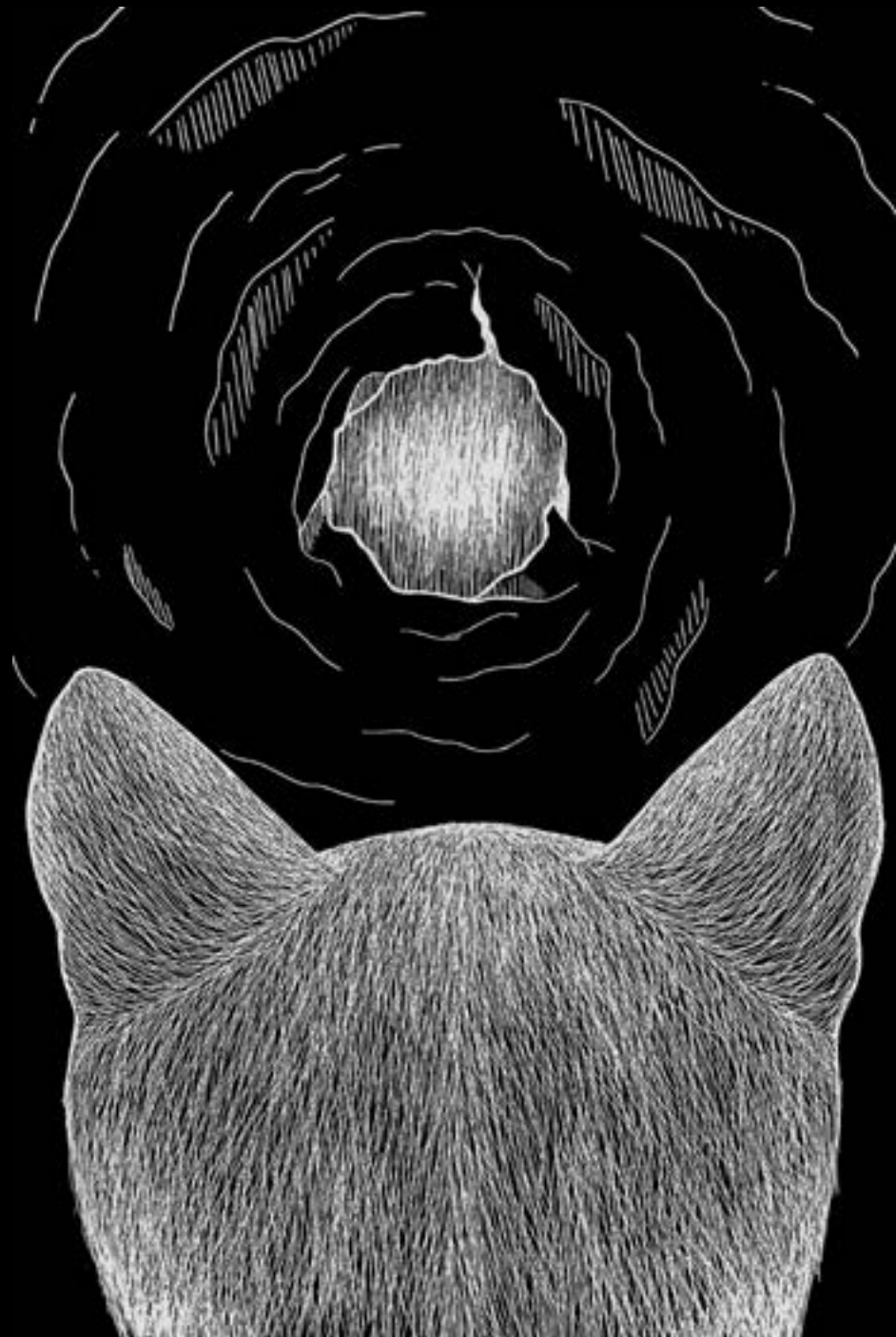




I'm made of patchwork, different every square.
Shoddily made, seemingly sewn together without care.
These patches are records of My days, tailored by the power of My hand,
These unmatching fabrics and patterns of different colors represent Me
without brand.

I'm made of patchwork, different every square.
I've snagged a thread of Me, there has been a Tear.
Hands grab My cloth, it's the powers that be.
They have fabric and thread to create a new me,
I beg to be set free
These fabrics aren't me

i once was made of patchwork, i've become uniformed and square.
Made with precision, clearly now sewn with perfect care.
i've become made in a factory, with no individuality,
Monochromatic textile, with no sign of me.



It started out innocuously as most things do. It all started with a hole in the wall. The hole was no bigger than a grapefruit and was created by my dad in a fit of rage and embarrassment. My mom discovered he had cheated on her again with a new woman. This time she confronted him in front of my brothers and me. I was fifteen at the time, not really able to comprehend the severity of the situation until my dad opened the door with so much force that the doorknob burst through the drywall. All I could do was stare at that hole as bits of drywall fell to the floor in slow, flowy motions. I should have known then that was the beginning of the end.

As the years passed, none of us dared to look at the hole, much less try to patch it up. It was an unspoken rule to leave that area alone. Any time I would look at it for too long, the hair at the back of my neck would rise. Even my golden retriever would avoid that area, too, choosing to look anywhere but there. Everyone got the memo. That was until my mom adopted a pair of Russian Blue kittens.

My mom grew up with cats in her home country of Guatemala and adored them. They were her companions, protectors against vermin and evil spirits. My grandmother would recount tales of our ancestors, the Mayans, and their relationship with cats, both big and small. According to my grandmother, it was imperative to keep a cat at home. The Mayans kept jaguars and pumas as symbols of power and protection. They were powerful tools against the insidious spirits of the world looking to take advantage of sorrow and grief. Cats were also our connection to the gods. My mother loved and respected cats. I would even say that she preferred cats to dogs. My dad, on the other hand, hated cats and loved dogs, which is why we got a cute golden retriever puppy. He forbade my family from ever adopting a cat. The day after my dad left, my mom drove my two brothers and me to the shelter. The rest is history.

Everything was fine for a month or so until I noticed that one of the kittens, Nala, was staring at the hole in the wall. My eyes never leaving the motionless kitty, I asked, "Hey, Mom? Have you noticed that Nala has been staring at that hole by the front door all day? I don't think I've seen her move from that spot for at least an hour."

My mom turned to me, her face perturbed. "No, I've never seen her do that before."

I waved my mother over to me, pressing my pointer finger to my lips to ensure Nala would not be startled. My mom slowly walked around the corner to where I was standing. Her brows furrowed as she took in sight of what seemed to be a hypnotized kitten. We looked at each other, not knowing what to do. That's when Nala started to make sounds, vocalizing as if she were trying to mimic human speech. The sound was grating and unnatural. It disturbed me to my core. I still get chills to this day, remembering the uncanny meows.

“Nala! What are you looking at girl?” My mom spoke shrilly, the volume of her voice almost at a shout. Nala turned to my mother, the spell seemingly broken before chirping and slinking away.

The next time one of the cats did something strange concerning the wall, it was 3 a.m. My room was downstairs, down the hallway from the front door. As a teenage girl, I wanted as much space for myself as possible, even if that meant that I was disconnected from my family at night. They all resided upstairs, preferring to room close to each other. I regret that moment of teenage rebellion even as an adult in my thirties. I woke up to a strange noise coming from down the hallway—a thumping noise that was hard enough to shake my closet door. My first thought was that the shaking was coming from an earthquake. As I was rubbing the sleep from my eyes, I noticed that nothing else in the room was shaking. Then came the scraping. I closed my hands around my ears, the urge to grind my teeth in overstimulation taking over. The noise stopped as suddenly as it started. This was my cue to investigate what was going on.

┌ *“I froze before deciding to do the stupidest thing I had ever done in my life.”* ─┐

I know what you’re thinking: How could I be so stupid to walk away from the safety of my warm bed? Trust me, it was not an easy decision. My mind conjured up the worst scenarios possible, ranging from a rat infestation in the walls to a tall, masked hook man scraping the sharp end of the hook against the walls. I was not okay with any of these options. I opened my door and peered out. It took time for my eyes to adjust to the darkness, but there at the end of the hallway was Birch, the other half of the kitten duo. She was staring up at the hole intently. Suddenly she started jumping up at it, almost as if trying to get in. Each jump had Birch’s head colliding into the wall, causing that horrific thumping sound.

The hole was too high up for Birch to successfully jump into. Each thump must have hurt her, but she kept going as if her life depended on it. My eyes widened in horror as I ran to Birch, trying to grab her before she somehow successfully jumped in. I grabbed Birch by the scruff and held her in my arms, trying to calm my wildly beating heart. Birch snapped out of whatever had her acting strange and growled at me, making sure to puncture my skin with those small claws of hers. I yelped in pain and let her go. She ran like a bat out of hell into the darkness of the living room.

I didn’t realize I was right in front of the hole until I felt that tickle at the back of my neck. I crouched down, my body moving without my permission. I moved closer to the wall, intending to see what had the cats acting crazy. Icy

cold air blew in my face. I sneezed, not expecting it to feel like the Arctic. The hole was dark, so I couldn’t see much. There was a slow whistling sound emanating from the hole as if there were strong winds swirling inside. I grabbed my phone from inside my pajama pocket and used the flashlight to see what was in there. Before I moved the light to reveal the mystery of the hole, I heard whispering coming from inside.

At first, the whispers were unintelligible. I don’t know if it was the fact that I was running on four hours of sleep at that time or that I was too scared shitless to understand the quiet words invading my ears. I held my breath and strained my ears to understand the words coming from the wall. It was then that I understood that whatever was inside the walls was trying to get me to comply.

“Come inside the walls,” it whispered in a grotesque manner. I froze before deciding to do the stupidest thing I had ever done in my life. I shakily raised my light to the hole. All I could see was an eye looking back at me, the pupil wide and covering most of it. Whatever I could see of the sclera was bloody red. I knew then that I was looking at pure evil.

Much like Birch before me, I stood up and ran as fast as I could toward my room. I was almost at the door when I felt myself go off balance. My fuzzy socks caused me to slip on the wooden floor. It all happened so fast that I couldn’t stop myself from falling. My world went black. I woke up the next day on my bed with my mom sitting next to me, her eyes puffy and red. I haven’t seen her this distraught since we found out the reason why my dad never came home was because he was drunk and drove into a pole. I groaned as I sat up. I placed my hand in hers in a comforting gesture.

“What’s wrong Mom?” I asked hesitantly, not knowing if the pounding in my head would get worse with whatever she was about to say.

“The cats ... they’re gone!” she cried, putting her head in her hands. “We’ve turned over every piece of furniture in the house. We’ve searched every nook and cranny, and we can’t find them!”

I felt my veins turn to ice at this news. Despite the shock that came with losing our two sweet kittens, deep down I knew where they ended up. The house was quiet after that. I no longer felt that odd feeling when I passed the hole in the wall. Years passed and my mother never stopped believing that the cats would turn up. I didn’t bother to tell her what I saw that night, deciding that the burden should stay with me. We eventually moved to a new home, and with that came a sense of peace that we had never known after the night my father died. I still think about that hole in the wall sometimes, wondering if whoever lives there now patched it up.

I still have nightmares that haunt me every time I close my eyes. My grandmother’s stories remain on replay in my recurring night terrors. The Mayans used jaguars and pumas as companions and protectors, but they also used them as sacrifices to appease the will of malevolent gods. I still think about Birch and Nala and make sure to thank them every night before going to bed. If it wasn’t for their sacrifice, the god in the walls would have probably destroyed what was left of my family.

Jonathan Owens
SHADOW MAN



Nicholas Mersereau
UNWELCOME GUEST

As the sun begins to flee,
the velvet darkness nestles me
within her soft fabric.

And my legs and hips and shoulders,
are wrapped beneath the tapestry
of the warm sable of dusk.

And as the gentle candle's glow
burrows her head into the boundless sand
I float down, deeper, into slumber—
my weary mind drifting further from me.

Then suddenly—
like a bedsheet stripped by an invisible hand,
an oozing dread loosens from within.

Like a hunted fawn, at the end of a barrel—
the resonant scream in your room
at the foot of your bed
when you know you're sleeping alone—

A glance of a face in the darkness behind you
taunting, just out of full view,
a reflection you see that isn't your own
when you're walking alone in the night to your home.

Then just as quickly as the visitor comes,
he slips back out from under my door,
waiting for night, for dusk to fall,
when he can crawl under the velvet with me
once more.



Kasper Owen

PARALLEL LINES

In hindsight, Julian should have expected this. The only thing predictable about Monroe was their consistently terrible decisions.

The nature of their relationship had been made clear from the beginning. Even so, Monroe always found ways to muddy the lines and the clear boundaries between them, frying and tangling them in a brilliant blaze of heat and complexity. At work, they were at each other's throats over cases at the PI firm. In moments like this, they were something else entirely. It wasn't love, not in the slightest. It was just something to clear the head, a moment of what if we just got it out of our system...or at least it would've been, except for the fact that getting it out of our system was a process that, for Julian and Monroe, lasted several months. So here they were, two sad excuses for human beings masquerading as functional adults, rolling each other's joints on what was a typical Saturday night for them as they approached one another with what could almost be viewed as hesitance.

"Calm down...I'm not gonna bite your hand off." Monroe's tone of voice devolved into a scowl, a habit Julian recognized that they tended to lean on whenever they were anxious. But they were right; it was foolish to be hesitant. Julian and Monroe were just coworkers. And it wasn't like Monroe was even conventionally attractive enough to be nervous over in the first place. They had red hair and a peculiar-looking face that was sharp, tired, and perpetually scowling. But the way the moonlight hit their face on some occasions tended to make them look almost beautiful. The two were in the living room of Monroe's Los Angeles apartment engaging in the weekly habit of trying to keep their minds off of misery. Sometimes it would lead to sleeping on the couch with the TV still on in the morning. Other times it would lead to something a little more...invigorating. Either way there was a strange peace Julian found in those times, though he tried to convince himself it was all for convenience.

At once, Julian could hear the sound of Monroe's fingers snapping. "Hey. Spacey. Need a drink or something?"

Pausing for a moment, Julian let himself fall back into the old but familiar habit of scathing insults and biting comments characteristic of his and Monroe's friendship. "I hardly have any need for your cheap alcohol."

"Fussy." Monroe bit back as they lit their joint, adoration dancing in their eyes. Scathing remarks between them were good. Scathing was easy. What Julian was about to discuss was not. Monroe tilted their head as they commented, "You've been avoiding me lately and I don't like that shit. If it's something we can work out, shoot it my way, but if you're trying to get me to fuck off, I won't. I can't."

Steadying himself, Julian lit his own joint as he explained, "We both knew this was coming. Monroe, I'm under the impression that you're far more invested in...whatever this is...than I am."

A wounded softness clouded the dark brown eyes of Monroe's otherwise neutral expression. A wheezy laugh escaped them after taking a puff and coughing out the smoke. "Well with the shit you do, why wouldn't I be invested...? Come on, you're not fooling anyone, Jules. You think shower sex is just something friends do?"

"We went into this agreement as friends with benefi-!"

"You and your fuckin' labels!" Monroe snapped as they flicked their lighter open and closed. It made Julian flinch for a moment as he watched Monroe continue, "You kissed me behind a dive bar, shithead! How the hell else am I supposed to take that!?"

"If you got invested, that was your own fault." They both knew that was a lie.

"It's not about that, Jules!" Monroe dropped their lighter as their hands trembled. "It's about the fact that you can't even word it like a normal person! You have to word it like you're sending out an HR memo! God, it's pathetic...!"

"You really don't change huh...years go by and you're still the same prick."

Neither Julian or Monroe seemed to be able to break through the oppressive wall of tension that stood between them. Julian should have planned for this, the complication of things meant to be simple, which touched all of his relationships eventually. Usually he could break things off with a cold detachment if need be. After all you don't get far in the forensic profession by being kind-hearted and empathetic. But Monroe was a different case.

Despite being what Julian could only assume was a charity hire, they outclassed him in every way. In contrast to Julian's gleaming Penn State master's degree in forensic pathology, Monroe was a street punk, scrounged up from the worst parts of skid row, taken onto the team primarily for their prior experience with the criminal underworld. And yet they were still better than him, still smarter, more intuitive, and there were times Julian couldn't tell if that aching feeling in his chest was because he wanted Monroe for himself or wanted to be them. It was intoxicating, the way things were. All their problems at work could be vented out through meaningless sex and getting high on each other's couches, the stench of bourbon and cannabis still lingering in the aftermath of pent up frustration. But they were at a crossroads now, and Julian had to make a choice.

"Jules...are you gonna talk to me at least? You're puffing on shit I paid for, you know, the least you could do is say something you actually mean." Monroe's

voice was withdrawn and shaky.

“When we met, I told you I wasn’t your therapist and that I wasn’t your boyfriend. I still continue to be neither of those things.” Julian adjusted his glasses, watching Monroe pour a drink for themselves and then shake it lightly.

“You really don’t change huh...years go by and you’re still the same prick.” Monroe’s voice was bitter. “Not like I was expecting you to change or some shit, but aren’t you a little too old for this?”

“Too old for what?”

“To be such a fucking coward! Just because you can’t decide what you want doesn’t make that someone else’s baggage to deal with!”

Monroe was certainly one to talk. When they had met, it was Julian’s brutal disregard for others that they had claimed they liked. But now the mask was off, and they were starting to see what Julian was long before he even wanted to admit it. It pissed him off, how Monroe always tended to know what he wanted and who he was before he did, how they were always able to get under his skin. At first, when the two had met, Julian had found them annoying. Now however, he found their ability to read the worst parts of him like a book downright insufferable. He couldn’t confront all of that, not tonight.

“I’m leaving...” Julian scowled, putting out his joint as he got up from the table and began walking towards the door. While the moonlight had a tendency to make things blurry, he knew the outline of this apartment well enough to know exactly where the door was, not bothering to look back at Monroe as he headed for the exit.

“Have it your way then.” Monroe’s voice wavered slightly even as they glowered, panic building up within it as they continued. “Are we still on next Saturday, Jules?”

Pausing for a moment, Julian did something idiotic for once and let whatever response came naturally flow out of him. “I’m not sure.” As he closed the door behind him, Julian stood there for a moment, hearing the soft click of Monroe’s door lock.

The Table is set
The feast is limned
By the light of a candle,
And in the dim
Brightness of the room
In rococo décor,
We wait for him
In grim allure.

And what has night
To do with sleep?
The bundles of lightning
But scare the sheep
Around the star
We gather for gain
Why try to serve
When it is better to reign?

But one chair is empty
And this we fear,
For if we are not together
When he draws near,
We will have let him down;
Our lord, our prince
Of darkness will not be
Forgiving, in this instance.

An hour passes,
And then one more.
Two chairs are empty
One lifts from the floor.
The candles go out
And send us all into a chill.
I don’t think he is coming;
I don’t think he ever will.

Ethan Bostic

AWAITING DESTRUCTION

In the junkyard, I lie and rust.
While some burn to ashes,
Others collect dust.
In my spot I lie and wait
To be brought upon my gruesome fate
As we are crushed for the rancid crime
Of living long past our prime.
Now I fear as fate grows near,
And anguished screams are all I hear.
Soon I see his angry glare
As the crane lifts me into the air.
In my last moments, I only wish
That my owner had not been so foolish.

Ariel Schwarzkopf-Hamilton

RITA PATCHES: CYBORG POSSUM





Jubu Djanx. That's the handle that I picked up, or, perhaps, that picked me, during my stay in New Folsom Prison. I had arrived on A-yard at the maximum security, or Level 4, institution after nearly a decade of time as a detainee in California's Department of State Hospitals.

Jubu Djanx. It's got quite an alliterative ring, don't it? Most of my fellow inmates were taken off guard when I stopped going by "Pussycat" since that name reflected my easy-going nature during most of my time at the prison.

I remember Feeble, one of the inmates I was marginally acquainted with, quipping, "I hear Jubu means born on a Monday in some West African tongue." Although I knew it was short for Jewish Buddhist, the ethnic and religious identities I embraced during my time in prison, Feeble's fictive and jocular translation stuck. I did, after all, adopt Jubu Djanx as my nickname following a Mother's Day Monday when I had attacked a former cellmate for referring to some of the female staff at the prison as "bitches" and "hos." I didn't hit Rezen, whom I considered one of my nearest acquaintances, with a solid punch. Still, on the heels of the attack, my hundred-and-fifty-pound frame was literally lifted off its feet by one of the heftier correctional officers and forcibly taken to solitary confinement, or administrative segregation in official speak, where I spent three months.

Today, for reasons that will eventually become clear, the name "Jubu" is just another layer to the mess that is my life, a life I am trying to recover from the throes of madness.

The "Djanx" part of the name is and isn't more mysterious than "Jubu" and conjures up either something out of a voodoo ritual or a jazz riff gone sideways. At first, my fellow prisoners couldn't, or wouldn't, properly pronounce it. "What was that? Jubu James?" they would ask, squinty-eyed, or pronouncing the last word inquisitively and in a higher pitch. "Is that some kind of take on Jesse James? Are you trying to pass your Jewish-Italian self for some kind of cowboy or something?"

I'd hear from others curious declarations like "Did you say Jubu Change?" or "Was that Jubu Jinks? You sho' as fuck need to change, Pussycat. Shit, Jinks sums up your luck and predicament, man. You've gotta be cursed to end up at New Folsom after studyin' to be a doctor at Berkeley." And it was true. Fifteen years earlier I had gone as far as writing a manuscript of a doctoral dissertation on the uses of communications theory and technology during the Cold War. Had I been given the opportunity to defend it before a committee of UC Berkeley professors I was on good terms with, the defense, along with the solidly written argument, would've earned me a doctorate. Today I'd be Professor Panasitti and possibly earning six figures teaching in some exalted institution of higher learning—a vocational path many of my friends in graduate school have gone on to tread. That would certainly have beat earning eleven cents an hour serv-

ing meals to, scrubbing showers for, and mopping day room floors after prisoners in a concrete and steel institution devoted to carceral confinement.

So, in 2016, I wasn't Doctor Panasitti lecturing to a bevy of fawning students or having drinks with fellow academics in a faculty club. I wasn't even an ironic "Doc" to my fellow inmates. I had become Jubu Djanx, one of approximately 2,500 felonious prisoners at New Folsom. I was an inmate whose nickname was regarded as a curiosity and sometimes with mockery. Maybe there's a cosmic joke in the moniker, a prophecy hidden in the layers of its three poetic syllables, so metrically similar to those of Jesus Christ. Jubu meant Jewish-Buddhist to me but was "born on a Monday," according to Feeble, the Monday I attacked Rezen for his lack of chivalry. That Monday should've heralded a beginning, but for me, since well before the time I adopted Jubu Djanx not only as a name, but as an identity, it was more like every day felt like a perpetually mad Monday—unsettling, endless, monotonous, and sometimes drenched in the shocking neon colors of psychosis or the gray hues of regret. And although "Djanx" was phonetically similar to "Change," I had been lost to delusions and bizarre habits of thought for so long that I thought rehabilitative transformation wasn't even an option.

Although "James" and "Jinx" were also phonetically close, the fact is "Djanx" was my take on the Black vernacular term "janky," which in more collegiate terms means shoddy, disheveled, or unkempt. I would later find out by means of an online slang dictionary that it also meant "broken"—which to a great extent also described me and still describes me to this day. Djanx, an enigma that follows me like a shadow. Although some folks misinterpreted it as a corruption of the word "change," at New Folsom, surrounded as I so often was by concrete, steel, and silence as well as supervision and judgment, wellbeing felt like a distant dream. Perhaps the fact that the name suggested itself to my churning neurons is a nod to the unpredictable dance of fate, to a rhythm that only gods or devils can truly understand.

Since being released from my commitment to forensic hospitalization and psychiatric imprisonment in 2018, I've spent sleepless nights tracing the contours of those syllables with my tongue, wondering if the essence of who I am is locked within them. Jubu Djanx, a name that's become a shackle, a reminder of choices that have led me to a despairing and unforgiving corner of existence. It echoes in the quiet moments, a haunting melody that accompanies misgivings and the ghost of an institutional past that refuses to stay buried. So, I sit here now, a man defined by a name that holds more weight than the sum of its linguistic parts, wondering if Jubu and Djanx are my true companions or the demons that pushed me to the edge of an abyss.



Lennon Snipes

THE MIND PRISON

Most of the time I sit in the drawing room and listen to the news and the banter. Sometimes people will want to chime in with their own views. That's okay. Just let them try to raise their voices over all the hollering and yapping on the television. They won't hear nothing. But it sure would be nice for them to put something else on for a change. Like a movie or a documentary or even a soap opera. There's more truth in those than in all the talk shows. But what do I know about the truth anyways? I see cats walking down the hallways. Cats and dogs.

God, it would be nice if they had a library here, except they think we're too stupid to be able to read. Well, I'm not. When I'm free, the first thing I'll do is find books. I am going to relearn whatever knowledge they took away from me. That's right. They zap our brains with those pills and the lightning machines, and you end up losing thoughts, ideas, names, words, places. And it's all intentional—completely done on purpose, in the name of science, in the hopes that you'll forget about magic and ghosts and angels and maybe even God himself.

They win sometimes. Not always, but often.

One morning I thought I heard two men arguing. Most of the time I sleep in (if they'll allow it) and the TV in the background serves as a gradual alarm. The volume had been turned down so that they could better talk together. The next thing I noticed was a blackbird sitting on the nightstand. The voices seemed to startle him, so he flew away into the outside. There were other people who had been awakened by the voices. Slowly, with caution, we all made our way to the sitting room where the two men were. Sort of funny. We all formed a circle around them. Some of us stole a chair or sat our butts on the ground while a few of us remained standing. You must understand that it was not a normal occurrence for the night guard to still be here, let alone be talking to one of us.

"Why are you even here?" asked the man in white. "Where's the nurses?"

"I already said," the guard responded. "They ain't coming in until later."

"Well, I'd rather be in their grasp than in debate with your dumb ass."

"You can watch the news or you can leave."

"Leave? Leave where?"

"Go to your bed."

"But I can still hear it from there."

"Do you want earmuffs?"

"No, I want you to turn this off!"

The night guard reached over to the remote and turned the sound all the way up so that a lot of us had to cover our ears just to hear it right. But we heard it loud and clear. Bad things were happening in the world. Wars, sicknesses, fires, chaos. A lot of crazy things must have been happening all at once. You get to thinking it's all real, and the fear fills you up so quick that you start sweating under your arms and legs and hair and forehead, and that's the first sign

of trouble. After that, you start getting angry at people—even at your friends who lent you a cigarette the other day—because they might turn on you any moment. And sometimes they do, and you feel like you're burning with rage because of it. That's when things get bad. Very bad.

It's times like that when you need to remember God. That's what I do at least. I remember that justice is going to come. If not by us, then by God. We just wish he would act quicker.

The man in white suddenly leapt for the remote, which was still in the guard's hands. They wrestled and the old guard struggled against the patient while we all cheered for the man in white because he belonged to us. At last, he got ahold of the controller and sent it flying into the television screen. Here was a big man, a man with strength. We were all astounded at what we saw. The TV had a big hole through it. The remote had gone straight through.

"Fool," the guard said. "They'll do you in for that."

"Is there anyone here who saw this happen?" the man asked all of us.

"No!" we all shouted in return.

"Good," said the man in white. "So, Mister Watchman, it seems that you're the one who is going to be done in."

"They won't take any of you seriously. You're all mental."

"Of course we're mental. We've been drugged and poisoned and lied to. They took my name away, and I can't even remember it. They took away our families and our lives. All because we knew too much."

"You don't know what you're talking about," the old guard said.

"Yes I do. None of it is real. Those wars aren't real wars. If you start thinking about them, and you've got a whole other war going on in your own mind, you realize it's not so bad out there. But you can get tricked into believing it is, and then you go crazy and they lock you up in a place like this. That's why we're here, stuck with you."

"Yes, I agree with the last part," said the guard.

"No matter, because we've had enough. We want out, and you're not going to stop us. Everyone, now!"

Amazingly, we all jumped at the guard. Even I did. We were all acting as one. Everything the mad man said had resonated with us. It was not any crazier out there than in here. It only is if you think it is.

The guard gave a cry of shock, and his chair fell backwards. After we had gotten hold of his keys, we made for the front gate. There were a lot of people in the place, and looking back, I was astonished to see them all running outdoors, finally free. At first, it seemed like hundreds, but then it seemed like thousands. Could it be millions? Someone said seven billion. That was hard to believe at first, but it does sound about right.

Everyone was free. The world became a massive garden. In the cities, there were skyscrapers with vines hanging down from every window, and monkeys were swinging on them. The sky turned golden, and so did the waters. I saw mountains get up and move. Now, after all this time, we could see the beauty the world had to offer.

Later on, while I was taking an evening walk (maybe morning, it is hard to tell), I came across a great tree with fruit all about it. As I got closer, I saw the man in white, the man who had freed us. He had a long bushy moustache and shaggy brown hair. He did not look to be mean or daunting in appearance, so I went to talk with him. My voice was weak and unused to speaking after all the time alone in the asylum. Still, the words were able to come out just as easily as before.

“Thank you—”

“Thank yourself,” he replied.

“Thank you for helping us.”

“I didn’t really do much. It was really a group effort.”

“Will things ever go back to the way they were?” I asked.

“Only if you let them,” he said, “Of course, things are still bad from time to time. But you’re beyond them now. So cheer up.”

And the thought came to me that I might still be trapped in a cell, that maybe I had imagined all this in my head. Maybe reality would set in, and nothing would have been changed. But even then, I knew that was false. I was changed, even if none of this had really happened. It all became very clear.

I woke up in my bed. The TV was still there, and it was blasting all sorts of horrible things at whoever would listen. No matter. I wasn’t afraid anymore. I went over to find the remote, and I changed the channel. There were so many different ones to choose from. The best part was that nobody seemed to care. Not even the nurses. Not even the old night guard.

I had a strong feeling that things were going to get better. And now they are. They finally released me. I can still see the mountains walking on jagged legs, and the stars spinning bright and clear.



Arleny Peña
HUMANITY

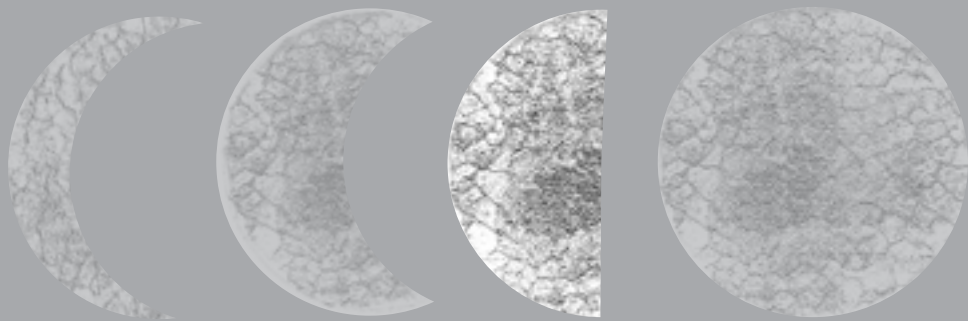
too entrenched in the covert shackles of hedonistic culture
your watchful eyes gaze unfazed
as sharp razor wires preside over our gentle waters
and enclose the dreams of hopeful beings.
in pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness:
they reigned through the scorching heat,
with blisters on their feet,
and no knowledge of the speech
to ensure the prosperity of their sons and daughters.
yet, on unfamiliar shores, their lives seep into the waters
and become a nameless number.

your watchful eyes gaze unfazed as bullets blaze through halls.
bloody red smears the walls,
and screams petrify the air.
the lives of our angels,
frozen in time, their future comes undone.
tearful wails consume our fathers and mothers
as they cradle the remnants of their young.
but thoughts and prayers consume your chambers
as you cradle your monstrous greed.

your watchful eyes gaze unfazed as brutality blossoms with each cry for death.
weapons of mass destruction rule the sky,
and piles of bodies preside over the land.
where once the trees danced,
and the birds sang the beautiful tune of the world,
wails of grief now echo through the air
and fill our world with inhumanity.

begs of mercy fill the world.
yet, indifferent to despair, you twirl





William Stanley

UNREACHABLE

“You have to go to school, Will. Please. I really, really need you to.”
“...”

I am eleven. I’m looking up at my mom—salty, biting tears crawling down my face. The kind of tears that silence your wails and disable every joint in your body. Where maybe, when you feel you should let out your loudest, angriest scream, biology takes over and you’re suddenly resolved to inert silence. I’m sitting, slouched over the living room’s matted carpet in my house on Baneberry. A deep darkness is taking form in the corner of the house that I’m occupying, only diluted by the meek warmth of the inlet lights in the dining room. Every muscle in my small body lets go. My shoulders slump, my legs sprawl out underneath me like the foundation of a collapsed building, and my hands lie limp in my lap and on my knees.

Across the room, my mother’s frame acts as a foil to mine. A rigid exasperation creeks from every limb in her hunched body. An overwhelming stiffness has taken hold of her, as if at any small infliction, she might utterly shatter. Her head is pulled down to her chest, and a deep, forlorn scowl has gripped her face. Her hands shift to push off of the arms of the chair, and as she begins to stand, an incredible heaviness moves with her. As she walks, the darkness of our corner of the house is towed steadily towards the dining room until she stops at a table covered with about a foot of papers over its entire surface area. Her left hand reaches to pick up a brown bicycle helmet with paper cones taped onto the sides to look like horns. The helmet sends a crackling shiver down my spine, making my eyes dart towards the carpet and away from her and the helmet.

My head sputters, and working to distract myself from the visual scene, my attention is pulled towards the sounds that blanket me. A soft murmur finds its way out of the TV in the family room, a low hum signals that the heater is on, and a persistent chirp enters the house from crickets outside. It’s sometime in May or June. My sisters are either out of the house or upstairs in their rooms, and as my mom sits back down in the chair in front of me, the ambient sound begins to be drowned out by a dull white noise and the ramping thud of my heart.

She leans forward. “William. There is no reason for you to stay home tomorrow. You haven’t been in over a week. All you have to do is go and have fun, and to be with your friends, and to play. You do not have to be afraid—and I so desperately wish that I could take away your fear.” She lifts up the helmet. “And dress up! It’s not scary, Will.”

“...”

She shifts in the seat towards me. “I want to help you Will, I don’t want to be fighting you. We don’t need to fight. I know that it’s really hard, but I want you to help me understand why it’s so hard, because you should be having fun. It doesn’t have to be difficult.” Her body inches itself so close to the edge of the

chair that she’s just about to fall off.

“...”

“Will?”

“...”

“Okay.” She leans back into the chair and puts her hand over her mouth, her eyes wide and staring blankly towards the front door. “I just don’t know what to do.”

My mouth quivers. I want to know what words to say—but my mind pulses and thrashes and leaves my body to fend for itself. I want to look up, but my eyes are forcefully glued to the ground beneath—utterly cemented away from what’s ahead of me. I want to not be like this, but no matter how bad I want to be one of those kids running on the blacktop, dressed up because we learned about Vikings this year, a part of me says that I can’t. Maybe that part started small, but it has grown so overwhelmingly powerful and decisive that I can hardly breathe. I missed the lesson where we learned about Vikings. I missed the lesson where we learned about variables. I missed David’s birthday party. I missed trick or treating with Jacob. I missed it all. They know that I don’t belong and I know it, too. Because it’s true: I do not belong on the blacktop, laughing and playing with the horned bicycle helmet on. I keep my eyes locked on the carpet, and let myself fall deeper into somewhere unreachable.

I am fifteen. The sun set around twenty minutes ago, and Connor and I are walking along Cabot Road, our faces occasionally brightened by flashing headlights, but otherwise resting in the warm glow of the yellow-tinted streetlights.

Though I was initially listening to music, the headphones in my ears now sit silent after reaching the end of my playlist. The textured sound of our shoes on the ground and the subtle hum of the 5 Freeway echo in the silence between Connor and me. My hands start to fidget with my pants.

“What’s up?” I push through my dry throat.

Connor curls his top lip and collects his thoughts. “Oh—umm. . . I wanted to tell you that I chose you for our next group project in English. We were supposed to partner up with somebody.” Connor’s eyes look down at the ground.

I search for words. “Oh, really?”

“Yeah, it’s really stupid actually because Mrs. Price kinda gave me shit about it too. She said I was ‘enabling’ you. What does that even mean?”

“Yeah.” My eyes look away from Connor and towards the thin wall of trees that covers the railroad tracks to our left. “That’s crazy.”

“Why aren’t you—” Connor inhales sharply and turns his head towards the sky. Without even looking, I can feel how tense he is, the normal fifteen-year-old exuberance replaced with something colder and heavier. He lets out his breath. “Why haven’t you been at school? I know it’s like a personal question and I don’t mean to get in your business, but... I don’t know. I feel like I should ask. We’re worried about you.” He looks over at me as we keep walking. My eyes pull back to my feet and on the cracks in the sidewalk.

“Yeah um. I don’t know.” He tries to give me time. My heart lurches to my throat.

“It’s been a couple months now hasn’t it?”

“Yeah, it has. Things have been hard lately, I guess. I don’t really know what to say.” A drop of blood begins to seep from where I’m biting my lower lip, and my hands turn from picking at each other to clenching in my pockets.

“Okay.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay.”

I am fourteen. I arrive at consciousness ungratefully. My room is dark, but spots of light come from the power buttons on my computer and monitor. I instantly feel queasy and turn my back to the lights and towards my wall and window. There is a sliver of light creeping through the blinds, which prompts me to convince myself that it’s moonlight or streetlights, or anything other than the sun. But I know deep down what it is. It’s morning, highlighted by the cool purples and oranges of a winter sunrise. My whole body shakes, my blood pressure spikes, my palms begin to sweat. I can’t do it. I can’t feel their eyes on me, I can’t do it anymore. I curl myself into a ball, the feeling within my stomach completely immobilizing me. It’s too powerful for me to stand. It’s too powerful for me to leave the house. I have to stay right here.

I am sixteen. My back arches towards the simmering concrete under the bench I’m sitting on. My mom drove away a couple minutes ago, but I still have some time before my appointment starts. I brush my faded blue hair out of my face and pull out my phone, noting the 1:26 on the lockscreen. Behind me, there’s a three-story building with small offices and numbered doors. Its interior smells like dry paint and old carpet, and it’s been absolutely dead empty every time I’ve been inside. For the last three weeks, every Thursday at 1:30 p.m., I’ve walked up the stairs to the second floor and opened door 211. With a bead of sweat forming on my forehead and a shake in my knee growing, I walk through every step in my head, repeating the number 211, 211, 211. I take my notebook and flip to what I’ve written in the last week. In the form of bullet points, drawings, and paragraphs, I’ve created a script for everything I’ll talk about in the next hour. I rehearse the order that I’ll bring everything up, how I’ll transition from point to point, where I’ll ask for advice, etc.

I check my phone and it’s 1:29. Scrambling to grab my journal and close it, I wipe my forehead and wrap around to the front of the building. With a full-body pull of the awkwardly heavy glass door, I pace towards the stairs and up to the second floor. But with every step, my hands shake a little more; my lungs begin to get heavier. I try to get through it, to walk it off; there’s no reason to feel this way for my fourth appointment. Maybe the first or second, but not the fourth. Still, my mouth gets dryer and my fingers stab harder into my palms. By the time I reach the room across from the bathrooms, Room 211, I want so badly to open the door, but as I stand in front of it, my body doesn’t listen. In a struggle, I drop my head against the wall to the right of the door. What’s the point of trying when it doesn’t get better? There’s nowhere to go. The harder I look, the more

reasons there are to run; the more reasons there are to stop looking. I open my phone and start a message to ask my mom to come back.

“William?”

I turn around to see a familiar face with squared glasses and shoulder-length dark hair exiting the bathroom. She takes out a pair of keys and walks past me to unlock the door.

As she opened the door and gestured me inside, she said, “My bad. It was locked. How are you doing?”

I am four. White noise is formed by water splashing on dishes in the sink, and I’m walking into the family room. A figure is to my mom’s left. His voice silences the house, and in the space it creates, erupts from every wall, corner, and room. There is no hiding from it. His face twists and pulls itself into a sharp hook led by his nose, making his skin tight over his cheeks with deep creases in his brow. His gray-blue eyes, though filled with rage, are just like mine. My heart is beating faster than I’ve ever felt it, and my hands shake with helplessness as I stumble towards them. With tears now pouring from my eyes, I’m yelling, grappling for control, but I’m no longer looking at him. My eyes are cemented on my mother, whose tears are splashing onto the dishes in the sink, her face contorted, in pain, and afraid. She has headphones in on max volume. The figure to her left is screaming and trying to knock her over, doing anything he can to make her flinch or break, but she doesn’t look to her right. I stand there immobile, and what forever etched itself in me is her eyes, steady set and powerfully unmoving, staring at the dishes underneath her. Why can’t she make it stop?

That next morning, I go to school and they want me to go to an activity where we use scissors. All of my friends and surroundings leave but I stay rooted to the floor, playing with building blocks. They try to come to me and get me to move, but I am recessed and unreachable. They ask me what is wrong. My eyes do not move from the ground in front of me: You cannot touch me.

I am eighteen. The last two years I’ve learned a lot about why I feel the way I do. Moments where the breath leaves my lungs and control becomes impossible come less often. And when they do, I know that it’s not about what’s in front of me; it’s not about school, Connor, therapy appointments, or the rising sun. It’s about that four year old struggling for control. I can’t always give them that control, but that doesn’t mean I have to run away.

I’m sitting at the front of seven small rows of students. We’re all wearing a black polyester cap and gown, with clothes underneath ranging from dress pants and a button-up to cargo shorts and a T-shirt. I can’t wipe a smile off my face, but my hands are shifting over my bouncing left knee in anticipation for the next part of the ceremony. Right now, the principal of our small charter school is in front of the central podium. She’s thanking the handful of staff across the aisle from me and transitioning to her last words.

“And now, for our final student speaker, William Stanley!”

I find my way up to the podium, attempt to swallow the dry spit in my

mouth, rub my lips with my index and middle finger, and begin speaking. With the crowd's eyes on me, I find myself near the end of my speech: "... a sense of pride that that fourth grader sitting behind a wall of superfluous busy work never thought they'd have. One that I didn't think I'd have even a year ago. It's with a heavy heart I say goodbye to a place that taught me to give myself things I thought I'd never have. But I'm here, and I am proud."

As I walk down from the stage, I look at the audience: my sisters are crying, my dad's blue-gray eyes are bright with joy, his mother is crying, and my mom and her mother are crying. I find myself at my seat, my breath slightly shaky. Pride pushes against my fear like lungs into stiff ribs. My sides begin to ache, and deep down, a four year old yearns for their eyes to be covered, yearns for somewhere dark where they don't have to be seen, but nevertheless, I look forward.

I am eighteen, a slightly older eighteen than last time. I start walking towards the stairs, around fifteen minutes before the reading starts. The sun is teetering on setting, and the campus is about as quiet as I've ever heard it, with soft caws from crows in the distance meeting the meandering wisp of the wind through the trees. The vacant lot meets an equally vacant sidewalk. As I turn onto the stairs and into the BGS building, my eyes wander the walls incautiously. Looking down at the book in my right hand, the cover depicts a dragonfly, emitting yellow from its core, bursting out of a thick bubbling substance, almost like tar. The emboldened word in the upper-right corner reads "WALL."

After exiting into the quad, I pass a group of people heading the opposite direction as me, and I recognize none of them. For the first time in my life, I'm on a campus with thousands of kids and I'm not met with scorned looks or concerned, backhanded questions.

The once soft caws grow in volume and in number, and I begin to see crows land on the edges of buildings. Through the area in between the Gateway Building and the Health Sciences building, I turn in to view Lot 13. A sea of crows blanket the sky. Moving like a single, lucid being, they pulse and flex over a baby blue backdrop. A small scattering of people begin to grow outside the building, and as I step inside, my eyes survey the room. Two students talk. Families and professors are huddled around each other. Unfazed, unbothered, ready to hear stories from people who are quite a bit like me, I walk into the auditorium calmly. My heart begins to steady; the white noise fades; my gaze shifts, and all of a sudden, I'm reachable.

in another life, i think i could have loved you
if not for these shackles; the ties that bind
and so instead i am lost in that which she cannot find
broken promises, resolutions for change, all of them lay dying
drowning in a pool of stagnant morning dew
do you ever get sick of lying?

if i were a better person, i think i might have loved you
if not for my self-preserving, egocentric nature
a nature so unlike your own; always a damsel-in-distress
you never let the wound heal, forever opening your scabs anew
to be in agony and suffering, is that what you prefer?
you are caged in a prison of your own making, but i digress.

if we were kinder people, i think we could have loved each other
but you are pigheaded and i am no longer naive
you take your glass and drink the wine; you know it to be poisoned
i am something you regretted, but it is far too late to combat that bitter taste,
you expect me to partake in a foolish decadence that is laced
i am a stand-in doll, marble carved bust of everything you hate about yourself
because i'm still willing to save myself.



My pace increased with each footstep as I pulled up the sleeve of my black shirt ever so slightly on my left arm. Two minutes until seven, I noticed, looking at my watch. I hit the automatic door button, tapping the heel of my black clog as the doors took their time opening. Once a wide enough gap emerged, I veered around the corner and made a sharp left into the breakout room. Everybody was already geared up with stethoscopes, pens, report sheets in hand. I clocked in, stuck my bags in my locker, and sat down on the arm of the couch with just enough time for a deep exhale. Bernie, the charge nurse, began her overview of the patients we would be serving today during our shift in the Neuro-Surgical Intensive Care Unit, an eleven-bed block that sees brain, spine, trauma, and surgical patients of all kinds. Luckily, we were only dealing with adults. Kids would be a totally different story, one I don't know if I could've handled.

"We have our usual craniotomies in beds two and five, a ventric in bed seven, two sepsis patients in one and three, an arctic sun patient in room nine, and a unique toxic shock syndrome case many of you might have already heard about if you worked yesterday," Bernie summarized.

We quirked our collective heads in confusion. Bernie continued, "An eighteen-year-old female who has been diagnosed with TSS has been transferred here from UCLA Medical Center after the doctors were forced to amputate both her arms from the elbow down."

The sighs of sadness spread through the air. My eyes did not leave Bernie as she turned to look at me, knowing my rare gift that could potentially help her.

"Kathryn, I'll assign her to you," she said as I nodded back, knowing the agreement. "We can work with the doctors to give you enough time to hopefully heal her." I nodded again.

It was a gift, but a curse. Some nurses valued my ability to tap into the minds of the patients, getting their consent to bring forth the healing they desired and needed, and go about producing miracles unheard of by many. Others bullied me for it, thinking it was strange and supernatural, but no matter what we had a pact to keep this within our unit. We didn't want this to become a big hype with news anchors and media out following me. If somebody was meant to be healed, they would find their way to the unit.

"Why don't you heal all of our patients, Kathryn, so we don't have to work today?" one of the jealous nurses sneered.

"You know the answer, Tara," I remarked with a smile. "Not everybody truly wants to be healed, remember? Therefore, I can't help them if they don't want me to."

I walked out onto the floor. An empty chair waited for me adjacent to the night shift nurse. After greeting one another, Lauren began providing me a past medical history for Karla Peterson of healthy, vital signs that were finally stabilizing while she remained intubated and sedated with a Levophed drip hanging

to keep her blood pressure normalized, the numerous rounds of antibiotics to kill the bacterial infection that's caused all of this, and a family history that's a bit disorderly.

"The mom is trying to find herself after thirty years of marriage," Lauren said. "She left the dad to live in Bali once the kids got old enough. She's been there for six months. Patient's brother is two and a half years older than her."

I quickly made bullet points on my report sheet to remember the details:

Mom – Bali – 6 months – Finding self

Dad – here, alone – possibly bitter?

Brother – 2.5 years older

After a few additional comments about inputs and outputs, I initiated our next steps. "Well, should we go in and see her?"

"Yep." We both got up from our chairs, papers folded into fours and neatly placed in our pockets, as Lauren and I donned the yellow paper gowns and blue gloves to isolate us from the infection.

*"I'm simply the channel to allow
a greater power to heal
Karla with her permission."*

As I slid the glass door open, the artificial hum from the ventilator entered my ears. Parted on the right side, Karla's long, straight blonde locks ended right around the top of the pocket of the blue diamond-patterned gown. Being too perfectly manicured, she looked more like a Skills Lab mannequin than an actual ICU patient. I confirmed everything Lauren said was accurate: the drip rates of the Propofol and Levophed, the previous antibiotics that were empty and still hanging, the locations of her IVs, the stumps where her forearms had been. Turning her to the opposite side, I confirmed her skin remained in good condition and that we were doing our best to prevent bed sores.

Then I did my own mental assessment. I pulled up a chair to sit next to the patient, grabbed hold of her hand or arm in this case, and closed my eyes to feel the type of vibrations coming through. It's through these waves that I can speak to the patient's subconscious mind to determine the route they want to take. Karla's energy felt jagged and intense. Fear consumed her. I had to get her to a place of calmness before anything could happen.

"What did you feel?" Lauren asked me.

"She's really scared," I commented, "but she's responsive."

Lauren was one of the ones who believed in me and witnessed a few of the previous miracles that took place within this unit. One was the bringing back of a 52-year-old patient after they'd left their body. I still heard the words shouted

to them from another nurse during CPR as they began to transition, "Get back in there!!!" I still think she must have seen their soul exiting and that was right about the same time the patient and I telepathically communicated about how willpower would keep them alive. Their desire to live brought them back into their form.

An hour and a half later, I rounded with the medical team consisting of the intensivist, respiratory therapist, infectious disease doctor, and Bernie to review the patient's case. Everybody looked at me in the end to determine what I needed to perform my specialized task.

"I need time and peace and quiet," I mentioned.

The respiratory therapist chimed in, "There isn't much I can do about the ventilator sounds. Will that still be okay with you? I mean it is keeping her alive."

I smirked. "Yes, that's fine. I'll try to tune that out."

"Is her family here?" Bernie asked me.

"The dad and brother are in the waiting room. The mom is on a flight back from Bali."

"Are they in favor of what you're trying to do?" the intensivist questioned.

"The dad isn't. He thinks I'm doing some kind of witchcraft. Similar to the stuff the mom is into. But at least the mom's on board and so is the brother." I confirmed with the team that I'd talk to the dad in a bit because I had to have the family in agreement since their good thoughts would assist with the process.

I walked into the waiting room after lunch and greeted Karla's dad with a handshake.

Ignoring my respectful gesture, he blurted, "I don't mind if you're her nurse, but I don't want you doing any of that magical 'healing' of yours my son is telling me about."

"Mr. Peterson, I understand your concern," I stated calmly, "but I can sense how much fear Karla is in and I want to see if we can reverse what happened. Bring her arms back with her permission."

"It's witchcraft, what you're doing!" he shouted. "You're just like my wife with your potions and oils and stuff."

"I assure you this is very scientifically driven and healing of a higher realm." Going into further details about the process, I added, "One not known to this physical plane, but used in more advanced worlds."

The tension in Mr. Peterson's eyebrows softened as he began to understand and be receptive. "You promise it won't hurt her?" His empathy now showed on his sleeve.

"I'm simply the channel to allow a greater power to heal Karla with her permission, but I need you on board to shower her with love and support."

Mr. Peterson finally gave his agreement with a single nod. I could tell he'd do anything to protect his daughter and was thankful he accepted my unique invitation to help her further. I mentioned that it was best if the family sent their good thoughts from a different room so they didn't interrupt the transmissions of signals from the patient and myself.

Making my way back to the unit, I could feel my confidence slipping. The

WALKING THROUGH TIME

bullies must have sensed this, for Tara and her sidekick rounded the corner. The humerus of Tara's shoulder hit mine as she snarked, "Showoff. You just want everybody to think you're something special with your magical healing hands, but you're not." With Tara's head cocked backwards, her laughter lingered as she trailed off in the opposite direction.

Around three o'clock when the unit was a bit quieter, I took my place once again seated next to Karla. This time unafraid of the infection, I pulled my left glove off and molded it to the patient's left shoulder. I could feel the pulsing of Karla's heart as I second guessed my talent. "You can do this," I told myself. "Don't worry about those bullies. They don't understand." In pace with Karla's heartbeat, I repeated a mantra meant for me as much as for her, each phrase uttered out loud with greater and greater intensity: "Never give up...remember. Never give up. Never give up. Nevvveerr give up." Then, in a quiet whisper, speaking for both of us, I added, "You have to believe in yourself first and foremost if this is going to work."

I removed my clogs so I could sit Indian style with a straight spine. I laid my other hand palm upwards on the juncture of my thigh and abdomen. Closing my eyes, I lifted my gaze to the center of my forehead where I could visualize the stumps on both ends of her arms. I threaded my energy through Karla's up to her brain, traveling through her nervous system to reach her while bypassing the sedation of the Propofol. We greeted each other as light. No words exchanged except the subtle vibration of feelings.

Working through each layer delicately to smooth out her fearful vibrations, I felt a release in her upper arm muscles. This was when the collaboration could begin. Not with myself and the patient, but between the Greater Power and the patient with myself acting as a channel.

Receiving permission from this Greater Power to perform the healing, I telepathically requested consent from the patient to grow her arms back. Bernie and the doctors were intensely watching behind the glass slider in amazement over the miracle that was occurring before their eyes. Tara and the other ones who had previously bullied me dropped their gaze in disappointment for ever second guessing this process. With Karla's vibration responding with deep waves of gratitude, I felt as each cell regenerated to form tendons, muscles, bones, vessels, skin and nails into the shape of her hands.



Aidan Hunt
MARCH TO SUMMER

first breath of the New Year
the air hasn't changed,
these lips i'm pressed against
are one and the same.

long to make the moments
to make the world rhyme,
yet i'm ready to wait again
for it to come on Valentine's.

we March forward through,
curse this spell we're under,
to hope to pray to yearn
to break when it's summer.

stumble with each step
faith begins to lack,
but we would be a Fool
with promise, to turn back.

dwindling the days
the stasis' end is near,
May the next be the start
of our minds seeing clear.

dreary is the sky
the setting of a tomb,
sunken in the fog
and promise be the Gloom.

Mark Van Houten
JOSIE'S DILEMMA

Josie's chapped fingers knew the exquisitely smooth feel of Ms. Anderson's silk bed sheets. For the moment, however, she relished the sensuous delight of the sheets caressing her smooth, naked back and rump. She languished in Ms. Anderson's bed and gazed through Ms. Anderson's bedroom window long enough to lose herself in the emblazoned red and golden hues that glorified the setting sun.

Josie mused, "If only I could bottle this glorious feeling and bring it home with me." But then she squelched the impulse, doubting its possibility and re-focused. Ms. Anderson will be returnin' from her vacation soon. Best to tidy up the place before she arrives to inspect her apartment.

Josie squared the bed sheet corners and dusted the window sill just to be sure Ms. Anderson did not suspect anything untoward. Just then, she was blinded by a kaleidoscope of sparkling radiance, emanating from a small, crystalline glass cup that sat on the night table next to the window. Its cut edges, scored in geometric configurations, transformed the setting sun's brilliant aura into a dazzling montage. Josie persuaded herself that the radiance came not through Ms. Anderson's window alone but rather, as Josie believed, from a hidden luster within.

What would I give to bring this feeling home?

Josie found it harder to walk away empty-handed than to abscond with the small crystalline glass and risk exposure as a thief—even though her livelihood depended upon Ms. Anderson's good will. Impulsively, she placed the crystalline glass deep in her bag of cleaning materials and locked the door behind her.

The redline tram shook its passengers sharply as it wended its way across town and deposited them amongst gray, faceless apartment buildings looking like cheese graters scored with a lattice grid of darkened windows. Noxious exhaust fumes made her nose itch as she plodded through waves of raucous strangers. Whatever sun was left was hidden behind the buildings.

Josie flipped on the fluorescent lights of her tiny apartment. She removed the crystalline glass from her bag and placed it on her bedroom window sill. To her delight, the crystalline edges of the cup transformed the coarse fluorescent light into a mosaic of colorful sparkles and radiant facets—as would a cut diamond.

Josie went to bed but kept the lights on all night.

Iman H. Moujtahed
TURN ME ON





Meet at midnight
Scrawled like a ransom note
It grasps my secretly marked throat
Claws my ribcage
Ignites my marrow
Pierces blood-deep
Like a poison arrow

Crops shrivel smaller
Each long day
But still I cannot
Keep away

We fuse when red skies
Exhaust to black
When all that's left
Is a lone haystack

The last coneflower
Tucked aside my ear
We sigh our goodbyes
Unfetter our last tear

We don't break rules
We stay sequestered
We'd rather not leave Earth
Dismembered

Amber Franklin

BLUE SUEDE SHOES

“Those are awfully nice boots—for a dead man.”

Tae shook his head. “It’s bad luck to take another man’s shoes.”

“Worse luck to let good boots go to waste. He’s not using them; I doubt he’d mind.” John pointed. “Look at that face.” The man’s corpse was several weeks old. The edges of his mouth had been eaten away by insects and his lips had curled back, shriveled by sun. His teeth jutted out through chunks of leftover flesh, trapping him in a permanent smile. “A happy guy like that, he’d probably give ‘em to me if he still could.”

Tae sighed, exasperated. “Take the damn boots. I don’t care. Don’t bitch when someone steals them off your feet.”

John laughed, dismounted his horse, and ambled over to better examine the dead man’s hiking boots. They were an unusual blue suede material, which was what had caught John’s eye in the first place. They’d reminded him of an Elvis song his sister had liked. Tae explained once that the song belonged to Carl Perkins. Which it did, but neither of them really cared. Dark green paracord laced them just above the dead man’s ankles. John rolled up the sleeve of his flannel, exposing the soft of his forearm. He lifted it in comparison to the sole of his new shoe. Good fit.

“I don’t intend on dying anytime soon.” Carefully, John unlaced them and stepped back to look for other items worth pillaging, his brown eyes those of a practiced vulture.

“I’m guessing neither did he.” Tae was growing bored of the heat and the pit of his stomach had begun to gnaw at him. Indulging his brother’s scavenger whims felt exceptionally draining in the wake of a long day’s ride.

“You’re a real downer, you know.” John bent to put on his new boots, picking up a pebble which he tossed towards Tae’s shaggy head.

“I’m just looking out.” Tae shrugged. “People shootin’ at you tend to miss and hit me.”

“Oh, you love bringing that up.” John smiled. “It happened once. You’re such a drama queen. It barely counts as getting shot.”

Tae lifted the hem of his dirty undershirt, flashing the left side of his abdomen. He gestured to an ugly gray scar on the cusp of fading. It was too far to the side to have possibly hit anything of importance, more akin to getting grazed. Six months back, John took a liking to a horse that wasn’t his: the same Paint he was riding now. People don’t like it when you take what’s theirs. John chuckled playfully at the memory. Drama queen.

He climbed back up on his horse. “Let’s go home and get you something to eat.” He tossed another pebble at his brother’s dusty Yankees cap. “You’re not you when you’re hungry.”

There was a time when they would have twisted their smiles and knelt to pay their respects. There was a time when neither of them had seen a dead body

at all. But that was quite a long time ago. And they’d buried enough people to know the dead don’t stop and wait to be respected. Decay doesn’t tend to take things personal.

Three months after John’s 21st birthday, power shortages started plaguing the world’s major cities. Entire continents were then left in the dark. Things progressively got worse, the collapse of technology leaving social depravity unchecked. Neither brother was aware of the “how” or the “why” behind Man’s descent into shadow. In the beginning they must have cared enough to be curious. Spending time spinning outlandish conspiracies: deep state, aliens, Elon throwing a tantrum. But then their little sister was stabbed, left to die in a school parking lot. And they later came home to find their mother hanging from the ceiling. After that, curiosity felt like a childish luxury. Things were as they are. We adapt or we die. That was two years ago. Lots of people had died since then.

Colorado summers had always been brutal. Unrelenting heat and heavy sun made the asphalt street they rode down wobble in the distance. Back when cars worked, they’d driven down this highway hundreds of times. Tae would queue Beatles albums or let his brother slip in the occasional Led Zeppelin, and John would break 100 scream-singing with the windows down. Now, the two men rode mostly in silence diligently listening for things to be afraid of.

Tae was a broad man. He had stubborn shoulders and a sturdy frame. He looked like he was made to weather sandstorms while John looked like wind itself. He was never still. Even before. He was wispy and beautiful, a colt standing side by side with an ox. They were both well over six feet tall. Both had deeply brown eyes that had belonged to their mother. Occasionally, Tae slipped into a similar sadness, which made it hard for John to look at him.

“You need a haircut, my friend.” John had been staring at the back of Tae’s head for half an hour as they bobbed up and down on their horses. He concluded it was upsettingly long.

“You need to learn when to shut your big mouth.” The knot of hunger at the pit of Tae’s stomach was already agitation enough.

“I could do it for you. Put a bowl on your head. Make mom proud.”

Tae gave a half-smile at the memory. “Threatening.”

“And a bath,” John added. “You’re looking old.”

“That’s it. We’re stopping in town to get something to eat before I run you over with your stolen horse.”

“Daniels isn’t stolen!” John reached forward and rubbed the side of her honey blonde face. “Don’t listen to the grumpy old man, sweet girl.”

About a quarter mile later, they stopped in what must have been a diner. When the power went out, almost all the watering holes evaporated with it. With no electricity, no gas to start a stove, people had abandoned the notion of diners altogether. The fact that this one was open meant it doubled by providing other unsavory services. Typically, Tae wanted to avoid these types of establishments. It reminded him of the saloons and whorehouses they’d seen in movies growing up. Cowboys coming together to drink or shoot at each other. But he

was hungry and tired, and John was effectively pushing his buttons. They were still maybe two hours from home, which felt unbearably far.

Tae went to tie the horses somewhere they wouldn't get snagged, and John went inside to see if they even sold food. A bell chimed as he walked through the door, a small high-pitched ding alerting a cook and the two people at the counter of his existence. The place was haggard and worn down, with a thin layer of grime that made everything feel sticky. Heat bounced off the windows and made the air taste thick. John nodded to the man behind the counter and sat on a red vinyl stool. He attempted to swivel; the stuffy air made him fidgety. The stool screeched, reluctant with rust. Three seats away, the other two patrons gave him a withering look. John smirked, continuing to screech until the rust relented.

The bell chimed again. Tae walked in, nodded, and took a seat next to his brother. "Y'all got anything worth eating?" He folded his hands out in front of him on the yellowing countertop. John drummed his fingers on the counter's edge. A colt sitting next to an ox. Wind making friends with the weathered.

The two patrons and the man behind the counter stared at them silently. The man sitting closest to them had a pinched face. His sun-bleached hair was thinning in an unfortunate pattern. He reminded Tae of his high school chemistry teacher, Mr. Shaltz. He reminded John of a Gringotts goblin. The man's companion looked to be the same age as Tae. He was far heavier and far larger than his pinched-faced friend. They looked the brothers up and down and started muttering something amongst themselves.

Tae repeated his question, a thing he hated having to do. The three men continued their whispering.

"Hey jackass." John pointed a finger at the balding man and his big friend. "It's bad manners ignorin' my brother like that. I know you're not deaf, so what dumb hick bullshit are you two mumbling about that you can't hear when someone's talkin' to you."

Tae exhaled heavily out of his nose. He was hungry and didn't have the energy to clean up after his little brother's brazenness. "What did I say about learning when to shut up?"

The two strangers stood and took new stools till they sandwiched the young men. "My son was admiring your boots." The old man's voice was harsh and metallic, like he had been swallowing pennies before they'd gotten there. His son stared down at the blue suede and dark green paracord. In a voice just as flat as his father's, he said, "They're very... unique. Where'd you get them?"

The air in the diner was suffocating, making John irritable. He stood. He was much taller than the old man but still felt cornered. Accused.

"They're new," Tae interjected. He stayed sitting, hoping to deescalate long enough to get a sandwich or an old can of soup.

"Funny. Pretty worn in to be new." The old man rested his hand on his hip, exposing the black butt of a holstered pistol. His son did the same. The man behind the counter disappeared somewhere in the back. Now all four were standing.

John suddenly felt very still. "They're new to me." He made a similar movement towards his hip. Tae followed suit.

"Kacey's got a pair just like them. Isn't that right?" The pinched man's son posed it like a question, but his eyes never left John's, and his hand stayed steady on his gun.

"Where'd you get the shoes, kid?" The old man's mouth was a straight line. His blue eyes were glassy, like fog at sea. Eyes that promised shipwreck.

"Found them." John's face was flat. His hands were quiet.

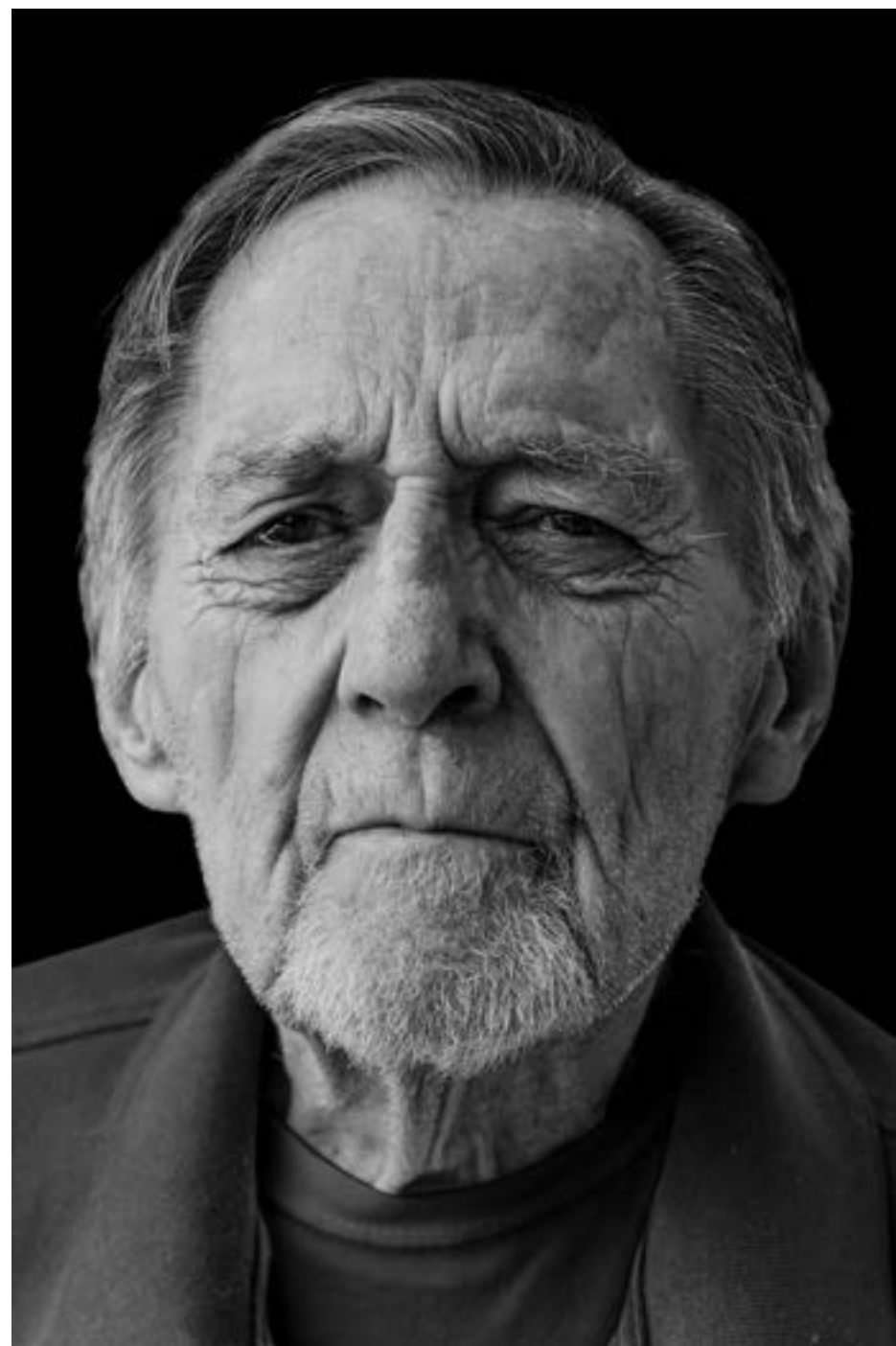
"Liar."

Everything happened very suddenly. The old man's hand twitched. He pulled his gun and Tae shoved John to the floor. A deafening hum rattled around John's head. His brother hit the ground hard. Tae's Yankees cap tumbled under a booth. His shaggy hair crumpled around his face. His sturdy shoulders went lax. The back of his skull was missing, shot point blank. But John didn't see the pieces of his brother spread on the ground beside him. He was instead staring at the dead man's hiking boots and the green cord lacing them to his own feet.

"I didn't," he stuttered. John couldn't think straight. The hum in his ears turned to a nauseating ring. His voice was small and kept catching in his throat. "I didn't kill anyone. I didn't do anything."

The old man now towered above him. "You shouldn't take what doesn't belong to you."





Tori Terence

MY DADDY CALLS ME DARLING

My daddy calls me darling
When he answers the phone
When he asks how I've been
And can we go to lunch?
 Across the table, he'll tell me the same stories
 And update me on his dog, Charmie.
 His dog's name is Ona.
 Charmie was a cat that died before I was born.

My daddy calls me chica
When he drives me home
When he forgets the way to my house
And can we just let him think for a minute?
 He'll get snappy when I ask him to turn his blinker on
 And wonder why his Shelby is driving so slow.
 He's behind the wheel of a Toyota Tacoma.
 We had to sell the Shelby when he could no longer drive stick.

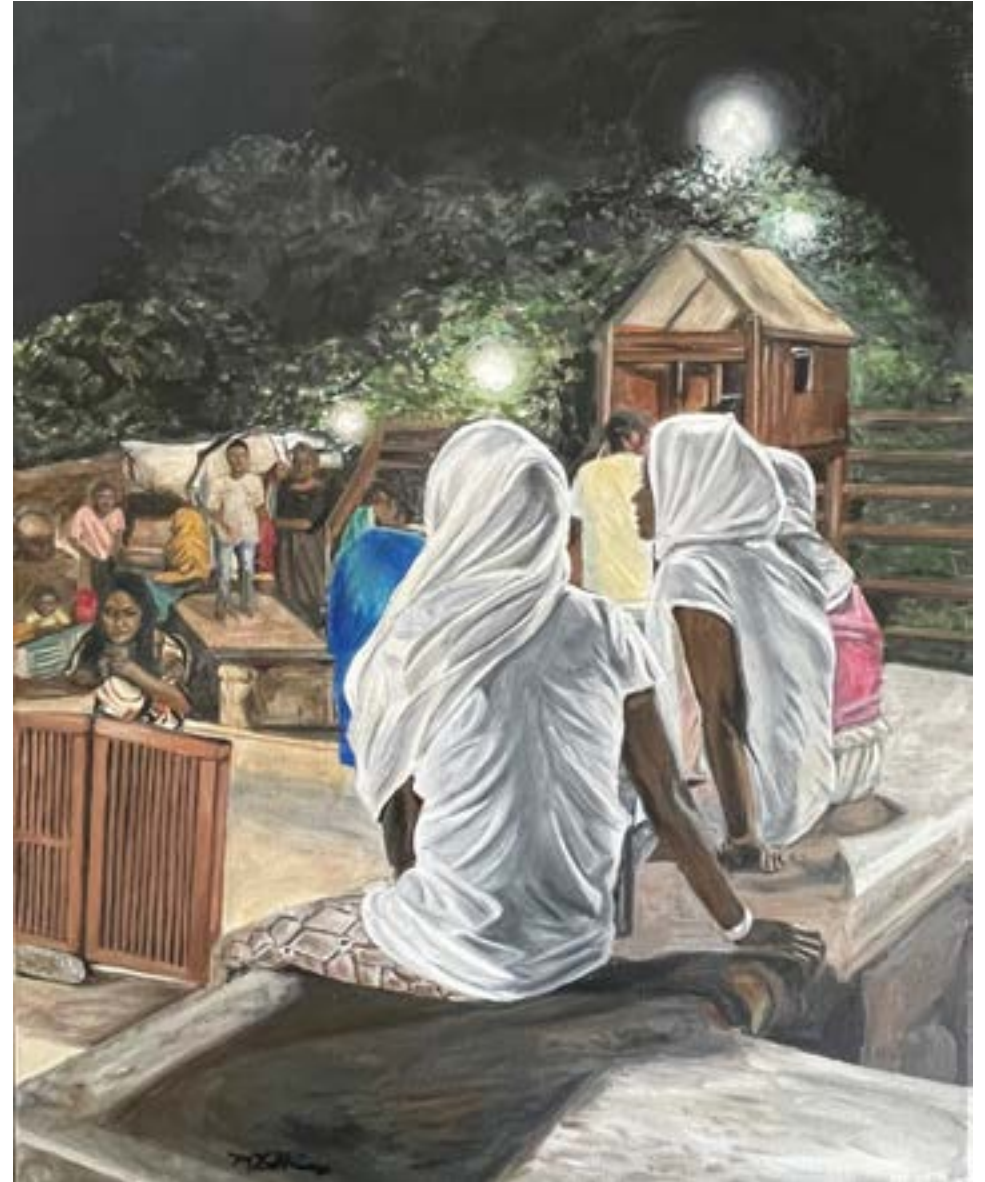
Worst of all, my daddy calls me girl
When I ask him to lower his voice
When I remind him to take his pills
 When he says he loves me.
When my daddy calls me girl, it's hard for me to remember too.
The way he yells at strangers
The way his left foot limps
 The way he says he's proud of me.
When my daddy calls me girl, I worry
About the time we have left
 About his safety
 About mine.

I'm afraid that my daddy calls me girl because I'm the only one left in his life.
I'm afraid that my daddy calls me chica because he can't translate it into English.
I'm afraid that my daddy calls me darling because he doesn't know my name.

Hannah Fawcett
SQUIGGLE VASE



Michelle LeMieux
ZANZIBAR NIGHT MARKET





Lately, I have been reflecting on a prediction a teacher made in college more than 25 years ago: “Karla, the world will know you by your words.” I took it as a sign that one of my purposes in this life is to convey a written or verbal message. I have always considered myself a good communicator. I certainly enjoy sharing stories—my head is constantly filled with them. Strangers will tell me about their joys or sorrows as if to inspire me to write. I have loved writing and reading since I was a child living in Mexico. In my home, the only books were textbooks and an encyclopedia that my mom bought in installments. I never had books of my own until I entered college.

In my childhood, books were a luxury, rent and food a priority. My childhood home in Baja, California was on the street Josefa Ortiz de Dominguez. I lived there with my mom and siblings until I was twelve years old. Apparently, our home was in much better condition than my grandmother’s. Our home leaked water as if we were in the middle of a monsoon and not in the comfort of a dry bedroom. In the night, the rhythms of water dripping into buckets woke us up to empty them. I remember a few kids from middle school wanting to see the house that overflowed at night during a very rainy season. Beds became floating rafts and the room turned into an ocean, waiting for the storm to pass.

Even if the house was remodeled, damages that could not be easily repaired were left behind in the heart of a child. The owner of the Josefa Ortiz house did not care about fixing it. When I was a teenager, my mom went to court to fight for the right to not pay an increase in rent while, despite the conditions, we continued living in that house. We were given a year and then we relocated to many other homes that were always much better than the one of my childhood.

So many feelings are attached to a home—even the dilapidated ones like the one on Josefa Ortiz. I remember crying when we moved out. That house had many good memories of us playing with our friends in the neighborhood and walking to our elementary school, which was a few blocks away. It is strange how a house can hold such sentimental value and at the same time possess terrible stories to which no resident should be subjected.

Even the smallest apartments in which I have lived in the United States would not compare to the neglectful home of my childhood on Josefa Ortiz Street. And yet however bad our house was, it was much better than my grandmother’s.

My grandmother’s house resembled a shack rather than a home. No matter how clean she kept it, the house needed so many repairs that it was falling apart. It was a booby trap! You never knew when you would get intense electric shocks while washing your hands, running the shower, or flushing the toilet.

You might wonder why my grandmother, Mami, lived in such a run-down home. After all, before she died, she could have moved to live with me in California, moved to live with my sister, my mom, or my uncle. We definitely were

all living in better conditions than she was. Mami never wanted to relocate when she was offered the chance to move out. I remember telling her to come live with us temporarily, at least for the time permitted by her visa. She talked to me about her being used to that house and how her fate was connected to it. She apparently held a very convoluted belief that somehow she was doing penance by living there.

Finally, my grandmother did relocate in 2011—when she died. I believe her permanent home now is a heavenly place, or at least I want to believe in redemption. As for me, I continue renting and considering purchasing a place my son can call home one day. For countless years home has certainly been where my heart has been.

As an adult, I have lived in gorgeous neighborhoods in California. Always in small apartments, never in a home. Still, the amenities are something that, as a child, I never dreamt existed. Most importantly, these complexes have always been surrounded by so much nature and so many libraries. At times, I cannot believe that, as a child, I, along with millions of children, did not have the privileges that many other kids, including my son, now have living in secure neighborhoods.

Memories do not fade away just because we no longer visit the house on Josefa Ortiz. Reflecting on the houses of my childhood makes me think of *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros. Like the main character of her book, Esperanza, I always wanted a home of my own. For many, owning property is a dream that comes true. For others, it's a dream that stays forever in their minds or floats in space.

When I was eighteen years old, someone called me “soñadora,” a dreamer, because I was always working towards my life goals. Perhaps it is true. I am one big soñadora because I dream of the day opportunity is given to me and many others, regardless of our nationality or accent. I definitely dream that all the rejection letters turn into possibilities that embrace the dreamers by their talents, ethics, and efforts made through a lifetime.

Twenty-four years ago, as life required me to work in whatever was available, I never dared to pursue a career in writing or publish a book as many had suggested. The fact is that English was not my first language. I started learning it when I married and relocated to the United States. I only spoke Spanish and learned English on my own—with no private tutor, no dual immersion school, just a few months of ESL classes, a few community college classes, tons of reading. When I spoke English, it was mostly with an accent.

Sometimes, I wonder why some people want to reaffirm that I am not from around here. They are from California; therefore, I must be from someplace else. I do not recall one human being asking me about the intriguing facts or the natural beauty of my country, Mexico. They judge me for what I look and sound like rather than what I have to say. A few times, they have yelled “Go back to your country” or “Go back to where you came from.” I think it is ignorant to tell a person whose ancestors' land is the foundation of the United States to go back to their country. I know Baja and Alta both were one Peninsula of México

until the war of 1846, in which the United States and its pioneers seized the Alta California territory along with Texas, Arizona, Wyoming, Colorado, and New Mexico. The land they claim to be theirs and only for them was never rightfully theirs in the first place. But these harsh stereotypes don't stop in America; they resonate all throughout the world. If you come from Mexico, you are met with judgment, obstacles, and infinite red tape, making it practically impossible to become an American citizen. All these imaginary lines dictate the way we are stereotyped and judged.

In America, everyone has a different story and a different dream. Walking up and down the steps of Strand Beach in Dana Point reminds me of my days as a college student in Tijuana. For my last year of college, I walked through the very solitary and impoverished streets of Colonia Castillo and 2nd street to get to the steeply sloping stairs that took me to my university at the top of the hill. A different story from my walks in Dana Point. At the Strand steps, my walking is for relaxing, meditation, and exercise. I have freedom of mind, freedom of choice, and a sense of security. Whereas in Tijuana, walking up similar steps, I felt nervous, anxious, and stressed out. I had to pass by drug addicts whose eyes were empty and hopeless, reminding me of what I didn't ever want to be. They were seated on the stairs I climbed daily to get to my classes. In my walk to college in Tijuana, I saw myself in all these people and their tragic stories, struggling and suffering.

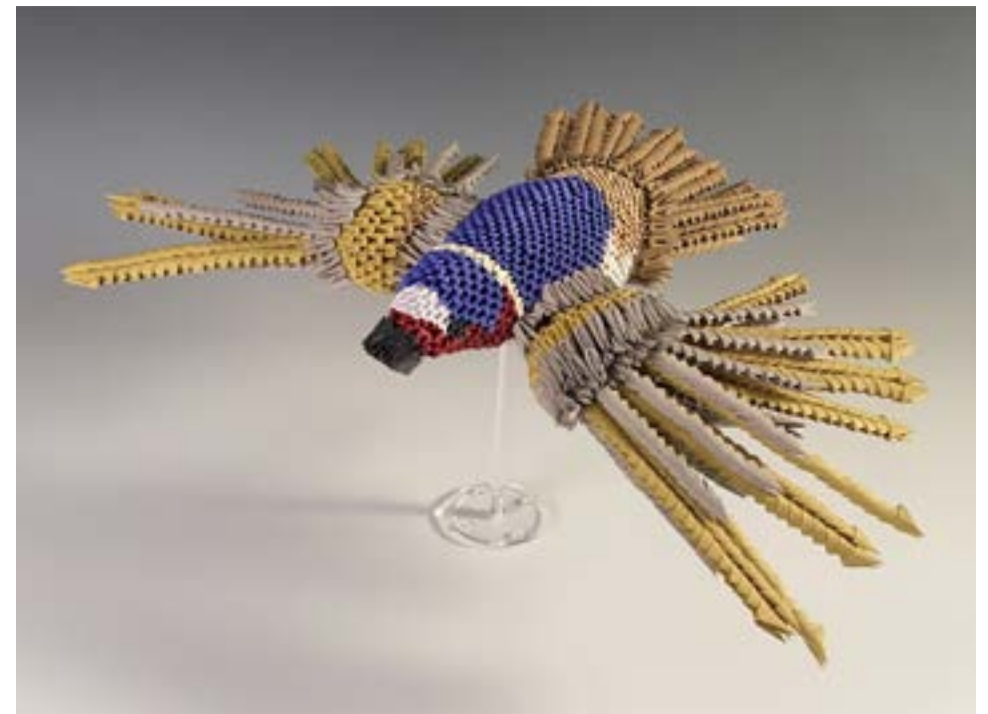
In a conversation with my psychologist long ago, he mentioned that due to my upbringing as lower-middle class, I was destined for two paths, either ending up as a low life or a drug addict, not a college graduate. I was in shock; his affirmations of other people's destinies were rattling and not what I had in mind for myself. Although I have not made an abundance of money through my professional career in the past 25 years, I feel that in many ways, I have changed my destiny. My B.A. and master's degree in education prepared me for my life as a home educator, activist, and seeker of truth. I did not know back then that I would be dedicated to my son's elementary, middle, and high school education. I know now that my career prepared me to educate my only son. He will be the first generation of my family in Mexico to attend an American college. The first in my family to grow up bilingual and proficient in two more languages. The son for whom I paused my career has given me many stories to tell.

┌
*“I am one big soñadora because
I dream of the day opportunity is given
to me and many others, regardless of our
nationality or accent.”*
└

When I graduated from college in 1997 with my bachelor's degree, at 21 years old, I was working in Ensenada B.C. as a public relations and admissions advisor for a small college. For two years, I was in charge of developing press releases, articles regarding events such as graduations. In general, I was in charge of written and verbal contact between the college and the local media.

Afterward, I relocated from Ensenada to Missouri without knowing one word of English. I had the opportunity to translate a few articles for the Springfield newspaper. Then I just dedicated my life to learning English on my own, to working, and to raising a child. While raising my son, I created a few blogs in which I wrote both in English and Spanish. At the time, I did not know anything about making a blog viral or being of interest to an audience, but I wrote for the love of writing my emotions.

One of my biggest dreams is, of course, to alter the destiny of my family and own a home—not only by being financially stable but also by leaving a legacy that goes beyond how much I have or have not made. Even though I do not make a living from writing and have never been published, nor am I a renowned author, I certainly have not given up on my dream of writing. With my words, it is my intention to create consciousness on issues we don't often talk about. Nothing will distract me from achieving these dreams. Yes, I am a soñadora.



Michael Finley

PAPER FEATHERS

John was having a very bad day. A traffic accident had made him late to work, the new hire had spilled hot coffee on his suit, his lunch had been stolen again, and the client he had spent months buttering up decided to sign with a different company. John stepped into the parking structure's elevator and nearly punched the button for the top floor. He leaned against the back wall, lamenting his choice to go into marketing as a career. At first, he had thought that it was a promising field with endless possibilities. After all, there was always a product or group that needed to get their name out there. John's hopes of a fulfilling career were crushed by the incompetence of company leadership, who were more than happy to pawn off work onto their already overworked juniors. On a normal day, John would grit his teeth through whatever projects management slid onto his desk, but miserable days like today seemed to have become more frequent recently.

On rough days like this, John would watch the sunset from the top of the parking structure alone before going home to drown his sorrows in a bottle of cheap liquor. With a ding from the elevator, the doors opened to the top floor. As John exited the elevator, he expected his scarlet-tinted realm of respite to be empty, as it had been many times before. Instead he saw a woman in a plain cream dress folding paper birds. There were eleven birds around her, and John paused to watch her diligently fold a scrap of newspaper into another sibling for the small flock. He sighed at the realization that his bad day tradition would not go as planned and clicked the key on his car. As his car's doors unlocked, the woman's head shot up to determine the sound and its source.

"Sorry, I was just headed out," John stated sheepishly as he walked to his car. "Didn't mean to scare you." The woman did not reply to his words. She simply watched as John took off his suit coat and threw it and his briefcase into the backseat of his car. Without a second thought, John drove off, annoyed that his routine coping mechanism had been so easily thwarted. The next morning he was shocked to see the woman in the same spot, still folding paper birds. The flock had grown in size, and in the morning light John could see that they were made of all types of papers.

"Hey," John began as he got out of his car, "have you been here all night?" The woman looked at him with pastel green eyes framed in alabaster skin and nodded. "Did you get cold or...?" His voice trailed off, realizing what time it was. He had no time for further inquiries, as he had to rush off to avoid being tardy for a second day. As he did so, he made a mental note to check if this odd woman was still there at his lunch break. Surely enough, as the elevator doors opened, there she was—still folding paper birds in the same spot as before.

"Mind if I sit up here to eat my lunch?" he asked, finding himself feeling like he needed her approval to simply coexist here at the top of the parking structure. The woman looked up from her work to nod before ignoring John's pres-

ence as he sat down a few feet from her. As he ate his meager meal, he observed the woman more closely. Her hands and arms were covered in small cuts, creating the illusion of long lace gloves. She lacked the characteristic oily skin and stained clothes John had come to associate with the homeless of the city. As he observed the woman as she flowingly folded birds together, he soon found himself unconsciously mimicking her movements with the wax paper that had covered his turkey sandwich. His folds lacked the grace that familiarity elicits and his bird ended up as a deformed mess. Failing this, he looked to the birds surrounding his silent companion. They were mostly newspapers, dotted with the occasional napkin or advertisement.

"Would you like some better paper?" John asked without thinking. The woman looked up from a half-completed bird and tilted her head slightly in confusion. "I can get you some copy paper if you don't mind some coffee stains on some of them." The woman nodded and gave John a small smile. "Oh, okay. I'll be back later with some paper then." He couldn't help but leave feeling slightly excited. It was easy to gather up papers, since his company had a habit of using a lot of paper as some remnant of the older generation's refusal to go digital. When John returned to the woman, his arms were full to bursting with papers. He saw the odd woman let out a silent giggle as she watched him struggle to not drop the bundles.

"Told you I could get some copy paper," John said as he set the papers down, careful not to crush any of the paper birds that sat around the woman. "I didn't know how much you needed, so I just brought as much as I could without getting yelled at." The woman simply gave another small smile in response. John sat down, exhausted after dragging up so many papers in addition to his briefcase. He leaned back against the wall and closed his eyes as he looked up, only to be shocked back to reality by an odd poking feeling on his cheek. Opening his eyes, he saw the woman holding out a freshly folded paper bird for him, an expectant look in her pastel eyes. A circular coffee stain gave it an outline around where its eyes would be. He delicately took the bird and nodded in thanks. The woman smiled, brighter than the small grins that she had gifted him before.

"I'm glad you like your new papers," John explained, taking a single sheet from the stack. "Mind if I try to make one?" The woman nodded happily and shifted to let John see the folding process she used. After he made a couple of mistakes, John's paper bird was complete. Unlike the woman's pristine creations, John's was rough and misshapen. "Whoops, I guess I'm not cut out for this kinda thing," he chuckled, trying to laugh off his obvious failure. The woman gave him a firm look and put his bird amongst her flock as if to refute his dismissal of the small creation before giving John another piece of paper. "Uh okay, I'll try again." And so the two continued to fold paper birds until the sunset had given way to the darkness of night. As John bid the silent woman farewell, he realized that he was smiling.

For months, John met with the odd woman every day to fold birds. At lunch, he would bring her food to share, and they would stay long into the night folding birds after he got off work. He soon found himself opening up while the woman

would joyfully listen and offer her silent opinions. At first, her lack of vocalization led to awkwardness, but John quickly began to pick up on the woman's unique method of communication. Within a month, the two could hold a full conversation without one side uttering a single word. As time continued on, the flock of paper birds grew from a small group into an immovable army. John had no idea if there was a purpose or end goal to folding so many paper birds, yet did not care. To him, the hours spent with his silent companion had become a place where he could be himself, not another suit-wearing corporate grunt.

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“As time continued on, the flock of paper birds grew from a small group into an immovable army.”
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One weekend morning, John awoke in fright to the sound of thunder crackling. He rolled over in his bed and turned on the television, only to be met with an emergency weather report. A category 5 hurricane had seemingly come out of nowhere and was hitting the city. John's sleep-addled mind took a minute to process the information and allow horror to set in. He sprung out of bed and rushed to his car, hoping that the woman had moved to some sort of shelter. He weaved through fallen light poles and around flooded streets, the entire time praying to himself for his friend's safety. By the time he reached the familiar parking structure and drove up to the top floor, the storm had elevated to deafening volumes.

He saw the woman, his beloved confidante, standing and looking up towards the swirling skies. John tried to shove the car door open, but the storm latched the door shut. Swallowing once, John flung his weight against the door and found himself sprawled on the ground in a quickly vanishing pile of things he had left in his car. He slipped and slid as he tried to stand, yet the woman stood seemingly unimpeded by the winds that whipped around. The paper birds that the two had made sat stalwart against the winds, as if held by some divine hand.

John tried to shout, but the noise was ripped from his lungs and swept into the tempest. He began to inch closer towards her as the winds threatened to fling him from the building and into the abyss. He refused to give up on her though, even when a satellite dish nearly struck him as it flew by.

When he eventually reached close to her and outstretched his hand, the woman finally noticed his presence. Her expression was serene, a look John had

seen many times when the two would make birds together. She did not take his hand, even when he tried to shout for her to take it. She simply gave John a small smile, one he knew was reserved for farewells.

As if in response, the paper birds were released from their stasis and erupted in a spiral. John had to cover his face to avoid getting sliced from the flock, yet this made him lose focus on his footing and he was tackled backwards by the wuthering winds. He rolled and bounced across the ground until he slammed against a stone pillar. He felt it in his back first—before his head whipped back against the stone.

When John awoke, all was quiet. His back felt broken and pain shot through his head. He struggled to move, yet by some inhuman will he forced himself to his feet. The storm was over, with rays of sunlight peeking through the overcast skies. He could hear sirens in the distance below him, but he did not care. John slowly looked around, not daring to move from his position out of fear of the pain getting to him. The odd silent woman and her flock of paper birds were gone. The emptiness of the space she had taken up hurt John more than any broken bone or head injury. He stumbled forward, hoping to see her safely hidden in some corner, but to no avail.

John fell to his knees, his consciousness rapidly fading, his body wracked with pain and his mind reeling from shock. As his eyes began to weigh heavier and heavier, John noticed a small white spot in his vision. With the last of his strength, he pulled himself forward to the spot. There on the ground was a single paper bird, seemingly unharmed by the hurricane. It had an outline around where its eyes would be from a circular coffee stain. As his consciousness finally faded, John softly took the paper bird in his hands and let tears flow for the first time that he could remember in a long long time.

Moriah Saylor
MURAL OF CLAY

Dusted earth wet with dew,
Woven among the stone,
Awakes the hidden hue,
Sleeping sepia tone.

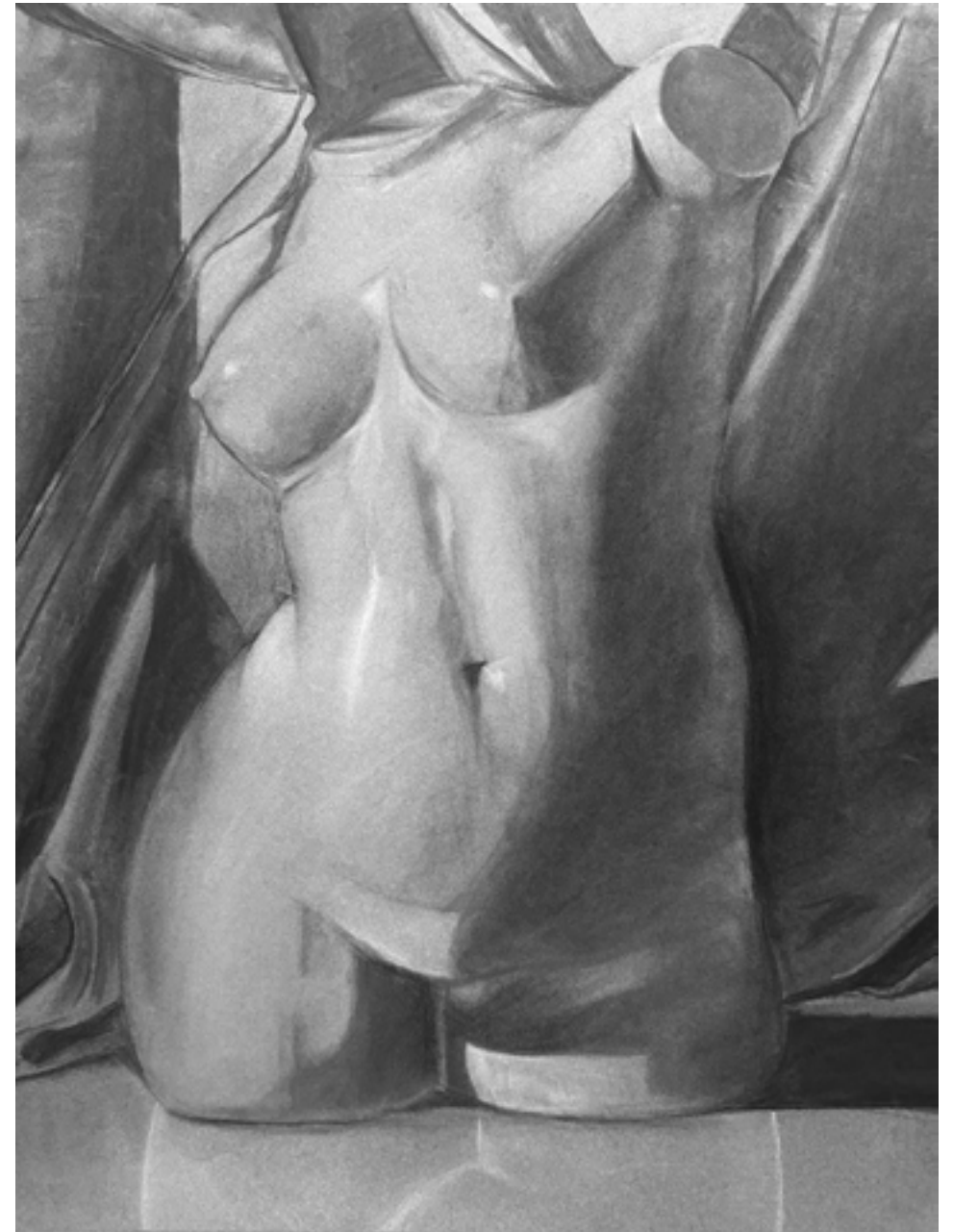
Swirls of wind, ash, and chalk
Charred meeting in the sky,
Shattered sienna rock
Adds colors to his dye.

The miner's hands burrow,
Like a fox builds a den,
Smearing on muted clothes,
Exhumes back in again.

Actor without a line
Waiting silent canvas;
The flecked clay into wine
Quells the naked bareness.

Eyes shut in drifting dance,
The blushes come alive.
Though subdued yet enhanced,
Modesty still survives.

Geraldine Achenbach
BUST



Maya Toma
HER

I killed the first girl I loved.
And I'm glad that she's dead.
I pushed her deep underneath
until she shrank into an aching echo,
a ripple of who she once was.
I kept her hair.
Her eyes.
Her teeth.
Her mind and memories.
When I speak I hear her voice,
woven into mine.
When I move it's with her muscles,
running with my blood.
When I look into the mirror I see her,
looking through my eyes.
I expect to see the scorn,
the shame.
The disappointment at the machination of flesh
that I've turned her into.
But she's smiling.
I'm smiling.
She loves me.
And I love her.
Her skin encases me entirely,
an embrace I will never shed.
I killed the first girl I loved.

Hana A. Cornwall
TORTUROUS TOOTHPICKS



Logan del Rio

ME, A MOSAIC

I'll always remember the words my dad said to break the silence almost eight years ago in that cramped therapist's office. The fear that I felt, the protectiveness radiating off of my mother's body, the aching weight of an unknown reaction hanging in the air. His only daughter had just told him that she didn't feel like his daughter anymore. I mean, how would you react?

See, I'm the "scary transgender" that the media has not been able to stop talking about recently. Full transparency: I am probably more terrified of you and what you could do to me should you learn my identity than you could ever be of me. Why? Because every day I, along with my community, am bombarded with hate messages and new laws restricting our right to exist. But that's actually not what I want to share with you.

Band camp, 2016. I'm not technically a freshman yet because high school band camp starts during the summer. I laugh along with my new bandmates as our visual instructor, Hayden, gives us an exercise to do. We have to cross the length of the football field by skipping sideways—much harder to explain in words than in visuals. He claps and tells us to begin, and we move in short horizontal lines. The person ahead of me reaches the end and it's my turn. I prance my way across the field, laughing as everyone else is doing, and feeling like every skip is higher than the last. We do the drill again, only this time returning to the place we began. Hayden is staring at me and asks me to come up to him.

"It took me years to perfect that. I mean, I looked like a baby giraffe tripping over its legs...You did that effortlessly," he said, gawking. "Could you demonstrate it for everyone?" I blush in embarrassment. I don't want to draw attention to myself, but everyone knows when Hayden asks you to do something, you do it. So I do, and for a moment I forget any attention is on me. I finish, he nods, and I walk sheepishly back to the giant group huddled ten feet away. Before I reach the threshold, he calls out. "What's your name again?" I freeze. I thought he knew it; he should have known it.

"It's Logan," I mutter, and he asks me to repeat myself. So I yell it. I yell it so loud that nobody misses it. I hear a faint "What? That's not her na—" from someone I no longer respect, followed by a smack and an oof. The man smiles at me and the glint in his eyes tells me he knew my name all along.

Hayden taught me that my ability to do things does not depend on what I identify as.

English class, freshman year. I sit terrified as it's my first ever class in high school. The girl who would soon become my high school best friend sits in front of me, laughing with another girl I can't seem to remember. My teacher quiets the class a few moments after the bell rings and begins taking roll. My heart pounds harder with every name called. She gets to the name before mine and I

feel black curl around the edges of my vision.

"Logan del Rio," she calls, looking up to survey the class for the person who belongs to this name. I choke out a pathetic "here" as my classmates' heads all turn towards me. You see, most of the class knew who I was before I came out; I guess that's what I get for growing up in the Orange Bubble, the place that no one leaves. Whispers erupt and I can feel my ears burning with shame. Looking back, I'm not sure why I felt ashamed. A lot of the people who felt the need to be cruel to me for my identity haven't grown up to be anything other than ordinarily boring.

"Cool name," the girl in front of me says, and I realize she's turned around to look at me. It was so nonchalant, and that would continue to be Linh's attitude towards my trans identity for the rest of our friendship.

Linh taught me that the people who are really important in your life will never make your identity more than it needs to be.

"I hear 14 years of my past pushing through the cracks in my voice."

My first pride. My parents and I have just finished marching with our Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) group through the streets of Long Beach. We are walking through the booths when I spot him. A spindly man standing on the street corner with a sign bigger than him held high above his head. Police stand against the wall a few feet behind him as he spits hatred out of his white-and-red megaphone. There are words listed on his sign: masturbators, sinners, faggots, alcoholics, and trannies were the ones that stood out to my young mind. I walk up to him, my rainbow socks and PFLAG shirt acting as my armor, ready to shield me from whatever he could possibly say. Nothing could have prepared me for what came out of his mouth.

"Transgressors are sinners and are going to hell! They're child groomers, they're freaks, they're sick in the head! **They deserve to be killed!**" He screams, droplets of spit spewing from his mouth like venom.

I step up to face my enemy. "You're saying I deserve to die?" I ask, and I hear 14 years of my past pushing through the cracks in my voice. He stares at me, taken aback.

"No, of course not," he backpedals, and I am young and new to my identity and do not understand.

"But I'm transgender..." I say, defiance now rising in my blood. I am whisked away to when I was nine and the flower girl at my aunt's wedding. My mom convinced me to wear a dress to the afterparty, but I insisted on wearing my sneakers at the very least. These clunky, neon and black-colored leather sneakers didn't go with my dress at all. I have always been transgender.

“But I’m not talking about you...” he defends, seeing the rage of thousands of transgender people—past, present and future—behind my eyes.

“But you are!” I shout, and now more people have gathered around me.

“Yah, you’re saying this kid deserves to die?” an adult questions. More chime in and I am dragged to the back of the crowd by a man that looks like a human teddy bear. Before I can say anything, he hoists me up onto his shoulders and pushes back to the front of the crowd.

“Don’t touch the sign,” the man holding it yells, and I know what I must do. I stick my arms out and block the sign with my hands. The man becomes frustrated but cannot move so as to unblock his sign due to the mass of angry queers and allies surrounding him. As I complete my mission, cheers erupt and the sign man gives up. The man holding me puts me down, high fives me, and says, “Don’t listen to people like that. You deserve life.”

I never caught his name, but the man who carried me on his shoulders taught me that I will always have people who believe I deserve to live as I am.

“I am made up of the lessons that everyone in my life has taught me...”

My 21st birthday. I am surrounded by my family and friends. I had just spent the first half of my day at Orange County Pride with my boyfriend and various friends. Now I sit at a table surrounded by even more friends and my mom’s family. We are laughing and joking, and I drift off into silence. No one seems to notice because the atmosphere has not changed. I reflect on my past, on everything I’ve been through. My boyfriend places a hand on my bicep and gives me a look that asks if I’m okay. He’s good at that—being able to tell when something has completely captured my mind. I nod and smile at him, and he seems satisfied with my answer and returns to talking with two of our oldest friends.

A few moments later my mama brings out a cake—cookie cake to be exact, like she always makes me (she knows me so well). The backyard erupts in an off-tune rendition of Happy Birthday, and hearing “Happy Birthday, dear Logan” feels normal now. My mother tells me to make a wish, and I look around me. I am surrounded by people who love me. I realize I have everything I had ever wished for at every previous birthday party: a partner who loves me for who I am despite being ridiculed for it by others, a family that supports me despite sometimes not fully knowing the meaning of my identity, and friends that continue to learn every single day how to become better allies to me and my community. I am loved and accepted and supported.

I think back to the people who have helped me in my past that weren’t there for me now: Kim, the therapist who helped me discover what being transgender was (may her light live on in her wife and daughter), my father, whom I was so terrified of coming out to and who ended up being my biggest supporter alongside my mom (and who is now enjoying his peaceful days at a lakehouse in Minnesota), Mr. Miller, who had a hard time understanding me at first but ended up learning how to become a better teacher to transgender students because of it, and so many more. I have always been loved and accepted and supported.

The world is a terrifying place, especially when you feel alone. But even when I thought I was, I was never truly alone. I am made up of the lessons that everyone in my life has taught me, of every lesson I have taught myself. Every experience I have had, every person I have met has played a role in my transition, whether they knew it or not. My transness doesn’t only affect me, but the people around me as well. I have learned so much through others: about me, about others, about the world.

I am a mosaic, made up of something from every person I have ever experienced.

Debra Weaver

THE MAN IN THE WAVES

I have grown increasingly obsessed with the ocean over the years. I will be the first to clock out at work, right on the dot, to rush onto the toll road to get down to the coastline. Even if the sun has already slipped past the silver-blue horizon, I can still breathe in the golden afterglow of a thousand variations of color, both on water and sky. Just recently, while watching the golden orb make way for the silhouette of Catalina Island in the distance, I confessed to a companion, “Of all the lovers I have had, the ocean—what we are gazing at now—that is the one I can never get enough of.”

Waves have always held a particular fascination for me. Their shape, their sound, their form. Watching them ebb and flow, come in, and then sweep back out. Their rhythm. Their constancy. Their assurance that they will always be there when I return. I long to connect with them on some deep level that I don’t understand, as if they have something just for me. As if they know something about me that has not been revealed.

Growing up in Southern California, one might think I was accustomed to visiting the beach often. Only six inconsequential miles from my front door, “Surf City” and all of its glory might as well have been on the other side of the planet. My schedule was set and determined so that aside from holidays or our occasional road trips, there was no deviating from it. Monday through Friday was reserved for school, homework, and dinner—promptly at 5:30, with no exceptions, watching whichever one to two television shows were available before going to bed at the determined time of nine o’clock. Saturdays were defined by elongated canisters of Comet Cleanser, Windex, Pledge Dust Polish, and dirty rags, with the occasional chance to pull weeds in the backyard. Sunday was non-negotiable. Church. Not only were we expected to attend Sunday School and one full service of “big church” on Sunday morning, but after a brief reprieve of a strangely ill-timed pot roast dinner in the middle of the day, we headed straight back to our morning’s location.

Straight back to the same building.

To listen to the same wooly-eyed man.

Say the same damn—I mean dang—things.

Although I was raised in the Baptist denomination, my particular church was an American Baptist church. To this day, I am still trying to understand what that actually meant. In my church experience, we were allowed controversial exploits such as going to PG movies, playing cards, and even dancing. (I had heard you couldn’t even roll dice in some churches.) Sunday mornings were kept “traditional,” singing hymns with words like “Thou changest not” and “Be Thou my vision.” Yet a mysterious transition occurred between the morning services and the evening service. Among other things, girls were now, inexplicably, allowed to wear pants. Contemporary praise songs that had seeped in from the Jesus Movement, only two cities away, replaced the age-old hymns

that, apparently, belonged exclusively to the morning. Sounding like ‘70s soft-rock love songs, lyrics of passion now filled the evening chapel atmosphere: “It only takes a spark to get a fire going. . .” This more relaxed tone led to the implementation of more casual church events where these newfound praise songs would reign. Our annual “Sing at the Surf” was one such event. A full day outside of our four chapel walls, where pastors wore swim trunks and the women showed bare legs—a total mirage of inside-out and upside down.

After a full day of surf and sand, we Baptists would ceremoniously gather around the firepits, hotdogs on long metal sticks over glowing coals, the smell of smoke permeating the salty air. Songs of praise would follow, accompanied by guitars in lieu of pianos and organs. Sunburned children would eventually pile back into family station wagons, feeling more connected to God than from any church service they had ever attended.

“He held onto me unwaveringly as we navigated the crashing foam that separated the sand from the calm.”

It was during this once-a-year, dream-like escapade that I was introduced to my dad. Of course, my dad was a daily fixture in my life. Defined at home by his tasks, he was the cook, the grass mower, the one who always had something to study or mark up with a highlighter behind closed doors—the pastor dad. Being that he was an associate pastor, I rarely saw him speak from a pulpit. My only understanding of his profession was that it came with a brown briefcase and required his attendance at nightly meetings. He left the dinner table just as the conversations started. He watched football and TV before retiring early. He was explicitly called upon when we needed to be spanked.

On this surreal day, I was introduced to a different dad. His hair was wild instead of plastered back (something akin to a televangelist was his typical look). His skin was exposed instead of wrapped in polyester, neck laden in striped neckties. I heard him laughing there on the sand, talking to others, smiling, warm. And then, somehow, and completely unexpected, he created a space for me.

This unfamiliar form of a man took my hand and led me down to the edge of the blue. He held onto me unwaveringly as we navigated the crashing foam that separated the sand from the calm. And as we bobbed up from some battering, he taught me to detect the sandbar where I could find my balance. How to float

THE PINK MOON'S SERENADE

on the wave as it flowed by us, like a giant sigh, leaving it crashing down on the other side. He knew about riptides and how to navigate this sea-like world. I remember the greenish-blue depths and how it felt to rise and fall within them. But most of all, I remember him. This was my dad, and he was with me. Not with all the other laughing, smiling congregants enjoying their one day of freedom from suits and nylon stockings. He chose to be with me. It was our world—his and mine.

I wanted to keep him there, or better yet, to bring him home with me. I could see him slowly disappearing as we crossed back over the white spray pounding on the flat, brown sand. He lasted into the evening a bit. I kept my eyes fixed on his messy blackish-brown mop of hair. I glimpsed at his unfamiliar chest with the glow of a tan. I listened to his voice singing praise songs—not hymns, but praise songs—while the smoke from the fire began to create a veil between us.

As we found our way back to the daily-routine house on the darkened cul-de-sac street, we crossed the freshly mowed lawn—bare feet at night. The only thing left of the illusory day was the sand that stubbornly clung to our skin.

He wouldn't permit one grain in with us.

It was carefully and methodically brushed aside.

Like the memory of the man in the waves.



WALL 2024 STAFF



WILLIAM STANLEY

Editor-in-Chief

William Stanley is currently studying English/Creative Writing at Saddleback College and plans to transfer to University of Washington in Fall 2025. He is grateful for his time as the Editor-in-Chief for the 24th edition of WALL, something he couldn't have done without the endless support from his friends and family. He spends his time writing, making music, painting, and exploring any other creative medium he can get his hands on.

KATHRYN MCCLUSKY

Personal Narrative Editor / Art Editor

A writer's occupation should include looking out a window for inspiration. Kathryn considers this an important part of her job with a cup of tulsi tea in hand. The other very important part is helping people through a period of transformation or change by making the process easier for them. Hence Kathryn's role as a Transformational Facilitator. You can find her self-published workbook on Amazon, which provides brainstorming questions to help you learn more about who you are. You can also find course material and blog inspiration from others walking their Paths Leading Back to Me at the following site: www.thepathsleadingbacktome.com.



NICOLE KARRAA

Personal Narrative Editor / Publicity Chair

Nicole is a passionate and creative bean who is double majoring in Comparative Literature and Business Economics. When she isn't reading, she enjoys writing. As Publicity Chair and Personal Narrative Editor for WALL 2024 and author of "Waterlogged," she strives to find irreplaceable stories. She also participates in ASG Student Leadership as Officer of Publicity and the Senator-elect for International, Diversity, and Student Council, where she works to make hopes a reality. In her free time, she travels to learn about culture and languages. Whether it be eating frijoles in Lima, Peru or sweating in the sweltering Panama heat, Nicole strives to connect. Her curiosity has turned to learning Arabic and picking up the vivacious skill of confusing the natives. She strives to become an economist in international and global affairs to help make an impact on the world.



MICHAEL FINLEY

Fiction Editor / Copy Editor

Michael is studying English Literature to transfer to Cal State Fullerton. He hopes to pursue a career in teaching English at the high school or university level. In his free time, he enjoys running games of Dungeons & Dragons for his family and friends, watching Internet videos with his cat, and reading classical works of literature.

LOGAN DEL RIO

Fiction Editor / Copy Editor

Logan is an aspiring horror novelist with a passion for wildlife photography (he says animals don't demand he get their good side). A major inspiration for all of his writings is the need for more transgender representation in both literature itself and the writing community as a whole. He is currently graduating with his A.A. in Psychology for transfer to the University of Minnesota - Twin Cities and plans to pursue a career in animal-assisted therapy.



AMBER FRANKLIN

Poetry Editor

Amber is currently at Saddleback majoring in English with an emphasis in Creative Writing. She is a self-diagnosed poet who draws creative inspiration from her rambunctious cast of family members. She has long believed writing to be one of nature's greatest gifts when coping with the human condition, closely seconded by the invention of the grilled cheese sandwich. Everyone has a story sitting somewhere inside of them; Amber can't wait to share her own.



LUCY ROTH

Poetry Editor / Copy Editor

Lucy, a second-year student at Saddleback College, enjoys studying creative writing, film, and languages. Her current favorite book is Kokoro by Natsume Sōseki. She enjoys reading and writing, going to the movies, playing music, and sunbathing with her suspiciously tiny dog.





GERALDINE ACHENBACH
Graphic Designer / Layout Editor

Geraldine, a graphic designer driven by childhood doodles and big dreams, draws inspiration from the likes of Jhonen Vasquez and James Baxter. Blending humor and creativity, she crafts designs that stand out in a crowd. As she aspires to make her mark at a major company, Geraldine's journey is fueled by passion and persistence.

TIARA SIEGEL
Graphic Designer / Layout Editor

Tiara, a passionate graphic designer, finds inspiration in the intricate worlds of video games like Dragon's Dogma and Splatoon as well as the enigmatic narratives of books such as House of Leaves. With a love for illustration and a desire for pushing design boundaries, Tiara continuously explores new frontiers in their craft. Good afternoon, good evening, and good night!



ZEINA MARANDI
Graphic Designer / Layout Editor

Zeina, who holds a Master of Science degree in Finance, shifted away from the world of numbers into a creative world of designs and illustration in 2021. She is working toward an associate degree in Graphic Design. Zeina enjoys capturing memories with her camera. She also finds inspiration in learning and exploring the world of design and illustration. She aims to start a new career as a graphic designer for an innovative company.



CAYLIX LA
Art Committee

Caylix is a naive yet caring and aspiring digital artist who wants to major in graphic design. Her goal is to become a graphic designer with hints of her anime and chibi art style mixed into what she creates. She's often quite forgetful and tends to lose track of time but is trying her best despite struggles with ADHD. If you ever see her, she is often wearing a pink bow and playing Super Smash Bros Ultimate on her Nintendo Switch. If you ever want to see her artwork, her Instagram is @Spectiquex.



ETHAN BOSTIC
Art Committee

Currently working on a science major to establish a career in marine science, Ethan revels in the obscure when looking for inspiration in many of his artistic pursuits. He has been drawing and creating stories since he was 10 years old and as his tastes changed, so did his inspirations. Ethan looked into an old and obscure film The Brave Little Toaster for inspiration when writing his first poem, "Awaiting Destruction," featured in this year's WALL.



EDDIE MENDOZA
Graphic Designer / Layout Editor

Aspiring, or attempting, to challenge generic corporate art in graphic design, Eddie has worked many years creating artwork such as illustration and posters. Inspiration comes from movies, games and comics. Horror and mystery are two genre favorites.



FERN HELSEL-METZ
Photography Editor

Fern, as Photography Editor for WALL Literary Journal, draws inspiration from the contributors who infuse life into each edition. As an alumna of Saddleback College, her artistry extends from photography to alternative printmaking, exploring the intricate relationships between history, landscape, and nature in contemporary society. With multiple awards and exhibitions to her credit, Fern's work invites viewers to delve into the dynamic interplay of past and present as she diligently refines her craft through ongoing portfolio and website endeavors.

GINA SHAFFER
Faculty Advisor

Gina teaches creative writing, composition, and literature as a professor of English at Saddleback College. A faculty advisor for WALL since 2012, she also serves as committee chair of WORD FEST OC, a campus literary festival. She previously served on the faculty of UCLA Writing Programs. Before becoming an educator, she worked as a newspaper reporter, magazine editor, and theater critic. A poet and published playwright whose works have been staged throughout Southern California and New York, Gina earned her Ph.D. in English at UC Irvine. She is perpetually inspired by the creativity and innovation of the students who staff WALL and those who contribute their words and images to it.



WALL 2024 Contributors

FICTION

DIANA JUAREZ

An amateur writer who is majoring in English, Diana earned associate degrees in Arts and Humanities, Cinema TV, and Radio, as well as an Associate of Arts degree in Liberal Studies.

KASPER OWEN

Kasper is an English/Journalism major at Saddleback and the former president of the Creative Writing Club. They've been writing for the past six years and are semi-active in Orange County's literary and poetry community. At 21 years old going on what feels like 200, Kasper offers a unique insight on the world around them through their writing.

LENNON SNIPES

A graduate of Aliso Niguel High School, Lennon has been attending Saddleback College for about a year.

MARK VAN HOUTEN

Mark is a retired neurologist who reimagined his skills of patient history documentation as the art of creating characters in fictitious stories. He has published an anthology of short story fiction titled Tail of the Flaming Lion and Other Such Tales, available on Amazon. In the future, he will be survived by his wife, two children, and three grandchildren.

DEBRA WEAVER

Debra has been serving in the field of early childhood education for over 20 years. She presently works with Irvine Unified School District as a Site Supervisor for California's Expanded Learning Program. This is Debra's first submission of her written work. She is passionate about future writing goals.

CHLOE WORCESTER

Fairly new to writing, Chloe decided to take a writing class and felt inspired to share her work by submitting it to WALL. "Black and White," a story of hers being featured in this year's journal, represents her first time submitting anything to be published.

POETRY

ZOE GRAFF

Zoe is transferring from Saddleback College to Cal State Long Beach to pursue literature and creative writing. She has been enraptured by the art of creative writing since sixth-grade English class when she wrote a story about a mermaid for an extra credit project.

AIDAN HUNT

With a Certificate of Achievement in Music Production acquired and an associate's degree in English/Creative Writing on the horizon, this first publication of poetry is an inspiring detour in Aidan's pursuit of becoming an artist/lyricist. Having worked with up-and-coming artists within Southern California, Aidan ensures a poetic form of lyricism continues to live on through his pen. huntaj19@gmail.com

SOPHIE MATOSSIAN

Sophie graduated from Saddleback in 2022 with an AA in English and will graduate from Grand Canyon University in 2024 with a BA in Professional Writing for New Media. An alumna of WALL, she has worked as a copywriter and editor on multiple college literary magazines. After graduating, she hopes to work in the publishing world and never stop writing. Take a look at her work on www.sophiematossian.com

NICHOLAS MERSEREAU

Nick's interests in artwork and writing date back to his early childhood. He has kept a strong passion for them throughout his life, which has had a significant impact on both his academic and personal pursuits. As his second year at Saddleback comes to an end, he will continue his educational career to pursue a degree in English from the University of California, Irvine.

JAKE PACITTI

Jake is currently studying English Literature at Saddleback College. During high school he rediscovered his love for writing and began experimenting with poetry with encouragement from his teacher Ms. Erhard. He continues to write poetry as an emotional outlet which he loves to share with friends and family.

ARLENY PEÑA

Arleny is a first-generation student at Saddleback College, where she is currently majoring in English. She adores writing and has always had a passion for it. She finds it to be an excellent tool to bring awareness to issues concerning our society.

MORIAH SAYLOR

Moriah, a published author in Los Angeles, holds multiple degrees in English, Liberal Studies, and Interdisciplinary Studies. She graduated Cum Laude and was on the Dean's List for at least five semesters. Her contributions include published works such as The Act Series and The Memoranda Collection. Moriah is currently working on her next novel with a publishing date prior to 2025. Website: www.moriahsaylor.com Email: moriahsaylor@gmail.com

TORI TERENCE

Tori is a Theatre Arts major at Saddleback College with a concentration in directing. She graduated high school at seventeen and is currently the director of events for Saddleback's Rainbow Collective, the LGBTQIA+ club. In her free time, she enjoys exploring the outdoors with her friends, family, and dogs (of which she has four).

SHANNON THORNTON

Shannon is an aspiring writer who is currently submitting pieces of work to a variety of publications in the hopes that he can make a living doing what he loves.

MAYA TOMA

Maya is in their first year at Saddleback as an art and animation major. They spend their free time writing different fictional pieces but have never previously published anything.

CHLOE VAN VLIET

Chloe is an amateur writer and a student at Saddleback College. She can be found on social media [@ihateuchlo](#).

PERSONAL NARRATIVE

KARLA MUNDO

As one of her articles “From Baja to Alta California” mentions, Karla was born and raised in Ensenada, Baja California. Before relocating to the USA 24 years ago, she earned a bachelor’s degree in journalism and a master’s degree in education. Writing has been her passion since she was a child. Although she has not published anything in California, she has written several pieces in her personal blog, waiting for readers to get inspired or connected with her stories.

<http://karlagmundo.blogspot.com>

<https://awakeningtomotherhood-karla.blogspot.com/>

<https://karlagmundo.blogspot.com/2018/12/because-humans-without-mistake-are.html>

MIKE PANASITTI

Mike, who has gone by various pseudonyms, including !Ojo! (his painter’s handle), is a UC Berkeley graduate and a former resident of California’s Department of State Hospitals. He was once a Eureka state inmate. In 2024 he will finish his requirements for an associate degree in Creative Writing at Saddleback College, where he was a Fiction Editor and Art Editor of WALL 2023. Mike has two stories shortlisted on the Reedsy Prompts blog, where he has contributed prose since 2021. He has exhibited paintings at Las Lagunas Gallery and the Newport Beach Art Exhibition. His artwork can be viewed at <https://www.beforfinearts.com/>

MUSIC

CAMERON ROSENTHAL

Cameron is studying computer science at California State University, Fullerton. Formerly a student at Saddleback College, where he received an associate degree in Computer Science, he led a team of software developers within the college Robotics Club. Cameron, who enjoys working his day job in IT, has a fascination with all things art. His musical rendition of the poem “Patchwork” (page 29) can be accessed through a QR code on the Table of Contents next to the poem title.

ARIA SALESSI

Aria graduated from CSULB with a bachelor’s degree in Exercise Science. Prior to transferring, he attended both IVC and Saddleback for two years. He is passionate about watching horror movies and has a new interest in digitally producing music. Aria’s original music to accompany the poem “Awaiting Destruction” (page 42) can be accessed through a QR code on the Table of Contents next to the poem title.

ART & GRAPHIC ILLUSTRATION

SJ ABRAMS

SJ takes classes in graphic design at Saddleback College for professional development and personal enrichment.

RYAN ALPAY

Driven by a lifelong passion for exploring new skills, Ryan (who uses the nickname Rye) is majoring in art at Saddleback College. He never stops seeking new hobbies or ways to be creative. Nowadays, Ryan produces digital artwork featuring original characters and ideas, as well as various physical crafts such as props, cosplay, dioramas, and more. Ryan plans to graduate with an art degree in hopes of finding a career in game illustration. Email: ryanaalpay@gmail.com

HANA A. CORNWALL

Hana (haw-nuh) grew up making art with her beautiful grandmother, who was an art teacher. She is majoring in studio arts at Saddleback College. Her art has been featured in two showcases so far. There is nothing she'd rather do than create and she is excited for what is to come.

GABRIELLE CRESPO

Gabrielle is currently studying studio arts at Saddleback College, but she has been drawing and creating art for as long as she can remember. You can find more of her work on Instagram, posted under the user [@genopsycho](#)

PHILLIP DE GREE

Phillip, who recently received his associate degree in Studio Arts from Saddleback College, plans to either pursue a bachelor's degree or start to work in an animation studio. Over the past two years, he has dived into classes in drawing, painting, figure drawing, and ceramics, which have improved his artistic technical skills. Phillip's love for art is highly influenced by wanting to leave something for others to view and bring them a little peace. He was lucky to do so with his piece "Family," which was featured in Saddleback's Spring Student Showcase.

HANNAH FAWCETT

Hannah, a student at Saddleback College who has taken the Throwing 1 class, works as an instructor and studio assistant at Costa Mesa Ceramics. Her instagram, [@madebyhancerceramics](#), is where you can follow her artwork journey.

<https://www.instagram.com/madebyhancerceramics/>

ALEX HARTMANN

Alex is attending Saddleback College for general education classes and plans to transfer to a state college to study industrial design.

JULIANNE HOUSTON

Julianne is a graphic design student at Saddleback College and the owner of Fairy Wares, where she creates unique wearable art pieces and costumes. Over the past few years, she has gained many new skills from her time exploring the artistic pathways offered at Saddleback while simultaneously growing her business across social media and artisan markets. Inspired by the world around her, Julianne is excited to take her craft on the road, eager to explore new horizons and discover fresh avenues for her artistic expression.

KD KECKLER

KD is a visual artist living and working in Southern California. She studied art at university level and has shown her work extensively in Michigan, Washington, and California. KD uses ink, watercolor, acrylics, and collage to create art that tells a story, documents a place, creates a mood or expresses color harmony.

Website: www.kdkeckler.com Instagram: [k_d_keckler](#)

JANE LEE

Jane is currently studying graphic design at Saddleback College. Previously, she worked as a video editor, and is now enjoying building her artistic background. She hopes to explore creative interests and learn new skills to improve her videos.

MICHELLE LEMIEUX

Michelle originally acquired a B.S. in Business Management and an A.A. in commercial art. Now that she is retired, she has been taking Emeritus classes through Saddleback College for the last couple of years. She has especially enjoyed the acrylic/oil painting classes.

GEORGEANN BARKER MEUNIER

Georgeann earned a B.A. in Art with a concentration in Ceramics from the University of Massachusetts Amherst in 1975. The following year she was hired to teach an art class for children at the George Walter Vincent Museum in Springfield, Massachusetts. Now retired after creating and owning a floral design business, she has taken ceramics at Saddleback College for the past two years.

IMAN H. MOUJTAHED

From performing, photography, digital art, crafts, music, all the way to fashion designing, Iman has always immersed herself in the arts. Three of her photographs have been featured in WALL, including the cover of the 2013 edition. Iman is also passionate about psychology and health, especially the psychology of personalities, mental health awareness, suicide prevention, and alternative medicine. A Saddleback alum who was involved in student government and campus clubs, she served as a commencement speaker in 2015. She has returned to take classes on campus as her varied interests and love for learning have no limits.

JONATHAN OWENS

Passionate about digital design, Jonathan is pursuing an associate degree in Fine Arts and a Certificate in Graphic Design. "Shadow Man," his scratchboard drawing featured in this year's WALL, marks the first time his work is being published. He plans to further his design education at a university in the near future.

TERI PFEFFER PERLSTEIN

Teri has deep interest in digital editing and sees her camera as a canvas, a capture as a sketch, and then uses the tools in digital editing software to "paint"; a final image. Teri obtained a B.A. in Drawing & Painting at the University of New Mexico and has been a student in the photography program at Saddleback College for five and a half years. She began taking classes at Saddleback when she retired from working in the technology field.

SOPHIA RITTERLING

Currently in her second semester at Saddleback College, where she's taken art classes ranging from screen printing to ceramics, Sophia is working towards an industrial design major that she hopes to complete at CSULB. Since she was small, her life has been full of art. Born into a family of artists, she has been drawing since she can remember, exploring different mediums and categories of art such as traditional drawing, watercolor, digital art, graphic design, printmaking, and ceramics.

CHRISTOPHER E. RIVERA-GUZMAN

The garments featured in the photo "Blast Collective" are all designs Christopher developed with heavy influence from Punk, Grunge, Opium, and Rock subcultures that he enjoys and follows. Fashion designers such as Jaden Tillou, Rick Owens, Martin Margiela, and Martine Rose inspired him to pursue fashion as a career and make clothing the way he wants to. He hopes to grow his small clothing line to the level of the fashion designers who inspire him, but, most importantly, he just wants to be able to do what he loves. Christopher sells the garments he produces on his insta @crivers.reworks

TRACEY ROLDAN

Tracey is currently studying photography at Saddleback College. She aims to become a lifestyle photographer, while mastering the art of noticing. She received the Juror's Award in the Saddleback College 2024 art show and has a publication in the online magazine, Doc Magazine (Vol 47). You can find her work on Instagram @perspectiveinfocusl.

LINDA RUDDY

Linda, currently enrolled in Art 143 Professional Practices for Artists, is an alumna of both Saddleback College and CSUF. She has exhibited her paintings in both solo and group exhibitions. One of her oil paintings is featured as the cover art for the Village Breeze Magazine. Linda's painting Transformation is one of a series she is working on for a book project. See some of her art at IG @lindaruddycreates

ARIEL SCHWARZKOPF-HAMILTON

Ariel is an aspiring artist at Saddleback College working toward her associate and bachelor's degrees in Studio Art. She has been featured in multiple art galleries in her academic career, including the AMOCA High School exhibition (2019) as well as Saddleback College's "Radiant" (2023), "Future Arrivals" (2023), and "Flourish" (2024) shows. She creates art in various mediums, including sculpting, drawing, and painting.

VIKTORIA TAUZ

Born in Belarus, Viktoria, formerly an accountant and a graphic designer, walks the path of becoming aware of her true self, healing and opening her true nature. She strives for purity in the transmission of energy through her work. Viktoria wants the energy that is ready to manifest through her to flow easily so that it fills the person who observes it with light.

ANDREA SIERRA VASQUEZ

Andrea is an emerging artist based in San Juan Capistrano, who graduated from Saddleback College in 2022 with an Associates of Arts degree. Her work has been exhibited in the Saddleback Gallery and the Huntington Beach Art Center where she took "best in show." She is currently pursuing her creative passions while taking classes at Saddleback College.

GIA WAHLE

Gia, a ceramic artist, draws inspiration from the natural world around her, exploring the complexities of identity, culture, and nature. She blends hyper-realism and abstraction, capturing the essence of her subjects while infusing them with her own creative perspective. When not in the studio, Gia enjoys spending time with her husband and cat, seeking out new sources of inspiration, and exploring her many creative passions.

CELIA WU

Celia was born in China, grew up in Taiwan, and emigrated to the United States in 1978. She earned her B.A. degree in Linguistics and B.S. degree in Business Computer Method. After working at aerospace companies for a couple of decades, she decided in 2003 to leave her job as an IT specialist to pursue a classic art education at Saddleback College. Since then, she has focused on basic principles of representational art in both oil and watercolor.