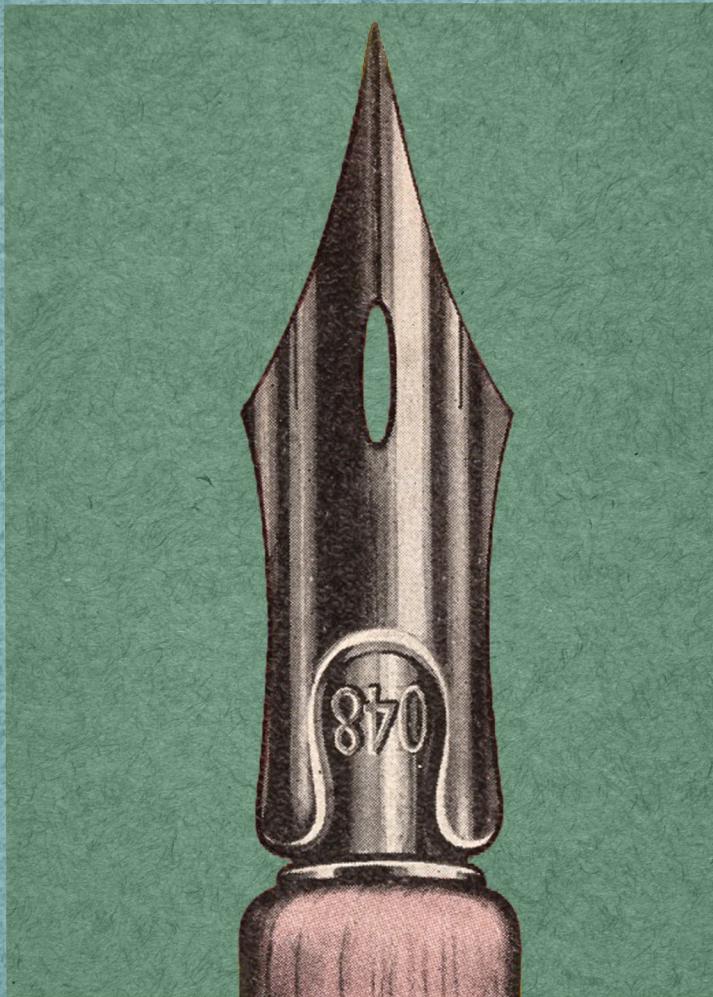


# Hothouse



Literary journal published by  
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at The University of Texas at Austin

2020 - 2021

H O T H O U S E





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Dedicated to the writers  
who make their home in Parlin Hall

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## Editor's Note

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It can be hard to feel present in an almost-and-also-not-quite-post-Pandemic life, but assembling *Hothouse* has always felt a little like having one foot stuck in the past and one foot sliding towards the future. With one, I think of all the incredible, brilliant friends with all their incredible, brilliant words I have had the fortune of meeting through *Hothouse*; with the other, I think of all the exceptional creators and thinkers that are yet to come. This year (as I do every year), I find comfort in the myriad voices nestled within the covers of the journal.

In this edition of *Hothouse*, you will find the evergreen themes of love and identity explored in particularly interesting, complicated, and comforting ways. You will also find a new, “Nontraditional” genre, aimed at reflecting the genre-breaking, innovative work we see the students in Parlin creating. This journal provides a space for students to creatively explore, so anticipate some challenging and, at times, sensitive material within the assembled stories.

Finally, I want to express my immense gratitude towards the staff who so carefully assembled this journal and its writers who have created despite it all. Kazuo Ishiguro once said that, ultimately, “stories are about one person saying to another: This is the way it feels to me. Can you understand what I’m saying? Does it feel this way to you?”

Well?



Kylie Warkentin  
Editor-in-Chief



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# PROSE

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# This will be easier with you gone, I think

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Zackary Davis

Vic's funeral was a particularly dreary affair. The grass was wet from the prior night's storm, and everyone had dressed for a cold front that had decided not to arrive. So, seeing it as terribly rude to complain about the unseasonal heat, the gathered mourners soaked in their own sweat silently, paying more mind to their discomfiture than to the coffin that was slowly being lowered into its grave. Vic's mother, Nadia, was bawling, which you thought appropriate since she had never known what an absolute nuisance her son had been in life. There was some satisfaction to be had in there being more sweat than tears at the ceremony.

Watching the woman cry was a Sisyphean effort, as just when you were certain she was done huffing and puffing over lost youth and unsowed seed, her tear ducts redoubled their efforts and kept the water flowing. There was some shame in noticing how much of a toll the decade had taken on her once-so-clear skin since you'd last seen her. You tried to recall what had compelled you to attend, and there too was the image of Vic's crying mother. When she called, practically draining her tears into the phone, asking you if you'd be able to make it out to your old friend's funeral, what were you to say? *Of course, Nadia. I wouldn't miss it for anything.* Because unlike her, you had some tact left. It would have been so much the better if she'd just sent a Facebook invite like a sane person so you could pretend the invite had gotten lost in the minutia of your feed.

A memory cropped up from an old movie, or perhaps it was from some lecture, it doesn't matter. But apparently people used to be buried with a string tied to their finger, so that if they'd been buried alive, they could give the string a tug and a connected bell above ground would ring out to summon a passerby to the recently presumed deceased's rescue. You'd cut Vic's bell given the chance, pocket the little clump of metal, and cherish the memory of its ringing lost on the wind.

Doug, standing firm next to the hole his son was to be buried in, looked as serene and stoic as ever. There was a poolside memory from middle school in his image, the first yearning you couldn't share with the son. Doug seemed to be talking in slow motion. Every syllable rolled off his tongue like it was tied to a sandbag at the back of his throat. Almost without fail, after every fourth word, he would cough lightly into his elbow, tap his tie down, and spend half a second recollecting himself before continuing with his eulogy. And frankly, watching your afternoon wasting away before your very eyes, decaying faster than Vic was anyway, you were starting to get pissed off. But that was definitely well within your rights, all things considered.

For once you allowed yourself the dense conflagration of recollection, and began to really believe that nobody was watching as you made your way past Doug and to the coffin. And then, as you jumped onto the casket, breaking the supports and sending both you and Vic hurtling six feet down into the pit, you believed that even if somebody had seen you do it, they probably didn't mind much anyways. Though, when you opened the casket and began shaking the corpse like a magic 8-ball, you lost faith in your prior convictions and took note of just how peeved Doug looked as he shouted down at you from above.

And while you felt you were being far too dramatic

already, it felt nice, almost poetic, to pull Doug down into the grave with you. You did your best to make him and his son hold hands, but rigor mortis had sunk in. You felt there was a joke about being hard as a bone somewhere in that, but who could say such a thing at a funeral, in front of his parents no less. Doug hit you then, harder than Vic ever had, and you fell such that your cheek crashed upon Vic's cold, pressed lips. And that brought another memory with it. So, while those in attendance stared down at you and Doug brawling atop the corpse, knocking dirt all over Vic's polished face, you searched your brain for the best way to tell the audience that when Vic decided he was done playing with you and told everyone at school you were a faggot, he still had the taste of your spit on his tongue.

The whole hypothetical made your eyes roll. It was a blessing that Doug finished his speech when he had. If his droning had gone on any longer, you might have actually gone through with that heinous thought. At least it would've made for a decent story.

Another relative, one you'd never met, took the microphone and thanked everyone for coming. She was sure that the late ingrate would be very grateful to everyone that had made it out. It was a speech worth tuning out indeed. Vic would have laughed if he could see you now, uncomfortably fidgeting near the back of the crowd, forced to stand in horrendous humidity to mourn him. Heaven must've been boooming with his coarse hay barrel of a laugh. You'd always known he'd be buried with his secret, though there had been a point where you had tried to deny that reality. Now the skeleton, in the closet that was his coffin, was him, and he'd never leave it, and the door would be jammed by six feet of worm-ridden soil. Those buried secrets were anguishing; they were despair. And that despair rose forth from Vic's grave like a flash flood of quicksand. Thin wave after thin wave of sinking sand coiling

around everyone's feet as those that felt the need to speak did so.

But as you sank, nobody else was panicking. You were being pulled towards Vic, and all the others were having no trouble at all standing perfectly still. You lost your footing, felt a rush of sand in your mouth, and while you tried clinging to a number of ankles, they all kicked you away and laughed as you, alone, were pulled back to the dead boy. Then, having fallen into the grave, having found yourself clutching that boy and breathing deep against his chest again, you both fell through the sand. As the light disappeared, replaced only by the cool rush of flowing sand, you knew nobody could hear your screaming. The dark faded still darker, and an impermeable black overtook everything.

That same blackness shrank away and took the shape of a thin tie hanging around the neck of a fantastically morose young man. Between tears, he lamented the death of his best friend. He laughed when he recalled for the crowd how he'd first met Vic. And he had a laugh that would make the sun sweat. For the first time that day, you found yourself perfectly enthralled. The man, whose face you were certain you'd have remembered if you'd seen it before, spoke on how he'd met Vic in a course on English drama. For a class project, they'd been paired up and performed a scene as Mephistopheles and Faustus. The crowd laughed with the man when he told them that Vic had grown to be a bit more than a devil on his shoulder during one of their late-night rehearsals. He ended his eulogy by thanking everyone for coming and saying that he would forever hold Victor in his heart as a loyal friend, a faithful confidant, and a loving husband.

It was as if your glasses shattered right into your eyes. A coarse chortling rose up from the funeral, through the trees, and soaked the clouds above with its ironic intonations. The sound swelled to a booming laugh, scaring off the birds

and darkening the clouds. One would have been forgiven for mistaking it for thunder had it not been for the laugh's bitter anguish. You looked around to find where the noise was coming from, searching for whatever lonely god had found comedy in the afternoon's proceedings.

Too quickly were you distracted from your search, as your eyes were drawn to the surrounding trees that had all sprouted countless nectarines. They were plump and ripe for the picking. But then all at once they fell to the ground. Some splattered on impact, throwing their guts into the tempest that was rising up around the cemetery. Those that were able to keep their form rotted, and that rot transformed into ash and was picked up by the wind and blown away all the same.

Just as soon as the first batch of nectarines had vanished, another harvest of brilliant orange fruit sprouted, and repeated their rapid cycle of disintegration all over again. The eldritch laughter punctuated this cycle of growth and decay, all the while shifting its pitch to stir the winds into an irresistible blight.

Perhaps, you thought, the Rapture had finally arrived. Here, angels might descend and anoint the worthy, carrying the lightest of souls off to heaven to join Vic. In the face of eternity, years spent in self-denial might flutter by like seconds. Surely the promise of a never evanescent joy washed away years of aching for a way to change a heart.

But those angels never came, and from a cramp arising in your jaw you found the laughter was coming from yourself. This realization brought forth the taste of hayseed, and its stench flowed through every crevice of your mouth. You pressed your fingernails deep into your mouth to scrape out the smell, to block off the laughing, to cut off your own breath long enough to escape consciousness. But nothing changed. Blood jetticed from your gums and cheeks, but your laugh still flooded out, and the field of hay still sowed its seed

somewhere in the back of your throat. Shreds of skin fell from your fingers and formed piles on the tops of your shoes. As the skin was picked up by the storm, you fell to your knees and began pounding your head against the ground. But still the laughter rang on. Like a memory, your own fist slammed into your cheek and shook loose your jaw.

The laughter stopped, and was replaced by the low ringing of your uvula tolling against the sides of your throat. If you'd had breakfast that morning, you certainly would have lost it then. As your uvula rang, it lowered itself down your throat, shaking your insides and deepening the tone of its melody. You pulled it forward with your tongue and bit down, hard enough to sever it entirely and send it hurtling towards your stomach, where it clattered like a fallen gong, its final resonance carrying with it the song of the forlorn and forsaken lover.

When you looked up from the tops of your well-polished shoes, you found yourself standing in a line of sorts with a cold clump of soil in your hand. Friends and family were sprinkling Vic with his final inheritance. Some did so with nothing but a sullen frown, others whispered parting words, or left him with a final soft sob. Each handful of dirt covered his casket like so many acts of forgiveness. Forgiveness for him for having died too soon, forgiveness for him for having left things unsaid, forgiveness for him for having ever lived in this pain-soaked world at all. Strangers and old memories alike passed before you and tossed their earth upon him. With each particle of dirt, Vic was cut off further from the world above, made all the more distant from those that had gathered to bid him farewell.

This time everyone was watching you. As your fingers tightened around your clump of soil, they watched your knuckles threaten to tear the skin of your hands. Silent as the grave, those gathered mourners considered your tears as

they streamed down your cheeks. You put the soil in your jacket pocket and left the funeral. You didn't owe Vic a thing anyway. The bastard would be buried just as well without your help.

\*\*\*

How long did you sit in your car? It had begun to rain at some point, and you felt hours slip by as you tried to count the droplets as they broke against your sunroof. And when you felt a dull hunger rise up in your stomach, did you even know why you took the soil from your pocket and ate it?

You swallowed handful after handful of the dirt from your pocket, but it refused to end. Your stomach grew swollen and your throat dry. Soon you began to heave, and the possibility of throwing up the mountain you'd eaten all over your dash became increasingly likely. But still you kept on, filling in the pit Vic had dug at the bottom of your stomach. Forcing the earth into your maw and washing it down with tears, you gorged yourself on the soil meant for Vic's grave. And then, when your fingers finally found the lining of your jacket pocket, you smiled.

Exhausted, you dared to give yourself up to your dreams. With a body full of earth, if there was something to be learned from the day, you deigned to let your unconscious mind figure it out. But as the rain pitter-pattered on, sleep failed to take you.

Your eyes still sticky with tears, you watched as the sun fell beneath the trees and was replaced by a thin sliver of the moon that quickly took its place behind the storm clouds. A gurgling began to ring around your stomach, and there seemed only one thing to do.

You opened your car door, and, finding that your legs were unable to support both your weight and the mass of earth you'd swallowed, collapsed to the wet pavement. Pressing your hands against the ground, you crawled forward. Grass

flicked against your chin as you dragged yourself towards Vic. His grave seemed impossibly far away, its unsettled soil an impossible finish line. Your clothes took in the rainwater and going forward became all the more difficult, but still you pressed on, bearing the load of your stomach like an Olympic torch on the eve of the games. The wind blew against your face and sent a rush of jitters from your jaw to your toes. The chill numbed all your pain and steadied your resolve. You pressed on.

With bloodied hands and knees, you lifted yourself up before Vic's grave, and emptied your stomach onto it. The mass of dirt you'd swallowed fountained from your throat and joined the brown earth that had been shoveled atop the coffin. The flow of soil that had begun so fierce soon slowed to a trickle of muddy clumps. You heaved out the last of it and let your stained spit dribble off your lips. A final effort, arising from the bottom of your stomach, sent a final mound of dirt, blood, and bile onto the grave. And atop that final clump sat a shining copper bell. It made no sound as it sank into the earth, almost concealing itself in the mud.

With what little energy you had left, you reached into the mess and retrieved the bell. It was warmer than it had any right to be. And though you could see a small metal ball shifting around inside it, it refused to ring no matter how hard you shook it. Held between your hands, the bell without a toll kept you warm as you laid down atop the dead man's grave. Beside you sat an extinguished candle, decorated with the visage of the Virgin Mary, which in turn was surrounded by several bouquets of already wilting flowers. It was there, amongst those thinning pedals and that lost flame, that you spent one final night with Vic. Pressing the bell against your breast, you waited for its ring to return. Though, as sleep finally overtook you, the only sound that entered into the graveyard was that of the pouring rain.

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## But This One Has a Happy Ending

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**Andreana Lozano**

You sell flowers by the docks.

Bundles of red and white roses to ladies in cashmere coats and fine dresses, dandelions and daisies for the young couples, and marigolds in late fall for the family altar. In the spring, the fay trade you stones and sea glass for snapdragons and baby's-breath. The sailors bring you pearls and foreign seeds, and you give them the white lilies that they scatter in the sea at dawn when the water is a still mirror, reflecting the pale light of the rising sun. Delicate, snow white petals floating in liquid silver, an honor to those lost to the depths.

You sell flowers and listen to the dockside devotees talk. They chatter with bright and bitter voices. Young men, women, and the occasional fay, each waiting for the sea to return a wandering lover or long longed-for face. You know that when the ships pull in, many will be left tear-stained and brokenhearted, the flowers they've bought thrown into the sea in grief or trampled underfoot in rage.

You sell flowers. You wake up early and carry stalks of sunflowers and larkspurs to your shop. You cut your fingers trimming stems and trade living color for gold and glass. And you pretend that you are not waiting, you pretend that you are satisfied. You pretend that you do not feel a pain in your chest, a strangling ache, as if vines are crushing your lungs and clawing up your throat. You pretend that you do not know what pulls you from your bed before light and compels you to the cliffside to search the sea with hungry eyes and watch the dawn break over the waves.

But he comes back.

There is cheering at the docks, the first day of summer. The sun is hot and furious in the open sky and the light catches his hair, highlighting the fiery, gold strands amidst the softest, deepest brown. He stands at the bow of the ship, looking out at the docks with windswept hair and shining eyes, like some returning hero from a children's tale.

Fool, you whisper beneath your breath. But your lips twist into a smile before you can help it.

As soon as his boots hit the dirt, he is swarmed by the joyful crowd. Old sailors and shopkeepers thump him heartily on the back and laugh at his ostentatious return. Young men dog his footsteps like lovestruck puppies, vying for his attention, for one story of the sea beyond the sea, as the girls and matrons of the town giggle at his gifts of seashells and soft-spoken words.

Flatterer, you murmur, but the sharp flash of jealousy stings all the same.

You have missed the vibrant echo of his voice in the harbor. The wicked sharpness of his wit. The somber concern he shows for all the little woes that fortune has wrought over the long season. The brilliant delight that dances across his face when he hears of all the triumphs and joys he's missed. Somehow, the air itself seems lighter for his being there.

You don't expect him to visit your shop, and he doesn't. You have always been little more than strangers to each other. Distant ships circling in the same harbor. Never colliding, never getting closer.

But you imagine that his eyes meet yours for a moment before he is carried away by the jubilant swarm, and that his raised hand of greeting was meant for you, and not some more familiar face in the crowd. You indulge these little fantasies. And you tell yourself that it's enough.

\*\*\*

Dusk comes creeping over the docks with a sweeping, sighing sea breeze. Deep shadows and warm, fading light. You look out the window of the shop and the sea is aflame, brilliant swathes of orange and yellow as far as your eyes can see. You close your eyes to the light, and you breathe in the scent of salt and lavender and rose.

The bell over the shop door chimes brightly and you are startled from your absent thoughts. A scuffling, jovial group of young men stumble in. He is amongst them, red-faced and laughing, leaning on the shoulders of his companions, clearly drunk on liquor or life — you can't tell. But he sways and staggers through the rows of bundled flowers and glass vases, hands hovering over the blossoms as he makes his selection.

He draws out a single long-stemmed rose and brings it to you.

“How much for this lovely flower?” he asks with a smile. His eyes are dark in the warm shadows cast by the evening light, and you cannot remember if they are green or gray. Your breath catches in your throat, but you manage to spit out an answer.

“One silver piece, or three strands of sea glass.”

It's a price far too high for a single white rose, but you know it is better to drive a hard bargain with a child of the sea than to ask for too little and receive nothing but the taste of brine on your tongue in return.

He laughs. A sharp, bright laugh, like the edge of an albatross's wing, like waves crashing gleefully under the midday sun. He holds the rose with one hand and with the other draws something from his jacket pocket.

“Will this satisfy your price?”

The sand dollar rests perfectly in his palm. A flawless circle, as pale as the petals of the rose he desires. It's beautiful, more beautiful than the finest flowers you could trade.

“Yes,” you say, and the sand dollar is still warm from his hand as you slip it gently into your apron pocket, “it satisfies.”

He twirls his long-stemmed rose between his fingers and beams. He turns suddenly away from you and then, just as quickly, he turns back. By some sleight of hand, the white rose has become a red rose, and he presents it to you with flourish.

“A gift,” he declares, “for the loveliest flower in this seaside land.”

His fellows heckle and shout good-naturedly, but he is unashamed. Your cheeks, however, flush hot and red, and the proper words escape you as he presses the rose into your hand, tenderly wrapping your fingers around its stem. So you say nothing.

It is a fully bloomed rose, though it’s pressed and crushed slightly in places, likely from being confined to a coat pocket or clenched in sweaty hands. You touch the petals and they are softer than satin, softer than silk. Something burns low and happy in your chest.

You look up, but he’s already gone. Your only companion is the faint chime of the bell above the door.

There’s a sharp wrench in your lungs, and you drop the flower and sprint to the backdoor.

You collapse in the alleyway right as the coughing begins. It burns, it burns as you cough and gasp and gag. Pale petals spew forth from your lips, blood-speckled and wet, and your eyes blur with tears. Your stomach heaves and you try to vomit, but nothing comes out as you beat your fists against the ground in frustration. There’s something in your throat, and it chokes you. You claw desperately at your neck and stick your fingers into your mouth, and you draw it out. Slowly, slowly and it burns all the way, but at last you are free of it and you sob in relief, drawing in greedy gulps of sweet air.

Through hazy eyes you look back through the door. The deep red rose lies on the shop floor, bathed in glittering dust and golden light, and you remind yourself that it means nothing, a single strange gift is no sure sign of anything more than a boy's brief interest.

You tell yourself that you mustn't care.

You don't care.

But the long, twisting garland of coral roses that you've wrenched out is a bloody, spit-coated accusation on the ground.

It isn't uncommon. You remind yourself of this as you stand on shaking legs. You know it isn't uncommon. You've worked long enough at the docks. You've seen buttercups and aster fall from the lips of the young and passionate, and seen the angry and brokenhearted yank out bunches of butterfly weed and throw them at the feet of the sailor or landbound lover that had scorned them. You've watched the grief-stricken shades that haunt the rocky cliffs above the wharf gently pull white lilies from between their lips and toss them into the sea. White lilies, like giant snowflakes, drifting dreamily down, only to drown in the crashing depths.

The flowers mean something, they always have.

You walk back into the shop. You pick the long-stemmed rose off the ground.

You frown. There is something about the color, a deep, brilliant red that flecks and fades in the grooves between petals. It's too deep, too dark, like the flower has been stained by berry juice or blood.

You shake your head and lay the flower on your workbench. Who can understand the whims and ways of the seabound, after all?

The lucky ones get happy endings. And there are lucky ones, however few. Flowers and promises mutually given, chests cracked open to reveal that sacred space, and the growth

halted and healed by the gift of another's love, perhaps even by the trading of hearts.

But you know better than to hope. The less lucky receive only dead vines and dust. And you've tasted withered daffodils, like poison in your mouth, before.

So this is what you tell yourself as you carefully dry those coral roses in the sun, as you hang the preserved garland above your bedroom window in your little coveside cottage, far from the docks, as you place that perfect sand dollar in a glass box and mount it over the mantle. You tell yourself this: You cannot have him. You shall never have him. Better to know the ache and wrench of vines around your lungs than to hear those bitter words of rejection which will only cut you both and irreversibly sour the air between you.

So you will not hope.

You will go to the docks every day, and you will bury your desire beneath pleasant smiles and clipped words. You'll watch him laugh under the sun, watch the light shatter in his wild hair and dance across his gentle face, and you will cough up rose petals into the palm of your hand and you will let him see nothing. And when he gives you courtesy, a smile, a glance into those mirthful eyes, you will remind yourself that it is no more than what he gives to any other.

But you will dream.

By God, you will dream.

It will fade in time. The rose he gave you will wither and dry, and you will place it into a leaden box, and you will hide that box in the deepest corner of the storeroom closet, and you will lock the door. And, eventually, the vines and flowers that choke your lungs will also wither away and the ache will lessen, and the desire too shall pass, fading into mist like a child's forgotten fever dream.

But it doesn't.

\*\*\*

As summer wanes the weather turns ill. The elder fay who bless the ships and sea cast their markers and read poor fortune in the bones. Few are foolish enough to tempt fate and, come fall, not one ship has left the harbor.

So that reckless, windswept child of the sea has no choice but to stay landbound till the weather turns. He wanders the docks, and laughter follows in his footsteps. He carries conversation as though it's a dance, like it's a game, and no one can resist it.

But if it is a game, it is one of his own devising, and he holds his cards close to his chest. And you wonder if the shopkeepers and sailors, the fellows and the hopeful lovers, notice that they always give more than they get.

Yet he is good-natured and genuine. Never forgets a promise or lets slip an unkind word, and he spends his days in honest work, repairing sails and running lines from the highest masts, readying the ships for spring. And if he falls asleep amongst the rolls of rope or becomes caught up in a street game of jacks and whiskey, these faults are easily forgiven. Because the knots he ties hold strong and the stitches in the sails he mends are even and small and there are very few quite as clever as him.

He smiles and banters and makes merry. But you see him in the morning, before dawn, as you set out your wares and open the shutters of the shop. He walks by the water in the heavy morning mist, watching the churning, angry sea with hungry eyes, and you wonder how long this harbor will hold him.

Your desire remains and you learn the name of it, as you choke up sunflowers and yellow marigolds: love. It is love, not the open, absolute love that only time and trial can birth, but it is love all the same, and the yawning, gaping ache in your chest only grows deeper with every passing day.

You lie awake at night, listen to the crash and roar of the sea; you get up in the morning and wrench weeds from the garden, plant choice seeds and prepare bouquets. When the flowers you've coughed up become overflowing piles, you gather them up and release armfuls of blossoms into the air over the cliffs and you watch them disappear into the sea. And you carry on.

Because he will leave when the weather turns, and you will miss him once again. But you have lived with that pain before.

\*\*\*

“Where do your flowers come from?” He is sitting at your workbench, watching as you diligently putter about the shop. You pray he cannot hear the gleeful singing of your heart, so prettily proud to be the brief object of his attention, or see how your fingers tremble as you tidy unruly bunches of jonquils and honey flowers.

“I grow them,” you tell him. “I have a greenhouse and garden. I trade for foreign seeds and for the blessing of landbound fay, so that the flowers blossom even in winter.”

“Clever. I often wondered. Your shop is always filled with more color than all the shops I’ve visited in other ports, and your flowers are finer as well.” He sighs. “The garden must be beautiful.”

“It is. Would you like to see it?”

A thousand curses on your mouth’s promptness.

But then he smiles, and your heart is fire in your chest. “I’d love to.”

It is a long trek from the docks to your cliffside cottage and he talks gaily all the way, rambling on about the ships, the seasons, and the sea beyond the sea. You keep your lips pressed tightly together, terrified that a revealing flower may try to escape. But you smile at his wit, and you let his voice wash over you, and you envy whoever will have this forever.

The clouds are puffy and swollen in the gloomy evening sky by the time you reach the cottage, and the sea is murky and deceptively still. In the distance, thunder rumbles ominously and the wind is a biting breath against your face as you open the garden gate.

It is a beautiful garden; this you can say easily and with pride. By the strength of your own hands and your resourcefulness, you've cultivated a massive garden brimming with color and shape. And you trade the sight of your greatest work for these few moments of his time.

There are flowers and plants from every continent known to man or fay, fully blossomed and stretching to the sky. Rows and rows of vivid pinks, purples, blues, reds, golds, yellows, and hues for which there are no names. The greenhouse, finely built with sheets of thick glass, overflows with life. Tall cacti, long, sweeping orchids and strange plants with luminous petals that capture the curiosity of your guest.

“I grew them from seeds given to me by a passing fay from the inland,” you explain. You do not tell him that she also gave you breathless, lovely words, and left only bitter disappointment in her wake.

“They’re beautiful, all of it is beautiful.” His eyes are fierce with the conviction of this compliment and you find yourself turning away, your cheeks unbearably warm.

You touch the delicate petals of a trailing orchid. “They’re only flowers,” you say softly, “and they’re all I have.”

The rain comes down in an icy sheet when you exit the greenhouse. The soil is already turning soft, and it sticks to your shoes as you take his hand and run across the yard to the cottage door.

The two of you stand in the foyer, dripping water onto the floor and panting. You meet his eyes and your grin matches his. The cold water is sharp and exhilarating on your skin, but your hand is warm. You realize that you are still holding onto

him and you flush and quickly pull away with a mumbled promise to be back shortly with towels.

When you return you find him staring at the sand dollar, still displayed in the glass box above the mantle. He turns and the vines in your chest wrench terribly and you wonder how you could ever forget the green-gray shade of those eyes, as deep as the depths of the dark winter sea.

“You liked it?”

“Of course,” you reply. “It’s beautiful. It’s the most unblemished one I’ve ever seen.”

“I can find you more,” he promises fiercely, “a whole string of them, a thousand even. For you, if you wanted them.”

You stand there, puzzled, as rainwater drips down and soaks into the carpet. “Why?”

You don’t know if you mean why would you ever need a thousand sand dollars or why he should go through all that effort for you, a florist whom he hardly knows. But he flushes, the first time you’ve ever seen red color those cheeks, and he turns away and coughs into the crook of his arm.

Brilliant red rose petals fall like gentle, flaming embers onto the floor.

And you wonder how two people can be so foolish for so long.

He won’t meet your eye, standing still and shamefaced. There are kinder ways to reveal that his feelings are reciprocated, but you have lived with this wretched ache in your chest since that day, five years past, when you watched him gently weave white lilies into a wreath and set them afloat in the quiet waters of bay. So you march up to him and you tear open your chest and you demand his attention.

“Look,” you order.

Flesh and bone and muscle part easily beneath your fingers and reveal the sacred cavity of your chest. It burns, it burns like your skin is aflame, and the blood runs down your hands

and pools on the floor. But you don't care, because your heart is singing, and you can hear it, a joyful, indescribable sound, like a thousand warbling birds, like shattering glass, or rolling thunder. It is the sound of the surf crashing on the rocks and the sound of sunlight on an outstretched flower. It is the impossible noise of every feeling you cannot put into words.

You know what your chest must look like. You've stood by the mirror and pulled open your ribs and marked the progress of every creeping vine and blooming flower. So often you'd wondered how much it would hurt to take your garden shears and cut that growth from your chest, how much it would truly hurt to tear out your whole heart and toss it down into the waves.

You know that there are coral roses encircling your lungs, carnations peeping from between every rib. There are sunflowers blooming from your heart, the organ raw and swollen and gleaming bright with passion. It rests heavily in a nest of blood red rose petals.

You know also that there are thin, sharp cracks amongst the sunflowers, and that deep within the heart cavity there is a sprig of dried daffodils, left behind by a traveling inland fay, who passed a pleasant summer with you and left without courtesy when fall came.

But these wounds will wait. For now, you can only watch the startled face of the boy in your foyer and hope.

His green-gray eyes have gone wide and his mouth parts silently. For a long, terrible moment you wonder if you have misjudged, if the rose petals were for someone else. But then his fingers find the collar of his shirt and he slips it open, button by button, and he tugs open his chest.

There are red and white roses wrapped around every rib and honeysuckle vines hug his fragile lungs. His heart rests in a bed of paper clippings and pressed white lilies, wrapped in

old newspaper. He takes it out and pulls away the wet, red-stained paper, and you hear its song. It is the deep, drumming song of wind over water, of sails cracking beneath the blows of a summer storm, of dancing fish and fresh flowers and fire in the dead of winter. And his heart shines red and full.

There are withered hydrangeas amongst the clippings and the lilies, and you can faintly smell their bitter sweetness. But these too can wait.

For now, you stand, two fearful people with bloody hands and open hearts, each waiting for the other to speak the first word.

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Winter is warmer with a companion beside you. You sleep more soundly in a shared bed and the days pass more pleasantly.

You learn how to tie knots with heavy rope that will not loosen under the strain of the north wind and how to tell when the tide will turn. You teach him how to select flowers for cutting, how to make an arrangement for a funeral, how to make an arrangement for a birth. If the dockside thinks you an odd couple, no one says so to your face and you walk proudly and laugh easily with him beside you. And the weeks turn into months and the flame in your chest does not wither or weaken.

You wake up before dawn, the first morning of spring. You listen carefully and you hear his soft breathing in the darkness of your cottage room, and you hear the gentle rustle of the wreath of coral roses above the window. But you do not hear the menacing rumble of distant thunder, or the shriek of wild wind, and the roar of the sea is steady and strong.

You feel his fingers tenderly trace the shape of your spine and his lips press warm kisses against your neck and into your hair. You lie still in the darkness and your breath is calm.

You know that when daylight breaks, he will be gone.

But you are not worried. When you wake to an empty bed, you will stand on steady feet, you will slip on boots and heavy clothes, you will take your coat and your bag, and you will lock the cottage door behind you.

You will run down the cliffside path to the docks and you will chase him to the sea beyond the sea.

You will feel the sting of saltwater on your face, feel the wind in your hair, and the sun on your skin, and you will laugh with the thrill of it.

And you will not worry about losing your way.

Because you are following the sound of your heart, beating away in his chest.

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# One Day In Oregon

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**Andreana Lozano**

It appears on June 5th, and I'm in Oregon, of all places, traveling up a god-forsaken strip of coastal road on a summer vacation that doubles as both a wedding anniversary excursion and a chance for Ana to examine the crustacean sea-creatures of the northwest coast. In the span of three days, we've traveled less than 80 miles, scouring the beaches and tidepools for creepy ocean crawlers that scurry about like manic, armored spiders and make all the hair on the back of my neck stand on end. At night, we sleep in dilapidated bed-and-breakfast resorts that offer only the bare blessing of shelter against the icy Pacific winds, the final few kisses of a long winter.

But for all my half-hearted grumbling about the overcast sky, hard beds, and constant rain, I am happier than I've been in a long time. My only real complaint are the goddamn gas prices, which have been cheerfully increasing since our arrival. So this is where I am on June 5th, at the only gas station for thirty miles in any direction, in Oregon, debating between premium, which promises better mileage, or standard, which promises to be cheaper. Ana is in the car, bare feet on the dash, scrolling through her phone. I pick premium and watch in distress as the numbers soar.

Ana flings open the car door, scrambles out, and walks, still barefoot, to the edge of the station and looks up.

“Honey,” she says, “There’s an alien in the sky.”

Well, when your wife says something like that, it really puts rising gas prices into perspective.

So, that’s June 5th; by June 15th we have determined that,

despite its massive size, the figure hovering just outside our planetary atmosphere somehow has no mass.

On July 31st, I am six-hundred miles above the earth, on the first manned mission to investigate the apparition since its sudden arrival.

Our four-person crew maintains a jovial attitude throughout prep and launch. Even our stone-faced captain makes a passing effort at humor. There is an unspoken certainty that if we stop laughing at the absurdity of our circumstances, we will be forced to reckon with the reality of it all. We are not alone in the universe.

But when we arrive, all our feeble attempts at blitheness vanish like light into a black hole. As one, our small crew silently presses against the wide glass windows of our shuttle and *beholds* —

I'm barely aware of my open mouth, of the air stolen from my lungs, of the cold glass at my fingertips, of my weightless body; all that matters is my brain's desperate struggle to understand, to comprehend, and catalogue what my eyes are seeing.

We have all seen pictures, of course, from satellites and the unmanned vessels that had gone before us. We have seen the creature from Earth, a pale apparition on the morning horizon, like the moon, during daylight and at night, an ethereal figure outshining the stars with its eerie, green light. It all means nothing.

We understand now, without a word, that it is real. It is here. And as I stare into its eyes, as wide and deep and dark as the ocean off the Oregon coast, I know, without a doubt, that it is staring back at me.

Yet somehow in the face of something so massive, so out-worldly and terrifying, all I can think of is Ana, six-hundred miles away. I wonder if she's looking up right now.

It's a blur from then on, a solid 48 hours that passes like a hazy daydream. We note the things we knew before. The creature is a twisted vision of a human female and something other, something tentacled and sharp-toothed, filled with strange light and stranger darkness.

We establish that the creature, despite its magnificent scale and form, appears to pose no threat to our little planet. We try to explain, in words that cannot capture the breadth of our meaning, our certainty that it is as aware of us as we are of it. We do not notice the changes. We do not notice the touch of light upon us. It is all a blur. A dream half-remembered and better forgotten.

They greet us with screams and shielded eyes when we return.

Ana and I move to Oregon. We buy a cottage in a tiny seaside town, where I have the blessed anonymity of being the crazy astronomer married to the crazy marine biologist instead of the woman who was touched by an alien. I cover my hair. I cover my eyes. All the rest can be excused as a trick of the light on pale skin.

I don't shave off the hair, though the razor tempts me from its place in the bathroom cupboard, because Ana likes it. "Magical," she says, with a smile that would break the devil.

She is writing a paper right now, seated by the window in an old, wooden rocking chair. The paper is about the unique mating rituals of a blue lobster that has only just been discovered. The thing dances, apparently. An evolutionary absurdity, in my opinion, but Ana is happy and that is all that matters.

Sometimes, late on moonless nights, we run down to the beach and tumble in the sand like teenagers, and I kiss down the spray of freckles that runs from her face to her chest, and she laughs and uncovers my hair which glows like stardust in the dark and curls gently above my head, defying gravity

as though it never really left space; and I swear, as we tangle together on this god-forsaken beach in Oregon, in full view of the wide universe, I swear I see that strange apparition in the sky look down at us and smile.

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# The Wish-Baby

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Stephanie Pickrell

Nestled in the depths of the forest of Drood, not far from the source of the river Darling, there was a town called Ballad. Ballad was a small town, little more than a village, but the people of Ballad were strong like the mountains and tall like the trees of their home. In another time, perhaps, the Balladians would have been known far and wide for their size, but Ballad was only a small town. Nobody ever came to Ballad.

Except Widow Agnes's lover, years ago. Everyone called her that now, even though she wasn't really a widow—her love had come to Ballad from the west and died two days before the wedding when an old tree fell on him in a storm. Her name wasn't really Agnes, either, but it was the name the older children had given her when they saw her staring into the trees with wide, lamb eyes or dropping lonely pebbles into the creek. Widow Agnes was also Crazy Agnes, but mostly she wasn't crazy, just too sad to be young and too young to be sad.

It was ten years after the stranger had come to Ballad, and it was the first truly sunny day of the year, when the light flickered down from the sky to dance on sullen patches of snow. Widow Agnes found the baby when she opened the door.

It lay on the doorstep, naked and awake. It cooed at her brightly, and giggled.

She only stared at it, at her, at first. And then she reached up her arms to her, and for the first time in years, Widow Agnes cried.

The first day, Agnes fed the baby mush and made diapers out of rags and rocked her to sleep. She bounced her on her knee and pressed her face to hers and sang lullabies until her voice was hoarse. They fell asleep together in the bed that was once a wedding present, and all night long the baby never wailed.

The second day, they played peek-a-boo beneath the window and whistled nonsense songs while Agnes knitted a blanket of the softest wool. The baby ate when Agnes fed her and slept when she rocked her, and in between there was nothing but smiles. She was the perfect baby girl.

The third day, Agnes took the baby to Granny Esther.

“It’s not a baby,” Granny said. She was peeling potatoes and hurling the peels into a metal trough by her feet, for the pigs. Violet and Indigo, Granny’s teenage granddaughters, had taken Agnes’s baby, and the three were playing by the plum trees, squishing mud between their toes.

Agnes watched Violet tickle her baby’s stomach, and the baby squealed in delight. “Then what is it?” she asked.

“It’s a wish.” Granny didn’t look up from the potatoes.

“A wish,” Agnes repeated. Indigo dangled her hair down at the baby, who grabbed huge fistfuls of it and stuffed it in her mouth. “What kind of wish?”

Granny shrugged. “Bad wish, good wish, little wish, doesn’t matter. Strong wish, usually. Don’t get many wishes that just peel your potatoes, or at least not ones you’d notice. But the problem ones are the big ones. Folks wish for love or life or loss.”

Violet and the baby had entered a screaming contest. Indigo was judging. “Problems?” Agnes asked.

“That baby’s not a person. It’s a wish.” Granny was nearing the end of her potatoes. “And now it’ll do whatever you wish for, anything at all.”

“Is that a bad thing?”

Granny shrugged. "Some people might think so." She finished the last potato, tucked the knife in her apron, and heaved up the pig trough. She carried it around the edge of the house, and Agnes watched her go.

More screaming made her move again. Violet had slipped in the mud and was blaming Indigo. As she watched, Indigo scooped up a fresh handful of mud and flung it toward Violet's face. She missed by several yards while the baby squealed with excitement.

Agnes picked her up, wiped the mud off her feet, and murmured her goodbyes to the girls, who were far too deep in the bonds of sisterly affection to hear her. She went home, the baby babbling against her chest all the way.

In the evening, Agnes rocked her baby to sleep, dancing with her around the kitchen to music she only heard in her head. She stopped only once the baby had fallen asleep, fist pressed next to her face. "Are you a real baby?" Agnes whispered.

The baby gave no answer, only yawned in her sleep.

The fourth day, Agnes took the baby to the doctor. He wasn't a real doctor; after all, Ballad was only a small town, but he did know some things, and sometimes even more than Granny Esther. Agnes explained about the wish, and he frowned very thoughtfully.

"Looks like a baby to me," the doctor said finally, and Agnes thanked him for his expertise.

She was walking back along the river bank when it happened. The side was steep, the rocks were sharp, and the baby was heavy against her chest. She wished for her to be lighter.

And she was. The baby grew lighter and lighter until she escaped her blanket. She dangled in the air before Agnes and laughed and laughed with glee.

“You’re not a baby,” Agnes said to her, to it. “You’re just a wish.”

It laughed again in her face and floated higher in the air.

“And I wish,” Agnes said, swallowing back the lump that rose too easily in her throat. “I wish you would go away.”

It didn’t. Instead it giggled, hiccupped, and drifted down, down, until it was again snug in the blanket in Agnes’s arms. It smiled once and drifted off to sleep.

Agnes stood frozen by the river bank. Slowly, like a cat stalking a bird, she slipped the blanket from her arms, baby included, and placed the bundle where she stood. And then, slow as death, she walked backwards.

It cried, just as Agnes stepped out of sight. But she had been expecting that, because she had felt herself wish for it, and that was when she turned and ran back to Ballad.

When she got back to her house, she was breathing hard and her chest hurt, but she didn’t let herself sit still. She tended the garden, hacked up the dirt that was still hard and ugly from the winter, and set to sweeping every speck of dust from the house that had been built for many more than just herself.

She made it until night, but when she went to bed she slipped again. The wedding-present bed was large and soft, but it wasn’t warm. She could spread out her arms in the middle and not touch either side. She wished, then, when the draft blew past her ears, and something cried outside her door.

After a moment, Agnes got up, crossed to the door, and opened it, taking the baby in her arms again. It stopped crying and immediately went to sleep. Its tiny fists clenched and unclenched like it was grasping a dream. Agnes placed it next to her pillow, lay down beside it, and watched it until her eyes closed.

The fifth day, Agnes got up at dawn, and then she walked with the baby to Granny Esther's.

“Only way to get rid of a wish is to stop wishing,” Granny said. She was washing the dirt off a pile of early spring flowers and tying them into little bundles. “But it’s hard. Especially when it’s a familiar wish, a comfort wish. We wish in our dreams, in our nightmares, while we’re picking cherries from the trees.”

Indigo had gone to visit her beau, and Violet was alone with the baby. She was tossing it up and down, and it screamed with glee. It made eye contact with Agnes from across the trees, smiling, but Agnes looked quickly away. She heard it start crying.

“Have you gotten wishes before?” Agnes asked.

“Oh, plenty,” Granny smiled, and looked up for once at Agnes. But it was gone as quickly as it came. “Granted, maybe none as sticky as that one you have.”

The baby was screaming over Violet’s song, but Agnes kept her eyes on Granny’s calloused fingers. “How did you stop wishing?”

“Throwing ‘em off a cliff generally works,” Granny said, oblivious to Agnes’s stare. “There’s a lot of finality in it, you see. You’ve thought about it a lot once you’ve gotten to the top. And your mind stops playing the wishing game once you see it break on the rocks at the bottom. Finality, like I said.” She took a bundle of small white flowers off the stack, brushed it with her hand, and held it out. “For you,” she said. “Something real to hold.”

Agnes took it, and held it close to her chest.

That day, Agnes sang rhymes to the baby again, made more carrot mush, and watched over it all afternoon as it slept. She fed the baby dinner on the floor of the kitchen.

“Careful,” Agnes murmured, using the spoon to scoop up the excess around its mouth.

“Ma,” the baby said, burbling. “Ma,” it said again, and reached for Agnes’s face.

Agnes froze. She closed her eyes and felt a slimy hand grab her nose. She let it travel over her face, clumsily tracing her mouth and her eyes and leaving smears of carrot in her nose. “Just a wish,” she whispered.

They slept together in the wedding-present bed again. But this time Agnes stayed awake long into the night, watching the baby’s chest go up and down, up and down.

The sixth day, Agnes got up at dawn. She packed a bag with diapers and carrot mush and started walking with the still sleeping baby slung across her front, heading for the canyons that lined the mountains to the north of Ballad. She stopped twice to change the baby and feed it. It was nearly evening when she reached a ravine deep enough and steep enough for her purpose.

It cried, then. Wailing, ear-splitting cries like a real baby would give, a baby who was sick or hungry or tired. Agnes didn’t know if it was because it knew, or if it was because she was still wishing for it, wishing for a sign that it was a baby and not a wish. She stroked its head, admiring its sleekness, and wiped the tears from under its big, sad eyes. She held it out, carefully, admiring it as if she had created it herself. And then she let go.

She watched it fall. It did not rise in the air by itself this time, but fell, fell and screamed like a real baby would. She saw it hit, at the bottom, felt but didn’t hear the impact through the stones. And then she grasped the flowers that Granny Esther had given her and tried not to wish.

It was dark before she left the cliffs, and she found her slow way back by starlight. She took her time, partly from fear of falling in the dark, partly from the knowledge that she would not want to get up again. It was nearly dawn when she stumbled into her empty house, too exhausted to remove her

dusty clothes. She lay down for a moment on the bed that was too big for her, and tried not to think. But that was her mistake.

She wished. A second of regret, and then she heard the doorstep creak. A脚步声. A knock.

“Hello, my rose?” it said, after a heart-wrenching pause. “Darling, will you let me in? I know it’s been a long time, too long for the both of us. But I’m back now, I promise. For good.” She had cried when she found the baby. She didn’t cry now. She walked with slow, deliberate steps to the door, and rested her forehead on the rough wood.

“Darling?” The voice cracked. “It’s really me. I swear. You don’t have to be alone anymore.”

Agnes said nothing. She heard the creak of the step as the wish shifted its weight, felt the pressure of the wish’s forehead leaning on the other side of the door, mirroring her.

“Darling,” it whispered. “I love you.”

“My name is Agnes,” said Agnes. “And you’re just a wish.”

It disappeared. It made no noise when it left, but she felt the pressure leave from the other side of the door, felt the humming cease behind her ears. She didn’t go back to the wedding-present bed, but curled up on the floor by the oven and went to sleep with the baby-blanket under her head and the little white flowers held to her heart.

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# Starfruit

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**L. J. Dillard**

I am Kiếm Ngôi Sao, descendant of Kiếm Đỗ Thẩm. Not that the mention of even the most famous of Kiêms will get me anywhere nowadays. In my homeland, there are the names with power now and those without, and my family has long been without. Thus, I am a worker in the fields as my parents before me and my grandparents before them. But during our youth, my siblings and I heard much from our parents of how times were changing. Their parents had not worked as hard as we do even as farmers, and though they worked hard their efforts were rewarded. They were always fed. Now, their children and grandchildren are working harder than they ever did. Quiet smothers the city from the highest palace to the smallest hovel. We are hungry, we are busy, and the men are being gathered for battle.

I do not join the boys and my brothers, older and younger, to be trained in the art of war. I am not allowed. I am far too busy anyways, for there are always places to clean and keep, gardens and crops to tend, dishes and clothes to wash, and goods to transport. Also not allowed, however, is my twin brother, Mặt Trăng. Born without an arm, the soldiers passed over him when collecting all of the boys from homes. He stood silent and still as our other brothers began moving around again, preparing to leave to train in the arts of battle, staring at the bottom of the door. Back out in the fields, his shoulders and nón lá turned and bobbed as normal, but there was a tautness between his shoulder blades, like knotted rope. To me he said, “Sister, it is the duty of all the men to go to

war, and yet I couldn't go." A storm boiled in his eyes, even darker than the gray, heavy clouds above. "Yet, I'm glad to stay." Then his nón lá tipped downwards again, warding away the rest of his words, and we bent our backs and worked. I did not say it, but I am glad he stayed home too.

Lately, the seasons have been unkind, and earlier in the year the outskirts of the city were washed away by harrowing floods. Even my parents say that throughout their lifetimes, they never witnessed such torrential rain or angry, hungry waters. They were murky brown, they said, frothing and filled with teeth made of the buildings they destroyed. Many fields were ruined completely, as were some great stores of food, and many living things perished from plants to animals to people. Though we clean up the debris and try to rebuild, the soil is poisoned, and our numbers are far fewer. Nothing can be planted and tended that will grow, and our stores were already smaller than in the year preceding the destruction. This will be a very hard winter, and the year following will be worse. It does not help that since the winter before, many quantities of goods, much food included, started being carted away to the West. We of the lower houses find no time to complain or wonder where all of this is going or why; we just know it is aligned with the training of the men and boys for battle, and the gloom that settles slowly but oppressively onto all the land. And we bow our heads and keep working, and on days where food is rationed, we make soups out of the very weeds in the gardens out of hunger, for even the stores of rice have begun to fail us.

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The rain has begun again. Day in and day out, the sky is heavy and dark, and rain falls powerfully like a waterfall. It is endless. Already, we prepare for more flooding, but we cannot move entire fields. Whatever crops that have not perished in

the previous flood will surely fall this time. I have transplanted herbs from the garden into pots and keep them indoors, but even if they are saved from drowning, they will perish from the lack of sun. Inside, the air constantly smells of wet soil and damp, moldering wood and cloth. Our elders are falling ill from the cold and hunger, and we cannot even cleanse the evil about us because we are so lacking in food that we cannot set out offerings. Everything would be washed away, anyway.

My family is lucky. Our little house is fortunately placed atop a hill, and yesterday, as the waters rose and overtook the fields and gardens we watch over, our house was spared from destruction. Mát Trăng and I went out to stand in the cold water and desperate insects crawled up our legs, not caring that we might be predators. The ones that did not have the fortune to be dragged across us continued to be swept away, spindly legs sprawled across the water. Birds have also taken refuge so close as on our porch, and they sit miserably in the eaves, too sopping wet and exhausted to mind us. I am also exhausted, for I worked late into the rains transplanting as much as I could along with my older sisters. Meanwhile, Mát Trăng and our younger sisters stayed inside, grinding and grinding up powder for medicine. Now I am busy aiding our neighbors as the waters burst into their houses and swirl away with their possessions. Young Võ Phiền Muộn was washed away too, and Trần Yêu was trapped inside and drowned. Many more deaths are carried along by the water, ever-flowing, and our spirits are as damp and cold and miserable as the weather.

And more bad news continues to arrive. Previously, when the battles were only starting, the men were called away to battle with promises of honor, glory, or even money. "The West is weakening," the messengers promised. "Now is your chance to strike, to expand, to repay old grievances and claim good lands." And many men answered the call. Then, it moved on to each household, from the richest to the poorest,

needing to send at least one man away to fight in order to preserve their family's honor. An order from the Emperor was not to be ignored, else we would be fined or forced. The Kiéms were not exempt, and away went my older brothers, who were still enjoying the sweet nectar of strength and youth. But then it was made that every man must go to battle, even the aging men with illnesses and creaking joints, and the young men who were hardly even men. "The West is rising for a final strike in their death throes," we were told. "They will take as many as they can in their final revenge, masses running leaderless and honorless to burn and pillage what they can find." And so went away my father, despite his back pain that can climb to excruciating, and my little brothers, despite their small arms and bodies. The only two men in our house now are our grandfather, Măt Trăng, and Cây Nhỏ, the first whose coughing sounds as wet as the weather and the last still being a toddler in the arms of our mother. And people have protested, they certainly have! But then too much of a rabble was roused in neighborhoods across the city, with even some of the higher houses putting up a fight, and suddenly riding in from the West came hordes of strange men. Everything from their dress to the shapes of their bodies and faces is different; even their weapons are strange and cruel. Some of them, however, we recognized as inhabitants of our neighborlands, but they had no neighborly love to spare for us. Worst were the men who had turned against their homeland, cruelly policing and stealing from their own families. Stranger men and kinsmen alike were now of one army, and their only goal was to grow their numbers. Whoever resisted the loudest was beaten; protestors against this abuse were also beaten. With them also came the removal of the remaining food stores—they were the harbingers of empty homes and weed broth. To this day, they patrol the streets, and those who have no reason to be out of doors stay in. I am one who has reasons

to be out of doors, and I greatly despise their evil looks and the hands on their weapons. All that is left now are the men who are too old to hardly leave their houses and the women, as well as the boys too young to even hold shovels. In the fields, murmurs rise up from under turning and bobbing nón láς, softly unspooling through the rain old tales of women in battle, feasts, fruits from the ocean. Old tales of modern impossibilities. That night, as I lay next to Măt Trăng and we listen to the rain thrash the thatched roof, we speak of the sparkling blue ocean that shines like a gem in the sun. We speak of the white sand and the fishermans' nets and the fish left in the rocks when the tide goes out.

“There is something I miss even more than the sea on sunny days, though,” he says to me. Water is seeping in through the thatching somewhere and dripping dully onto the floor. It is raining so much the walls have begun to silently weep.

“What?” I ask.

“Fruit in the warm weather. Eating in the shade of the biggest longan tree.”

“Which fruit do you want most now?” I ask him.

It is too dark to see his face, but I know he stares at the ceiling as he thinks. Eventually he says to me, “Starfruit. Yellow, like the sun.”

We both try to ignore the gnawing in our bellies and the finger of water sliding across the floor to our mats; though it is hard, eventually we sleep.

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Now, now, those men are bursting into homes unannounced, not even removing their shoes indoors, and taking away any man that has not joined the battle in the West. “The Westerners are coming, and you are a coward who won’t defend your home.” I learned this today when I

walked to the market, where I found people bustling about in the cold and wet and heard the shrill voices screech against the rain. Little was being exchanged other than information, rushing and tumbling words. Many sons whose mothers loved and feared too much for them are being dragged away, I learned. And when I returned home with this news, I learned something else.

My twin brother is one of them.

With the rest of the men of the house gone, and with him being lamed, we thought that he would be exempted. What use was a soldier who couldn't wield a spear? What use was a soldier who couldn't bear both shield and sword at once? We thought, he thought, we all thought. But today, I returned home to my mother and sisters weeping, and the scant furniture we have knocked about the room. Packets of powder had been sprayed across the floor like snow on the mountains. "They took him," they screamed to me! "They took him away!" And I cried too, for this poison has carved up my house now along with that of my neighbors, my country. Should this continue, there will be nothing left of us but bones. I think of the green mountains of my youth, the trees of starfruit, mango, papaya, longans, and lychees, of guava, banana, pomegranate, and soursop... Some trees were shorter than us as children, others grow thick and towering as trees centuries old do. Everyone could just pick and eat the many fruits, even those of the poorest house, and those days were glad. The poison that runs in the ground pulses into the great fruit trees like blood, and even the starfruit giant that has lived for so many years has faded and stopped fruiting. We are hungry. We are dying. This cannot go on forever, so I have decided. If war is what will return life to this land, then I will go. When the fighting has stopped, these horrible men will leave and our own men will return, and the flow of our food to lands other than ours will cease, and though not all

will be well, we will at least be together. Măt Trăng, wait for me. I am coming.

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Dressing as a man is not difficult. If women work as men do in the fields of rice, I see no reason why I cannot work as a man does on the fields of battle. Years of farmwork have made me big and strong and brown; my speech is loud and lacking modesty. I will not match the image of the refined woman who stays inside and is pale, speaking quietly and little with her mouth hidden behind her sleeve. Finding armor is also not difficult—quality armor is another story—for the entire country has been encouraging its citizens to join the fight for months and months. Revealing my plan to my mother and sisters would only lead them to hold me in, so I have written them a note and left it under the rice bowl. Xương can read and will say it to the others. It still twists something in me to do this, but I cannot stop myself from finally escaping the life of slowly steeping in poison, nor from seeking my family and returning them home. And so I go. Already, there is mud in my boots. I know there will be much, much more. I'm cold, I'm wet, and I know this will only grow to reach the very marrow of my bones, but I cannot stop now.

As I catch up with the steady trickle of new recruits that walk along the main road, I avoid the eyes of the Stranger men that flank it. I sometimes stumble in the mud, but always keep my footing. I am used to walking through the water, though it of course is normally not so high and angry in the rice paddies. Or so muddy, enough that it sucks at shoes like greedy, clammy hands. As the numbers of soldiers on the road steadily grow, I crane my neck to try and find a one-armed soldier in a farmer's nón lá. Măt Trăng's hat will not have the colored tips like those of other soldiers. However, I start to realize there are many plain nón lás, for many of the newer

recruits are young farmer's sons sent to battle too young. They all are small and have two arms. Seeing farther down the road is difficult through the gray and constant rainfall, even though the fall is not currently heavy, so I keep walking, I keep looking. The rain falls and seeps down my collar and into my skin.

When the crowd of soldiers slows and grows thick, I stand on the tips of my toes and find out why. We have reached the gate, which is far more barricaded and manned than I remember. At first, I do not know why exactly we have stopped, but it soon becomes clear: We give our names to receive numbers and weapons, for almost all of us don't hold arms of our own. And my heart beats fast in my chest, for now I can listen for my brother to say his name. Silently, my lips rapidly move with wishes that I will hear him over the rainfall.

"Nguyễn Cơm." "Đào Con Thỏ." "Minh Con Mèo." I hear this as I am shuffled closer to the gate, but the rain is picking up now. "Tạ Bầu Trời." "Ôn..." I strain my ears. Rain batters our many hats and shoulders; we are all rattling. "Hướng Con Sông." "Hướng Mưa." "Sử..." Some soldiers' voices are too soft to hear over the drumming of the rain. Mắt Trăng has a medium voice; I hope he is loud today. "Đỗ Ngọc Bích." "...Tôi." And the names drone on with the water, and listening grows tiresome. My boots are filled up. The line shuffles forward sluggishly; my energy has nowhere to go. It buzzes within me, churning more like the brown waters until it roils. Kiếm Mắt Trăng, say the name. Kiếm Mắt Trăng, Kiếm Mắt Trăng, Kiếm Mắt Trăng.

Then I am drawing closer to the gate. The crowd dwindle, and I scan the backs of the recruits before me once, twice, thrice. All of them have two arms. The waters inside only me rise to my neck, and I quietly choke. If Mắt Trăng is not here now, then he is already beyond and farther out of my reach.

I do not move except when there is room, and water runs down my face. When I reach the gate and am asked for my name, I say "Trần Yêu" without hesitation, praying for Yêu's forgiveness and courage. If I am to steal your name, allow me not to sully it. I am given a saber and the number 6789; the givers hardly look at me. I hope that this is a good sign.

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We are organized as best as tired officers can organize the young sons of farmers, and we march. The days and nights blend together wholly, for the sky is always dark and gray and wet. The times we stop to rest, many fires cannot be started due to the damp wood and kindling. Water invades even the driest of packs. It fills our boots, wrinkles our skin, clings to us underneath our armor, and floods the tents. Already we have lost a boy to a mixture of exhaustion and deep cold; his lips were blue when we found him still sleeping, long after the horn sounded. The reality of what we march to is also settling onto the minds of others as carrion birds do on looming branches, and the ones who do not clam up and stiffen like stone weep bitterly when no one can see. When the rain is loudest, so are the cries. Both when we march and when we rest, I surreptitiously break formation and walk with purpose, looking for Mắt Trăng. There are not even rumors of a one-armed soldier to follow, for the water weighs so heavy on us that we can hardly find the energy to speak. The food we eat is no less harsh than the food from home—unpleasant in taste and texture. What recognizable foodstuffs there are come to us old and dry, hard, damaged, or moldy. But food is food; there is never enough, so we don't complain. At night the rain drums in my dreams of fish and fruit.

But then, after many miles marching through the gray, the rain, and the mud, the mountains flatten out, and the sky lightens. Though there still is no sun, we are immensely

grateful to be dry. I can only hope that home has not been washed away. Here, the land is dry and flat, and the plants are stubby, short, and hard. It was along these immense fields that voices were lightened, and finally, amidst the scant chatter and song that broke through the fatigue, came the rumors of a one-armed boy.

I grab shoulders and ask, "Who told you this? I must see for myself." But the answers I find turn me around in circles. No matter how doggedly I follow a lead, those I speak to cannot remember names, numbers, faces. Frustration bubbles within me, but I cannot blame them. We all are wearied, sullen, and covered with the dust of this new land. But a new fire still burns in me and fuels my legs to keep going—my brother is nearby! Recently he was here! But I do not like where we are marching... In the West, far off on the horizon, I see tall mountains again, tiny black ridges on the edge of the dust. But above them, and far more noticeable, are the dust-colored clouds, thick and murky like the floodwaters from home. They loom, they yawn, and I do not like that we march towards their mouths.

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As we cross into new lands, I still have no luck in finding Mät Träng. There are multiple reasons for me to despair: First, here, the air reeks and is oppressive, choking. The sky is always darkened by the smoke of hundreds, thousands of smithies that cause the very ground to glow red from their work. Little grass grows, for the ground is mostly hard, barren stone; the only plants are thorns and briars tough as cables and sharp as cat's claws. Whatever trees that grew big and green here can only be imagined, for all that remains are dead, dry stubs in the ground. Second, the farther we travel across the stone and into the gloom, closer to the black spires of towers I see stabbing into the sky, the greater the numbers

of soldiers grow. The change is as stark as entering the city's heart from the countryside! There are men everywhere, all around, some familiar, but exponentially many more are strange. Different dress, different weapons, different faces, bodies, and languages. I look no one in the eyes, but I can tell by their bodies and voices that some are cruel, some are weary, some are afraid. But, with so many soldiers amassing in one place...How am I to find Măt Trăng now?

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It is hot here, hard. Very far are the sea breezes of home, the wind and rain and green jungles. I long for the laden fruit trees and the white powdery sand near the crystal blue sea. This place is like a fortress indeed—we are boxed in on all sides, excluding the one we entered on, the East, by tall, jagged mountains. Great spires and watchtowers rise into the sky and are always manned, as are the great walls carved from the very stone of the mountains. My heart thuds uneasily behind my ribs nowadays, for I know in my bones that a great battle looms on the horizon. The men of West are mounting a massive attack, and I can only think of Măt Trăng. If we are to die, then my sole wish is to die alongside him. I want to see him. But I can no longer search for him as I once could, for the officers here are stronger, healthier, more organized. They have sharp eyes and cruel hearts. And so I train with my saber, and I wait. The clouds grow ever darker, but no rain falls.

Rations are handed out, and for the first time since I came to this barren land, no, since I first learned of my brother's capture, I feel delight! For I am given a starfruit, bruised and old but tasting of the home I know and love. I relish it and wish I could share with Măt Trăng, for I have not had such good food in a very long time. I will save some for him, and take this as a sign of good fortune.

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The day has arrived. Morning cannot be told from night through the everlasting smoke, but I feel in the air, hear it—the eerie silence. The world holds its breath. Outside the great gates that lock this blasted land away we heard the call of clear horns, and the voices of heralds. Silently, we, mixed companies of all kinds of men, marched up into the mountains to hide amongst the rocks. I first wondered why the enemies were not answered from the walls, but then our answer came from the hills: Horns brayed like beasts and drums rolled across all the ranges like thunder, so loud that my hearing was afterwards stifled for a time. I could see nothing from my hiding place in the mountains, but murmurs were carried through the ranks that the army of the West was at the gates, and that our ambassador

had ridden out of the gates to speak with them.

So we are waiting. The air here in the nooks of rock is far more stifling, for here the wind does not reach. Under my armor, I am soaked with sweat that does not cool but soaks into my clothes and makes my skin slick. As I wait and wait, I wipe my palms on my clothes to get rid of the wetness. I hear speech but do not catch its meaning; my ears are not recovered from the immense noise from the horns and drums. For a while, there is nothing but speech, and we in the rocks sit tense and restless, coiled like vipers.

Then, from the gate this time, there are the horns.

Drums and fire are unleashed at once, and up we spring. I follow those in front of me, who follow those in front of them, flowing unstoppably. Dust flies into our faces and clings to our sweat, but we charge down, shouting, pouring down like floodwaters freed. My ears are deafened, but now, I see. I see our forces cutting off our enemies' escape, I see us torrenting down the mountains and streaming from the great gates. But our enemies' numbers are not what we were told. There is no great army of the West to sweep across all the East, no; there

are so few compared to us, less than ten thousand at least. Our army is easily ten times as many in number and strength both. An army of such a size, even to my eye untrained in battle, could not take on a fortress like this one and survive, let alone have life left in it to conquer and pillage. And so it is there, as I am charging down the hill with my saber in my hand, that I realize something is not right. The sun, veiled by the reeks of this land, glows ominously red.

I do not stop my charge, for to do so would be to submit to a death of trampling. A body here and there falls instead, killed already by an enemy arrow, but the torrent of bodies still living never stops. And so I flow with the bodies, and we rush and rush until we smash into the rocks of the shields of our enemies, roaring like the tide. The man next to me is pierced through, and something stabs into my left shoulder. I cry out, unable to stop my voice, but then dodge back just as my attacker is smashed away before my eyes by an allied warbeast, massive, thick-skinned, and fitted with tusks and armor. The elephant does not care what it hits, for it is frenzied, striking down foe and friend as they stand in its way. The unwary are trampled beneath its trunk-like feet. I take my chance and I slip backwards, sideways, away.

But I do not have to worry about the loss of my honor, for there is a sudden roaring, louder than that of the hundreds of thousands of voices, a rumbling that drowns out all the horns and drums. Our assaults are interrupted and bodies roil about, confused, and the earth rocks suddenly beneath our feet. I fall to the ground, unable to keep my footing, and a hand wrapped around a hilt strikes me in the back on the way down. Instinctively I look as my face presses against the dust, and what do I see! I see my own shining eyes looking back at me! I cannot stop my cry: "Mặt Trăng!" My voice is swallowed by the terrible groaning and cracking of the earth, but my brother sees me as I see him. He grabs onto my bloodied

shoulder, letting his saber fall away to be lost, and we scrabble along the ground holding each other close as bodies topple over us and the dark, impregnable walls and towers crumble and topple with tremendous clamor. Suddenly the sky lights like a torch would, bright, red, and fiery; fire and black smoke is belching forth from the mountains. It is like the sun has fallen from the sky to crash down upon us. Măt Trăng and I shield each other with our limbs; my right side is pressed to his left. Bodies and bodies pile on us like leaves, blotting out the sky and crushing hot air from our lungs.

Eventually, the impacts stop; the shouting does not. Fighting has been replaced with confusion, shock. Soldiers rise to their feet unsteadily, looking around warily like cranes and coughing from the dust, smoke, and ash. The opposing sides recede like the tide, stumbling, fires of fighting spirits spent just as the fires of the mountain were. And then slowly, the din is blown away with the sudden fresh wind, and it is quiet. With our foreheads touching, I reach into my pockets and hold up to Măt Trăng's lips a piece of yellow starfruit.

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# **Mariposa, ¿Estás Bien?**

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**Megan Leal**

Under the fluorescent lighting of the small classroom attached to St. Magdalene's church, Estrella Gomez does not hear her teacher recite the Hail Mary prayer. Instead, her attention focuses on the only other twelve year old in the room. He sits diagonally across from her, only one seat away. From this angle, Estrella's eyes trace over his jawline, down the protruding veins on his arm, and around the curve of his left calf.

The cream-colored cement of the classroom's walls snuff out any lamplight from the outside that tries to shine through the windows, disguising the room as daytime. She swallows her spit as the boy tucks a loose strand of his curly brown hair behind his ear, licks his index finger, and turns the page of his textbook.

Estrella had been opposed to spending every Wednesday night at church, arguing with her mother that if she had to give up a day on the weekend, she should not have to do so during the week too. The mother did not hear any more complaints from her youngest daughter once the boy walked into the room on the third Wednesday, apologizing for missing the first couple of classes.

The little blonde girl next to Estrella, whose straight hair is tied together in a pink ribbon, taps the boy on his shoulder. She whispers to him, and he smiles, nods, and hands her his eraser. Estrella watches the blonde girl use his eraser and brush the shavings off her notebook with two gentle strokes.

“Learning this prayer is essential for your First Communion.” The teacher hands out small cards with the prayer written on it. “Make sure you memorize it.”

Estrella takes a card, her eyes locked on the back of the boy’s neck. The boy turns around towards the teacher to receive his card, and Estrella’s eyes dart to the small paper in her hands.

A low quality, black and white picture of the Virgin Mary floats above the italicized letters of the prayer, her gown draping over her head, leaving a shadow over her soft eyes which stare directly into Estrella’s.

The teacher takes a long breath and smiles at her students with watery eyes. “Well that’s it, then. Don’t forget that your First Confessions are scheduled for Saturday evening, and the ceremony will happen during mass on Sunday.”

Most of the students start gathering their things.

“It has been a great honor being your teacher, and I can’t wait to see all of you become closer with God by receiving the body of Christ.”

The boy bends down to put his copy of *Bible for Beginners* into his backpack, his hair flopping over his face. The blonde girl thanks the boy as she puts his eraser on his desk and walks out of the classroom.

Estrella jams her books in her bag, gets up from her desk, and walks away without pushing the chair in.

“Hey, you dropped this.”

Estrella’s body freezes despite her intestines shaking.

The boy’s hand is only inches away from her, holding her prayer card. She grabs the card with her right hand, grazing his fingers for a second longer than she should, and rushes out the room.

Her quick footsteps echo throughout the hallway with each step.

The moonlight slips in through the open blinds of Estrella's bedroom window, casting rows of blue on her faded pink walls. She blows out the Our Lady of Guadalupe candle that her mother had lit.

“Buenas noches, mi mariposa.”

“I don't need a nightlight.”

A trail of smoke lingers in the air. Estrella fans it away in the darkness, the blood in the veins of her palm flowing with violence.

Estrella does not notice the loud zaps of dying moths outside her window. She does not hear the distant train horn, nor the airplane passing in the sky above her neighborhood, causing the windows of her house to rattle. She lets her hand tremble.

The boy had left his trace on the lines of her palm and the edges of her index finger. Estrella uses her left hand to replicate the boy's touch, her arms silhouettes in the darkness. Her insides shake again, and neurons send fire up her arm.

Estrella does hear her older sister's newborn, his whining cutting through the darkness. She tip-toes to her older sister's bedroom. The older sister, who is only older than Estrella by five years, whimpers along with her child, begging him to fall asleep.

The mother's door remains closed.

“Do you need any help?” Estrella asks her sister over the sound of the baby's cries.

“No, Estrella. Go back to sleep.” The sister holds the baby in her arms, swaying it from side to side.

Estrella watches her sister with a smile. She returns to her room, not without hearing her older sister letting out a small laugh. Estrella kneels down next to her bed, and tries to form the words to the Hail Mary prayer.

The sun leaks through the stained glass window, casting blue and green hues on the dark maroon carpet of St. Magdalene's church.

Estrella stands on top of the colors, the light from the window creating a halo around her.

She must admit that she did imagine this process to be a bit more private.

All the students cluster just outside the confession stall, a small wooden divider covered by crimson curtains. They hear mumbles from inside the box, and make out only a few, clear words here and there.

“Cheat.”

“Lie.”

“Sin.”

Estrella runs her rosary between her fingers, the small round beads tapping against each other. The curtain on one side withdraws, and the little blonde girl steps out, her hands clasped and her head hung low.

An usher gestures towards Estrella, and she goes behind the curtains that close with a sharp swish.

She sits down on a small, wood chair, her knees grazing the silk fabric of the curtain, and clears her throat.

“Um, bless me, Father, for I have sinned.”

At the center of the divider, a small window screen reveals the priest, and despite the carved-out barrier, Estrella makes out the details of his face. Dark brown eyes under white eyebrows, with a heavy chin that overlaps with his neck.

“Tell me your sins.”

“Oh, well, sometimes I lie to my parents.”

“About?”

“Just little things like saying I’ve finished my homework, or that I cleaned my room.” The priest nods his head as though he were listening to somber classical music.

“And, uh, sometimes I have these bad thoughts.”

“About?”

Estrella thinks of the boy's hand.

"Um, a boy. And about touching."

"I see."

Estrella watches a piece of lint fall onto her jeans.

"That is sinful. Those thoughts are immoral for a young girl your age. Say ten Hail Marys and you shall be forgiven in the eyes of God."

Estrella grips her rosary tighter and bows her head to no one in particular, shame making her face hot and her mouth dry.

Estrella breathes in the open air of the church as she stumbles out of the stall. The other kids give her weird glances. She catches the blonde girl whispering to another with a thin-lipped smirk. Avoiding eye contact with the boy, who practices the Act of Contrition, Estrella sits on the itchy, worn seats near the exit doors.

She pulls out her prayer card from her pocket with a numb hand and makes a sign of the cross, touching her forehead, her chest, her shoulders, and her lips with the same hand that is laced with the boy's touch. She repeats the Hail Mary ten times, pronouncing every syllable as exact and deliberate as she can.

The dimness inside the church rejects the brightness of the Sunday morning. A piano player performs a rhythmless hymn, stifling the mumbles of people filing into the pews. The students whirl their heads around, searching for their parents, and occasionally waving with their tiny pink hands. Knowing that her mother and sister are seated two rows behind her, Estrella remains still in her seat.

She sits in the first row, wedged between the little blonde girl and another girl who cannot stop shaking her leg. The boy sits in the pew across the aisle, in a fitting navy suit with a light blue tie. His hair is combed back behind his ears.

From the first row, there is a clear view of the wide stage adorned with candles, large bouquets with fake, shiny leaves, a golden table covered by thick, white cloth, and an old, wooden podium. Against the wall, behind the stage, hangs a large figure of Jesus nailed to the cross, looming over the congregation.

Estrella studies the detailed statue. A thorny crown pricks his forehead, his wrists and ankles leak blood, and his eyebrows furrow together in agony. Her gaze trails down his stomach, and over the small wrap around his waist. She shuts her eyes, wishing that her pearl-white dress, recycled from her sister's Communion, was further below her knee.

“The Lord be with you.” The priest’s dull voice hums through the speakers in the church, a monotone drone ceasing the piano player.

“And with your spirit.” The mass responds in a similar robotic tone. Estrella’s eyes wander around the portraits hung about the room.

A stained glass window portrays the nativity scene. Angels fly above Mary and Joseph as they welcome the miracle, surrounded by the wise men. Estrella tries to interpret Mary’s expression. Her lips are not turned up at the corners smiling down at the newborn. Her

hand is slightly lifted above her baby, somewhat hesitant.

The image reminds Estrella of when her sister gave birth, a scared girl screaming alone in a white hospital bed too long for her feet to touch the edge. No one to shower her with gifts and pride. Estrella next to her mother in the waiting room, testing out different names for her nephew in her head. The mother like stone in the plastic chair despite the silent streaks that fell down her cheek for a reason Estrella did not know.

The priest raises his arms, and everyone follows his gesture, standing up. Estrella stands too, her legs heavy.

“Today is a special day for our youth. Everyone, let us welcome our children who are taking their next steps to be closer to God.”

A soft applause fills the space as an altar boy hands the priest a golden chalice and a circular piece of bread.

The kids form two lines in the aisle. The priest bends down to them, smiling, his chin now disappearing into the collar of his green robe.

“You will now receive the body and blood of Jesus Christ.”

One by one, the girls in their white dresses and the boys in their baggy suits, touch their lips to the chalice, sipping the wine. In their open palms, the priest places the thin, circular piece of bread. The priest does the sign of the cross in front of their tiny faces, and they repeat the action themselves. With smiles on their faces, they return to the embraces of their families. Estrella notices none of this, as the boy is next to her side, close enough to touch her hand, to hold her hand.

They take small steps as each kid receives the communion. Estrella is level with his shoulder, stealing glances of his neck, his ear, his eyelashes.

Her hand trembles again. They are next in line.

Estrella stops breathing as she reaches for his arm, and picks off a piece of lint that had clung to the polyester fabric of his navy suit.

The boy flinches away from her touch, his eyes wide as he looks down at her. He steps forward, recomposing himself, brushing off his

sleeve on the spot where Estrella had touched him.

The boy walks away towards his family, greeting them with a smile.

Estrella steps forward, not blinking, not breathing. The priest hands her the chalice, which is too big for her little hands.

She puts her lips to the cold cup and sips the wine. It's warm and sharp down her throat. A few droplets fall down her chin and onto her dress, staining it with dark red circles. The priest puts the bread in her hands, its fragile texture almost breaking in her palm. She puts it on her tongue and swallows it without chewing, the flavorless, skin-like chip itching her throat.

She does the sign of the cross, and heads to the row with her mother and sister. The mother smiles, her eyes bright as her daughter sits down next to her. She puts her arm around Estrella's shoulders, and pulls her into a hug.

"Mi mariposa, I'm so proud of you." The mother frowns as she sees the stain on Estrella's dress. "Oh, Estrella, you ruined your dress."

The sister holds her child in her arms, giving a little grin to her younger sister as she returns to sit next to them. Her child is asleep in her arms, until the choir begins their hymn and he cries.

Estrella sits still for the rest of the mass, close to her mother.

She keeps her stare on the stained-glass version of Mary. Her hands are cold.

The pavement of the parking lot outside the St. Magdalene's church reflects the white hot sunshine back into the air.

The mother starts the car as Estrella buckles her seatbelt. The sister struggles to strap her child in the car seat. Estrella watches the child giggle at his mother who is making silly faces. She looks down at her stained dress and lets out a soft giggle of her own.

The mother looks up at Estrella from the rearview mirror. "Mi mariposa, you did so good. Tell me, how do you say the Hail Mary?"

"I can't remember the words."

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# The Springs

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**Paige Wills**

Breathe in.

Archie presses down on the gas pedal of his brand-new station wagon until it reaches a steady 35. He suppresses the excitement and fear specific to a man on the cusp of fatherhood—emotions that sneak into his brain and urge him to drive faster. He won’t listen. Instead, he slows down at a yellow light and takes hold of Suzie’s hand. Their nervous sweat causes Archie’s palm to stick to Suzie’s, pull apart, and stick again.

“Make sure you breathe, honey. Like it said in the books,” Archie says.

“I only skimmed the books. You said you were going to read them.” Suzie leans her face directly in front of the air conditioning.

“And I did. I did. But my hope was that you would read them, too,” he says. His head darts from the road to her, and he checks the rise and fall of her chest. “You aren’t breathing,” he says.

“Of course, I am,” she says. Archie turns onto a side street to avoid potential traffic jams. Even though he expects steep hills in Austin’s residential areas, he still takes in a sharp, cold breath that harmonizes with the hard-working engine as the car lurches forward and stubbornly gains traction. He thinks of the effort as a metaphor, a sign that they have a long journey ahead, but he knows he’s ready. He has a couple of books under his belt to prove it. Suzie says, “I want a cigarette.”

“Not while you’re in labor. After,” he says.

Archie kisses the back of her hand and, hoping Suzie won't notice, he lowers his lips to her inner wrist, checking the speed of her heartbeat. "What are you doing? I'm fine," she says.

"I know you are, but breathe anyway. Hee hee hee hoo."

"Hee hee hee hoo." Suzie gives birth to twins James and April. They enter the world covered in shiny blood washed out under fluorescent lighting. Archie takes a small step back at the sight and admires his children—his and Suzie's—the love of his life. Breathe out.

Breathe in.

Archie stands in their yellow-walled nursery with his hands over his eyes, though he can hear Suzie moving around him.

"Okay, open," Suzie says. He sees Suzie holding the beanies the hospital gave them, one pink and one blue. "Guess who's who."

Both babies lay next to each other in the same crib, and they let out tiny grunts, bodies tucked in loving swaddles. Archie examines their faces—both have round, curious eyes and fresh pink lips; their cheeks are perfect; their skin is newly exposed to the world and is beautifully innocent.

"Back at the hospital I noticed the tiniest difference," he says. "You see April's nose? The bone that runs down the center sticks out more. Just like yours."

"Yeah." She places both beanies on the heads of their rightful owners. "You're right." Archie kisses her in celebration.

Later that day, Archie stands at the kitchen sink. Beyond his reflection in the window, Suzie stands in the backyard with her hand on her hip and all her weight resting on her right leg. A cigarette dangles from her lips. He recalls age 12 at the neighborhood park—his friends would sit cross-legged in the center of the rusted merry-go-round passing around a smoke. Timidly, he'd sit on the edge, legs hanging off the

side, making them slowly spin in circles. He would imagine the smoke as a comic book villain, but instead of being a hero he was a fearful bystander whose only defense was saying no.

Watching Suzie, Archie memorizes her plump lips as they take hold of the very item he has grown to despise. Breathe out.

Breathe in. The family bikes together every Saturday. When April and James grow into lives of their own, Archie and Suzie keep up the tradition as a pair. On holidays, a twin brings home their current partner and they bike as a big group—an unspoken test to see how well they fit in with the family. Eventually, two partners break away and their Saturday rides expand. Archie teaches his grandkids how to bike when they reach six years old, and soon enough they've mastered the big hill on Archie and Suzie's street. As grandparents, they convert their spare bedrooms into guest rooms and decorate empty walls with framed family photos of various sizes. Aside from when the family visits several times a month, their house is much quieter as they settle into their sixties.

Until, "Ow." Archie wakes up to Suzie's cries coming from his left. Her arms push at the empty air above her body and she mutters in a half-sleep, "Archie, stop." She continues to push at the vacancy above her, as if a large weight rests on her torso.

"Suzie." She awakens; Archie notices pools of water forming in the bottoms of her eyes. "Hey, hey, it's okay." He strokes her stark white hair.

"Why were you hurting me?" she asks.

"Physically hurting you?"

"Yes, physically."

"I wasn't. I was asleep. Your thrashing woke me up."

Suzie places her hands, one on top of the other, over her chest. She takes in air.

"Is that where it hurts?" Archie asks.

“Yes.”

He rests his hand over hers and basks in the softness of her loosely hanging skin, skin that aged alongside his own. “I’ll call the doctor,” he says, already sliding out of the duvet.

“Honey, it’s the middle of the night.” A soft kiss to his forehead. “All we can do is wait,” she says.

It’s what he’s most afraid of, he thinks. Cancer. Breathe out.

Breathe in.

Looking after Suzie becomes a full-time job. When she forgets her sweater upstairs, or her portable fan, Archie goes to get it and keeps his back pain to himself—a result of the constant trips up and down. He can’t complain about his health around Suzie. It doesn’t feel right to him. She undeniably has it worse as she waits for the next stage, the next symptom. He never imagined he would have to watch his words around the woman who he’d once shared everything with.

They stop biking on Saturdays. Suzie stays in the same place on the couch most days, with her portable fan propped up next to her, blowing air at her face so she can breathe easier. As her lung cancer moves to stage 4, she switches to portable oxygen. When their grandkids visit, Suzie goes off of her machine, but soon enough the tips of her fingers take on a light blue tint, and Archie rushes the oxygen to her side. The grandkids try not to stare for too long.

Why can’t life be like it used to? The anger immobilizes him, causing him to stay in bed longer in the morning to glare at the pillow Suzie coughed into all night. He struggles to sympathize with what she did to herself, this slow death she chose—half a pack behind the grocery store she worked at in school—and what she still does daily in the backyard, among the tomatoes he nurtures every summer, radishes in the winter.

Breathe out.

Breathe in.

James calls once every two weeks; not near enough, Archie thinks. April calls every other day to check in on Suzie. After the health and life updates, she passes the phone to Archie who gradually moves from the living room to busy himself in the kitchen, then conveniently sees a cardinal in the backyard. When he's out of Suzie's earshot, April says something like, "How are you doing, Dad? I mean *really* doing?" He tells her: angry, upset, confused, disappointed. April asks what he did that day and he tells her: applied stain remover to your mother's blood-spattered handkerchiefs, cooked six meals so she can eat more often to control her nausea.

"I want you to do something for you, Dad," she says. "You never bike anymore." He doesn't say anything. "Why don't you try swimming? You can go in the morning before Mom wakes up."

"That'd have to be before eight."

"Good thing the pool opens at five."

"Don't you think it's awfully cold to swim?"

"There's a whole group obsessed with it I've heard. Give it a try."

He says yes. And it would be good for him. April drops him off outside the wrought iron gate at the top of a steep hill that leads down to a 300-yard-long spring-filled pool. The water is a dark teal. The occasional swimmer makes ripples that bounce the light from nearby lampposts and the half-moon visible in the cloudless sky.

A set of stairs leads into the water. Archie plants his feet onto the first step and, at the contact, his body signals to pull away, but he resists and moves down to the next step. Goosebumps shoot up his legs—the water is 70 degrees year-round, 28 degrees below his body temperature.

The bottom steps are slick and coated in algae hidden by the darkness. Archie's right foot slips a few inches forward

and to avoid falling any more he pushes his chest out and into the water. Everything in his body stills, as if his organs forget to work, but his brain tells his arms and legs to keep moving so he'll stay afloat. He takes in a deep breath but feels just as breathless as before, like his lungs have gone for a coffee break. And then his body adjusts to the temperature. He can breathe again. But for those twenty seconds, his lungs were useless.

He swims over to the edge of the pool and holds on to a horizontal railing. The ripples of swimmers to his left and right sway against him, and he feels encouraged and befriended by the water.

“What’s your name?” A teenage girl stands outside the pool in a navy-blue wetsuit.

Archie begins to speak, “Ar” but she steps off the edge and plugs her nose. She’s a navy-blue blur as she makes her way down. Her splash stops just before Archie’s face. The moment is silent, until she shoots out of the water on the other side of him.

“Well?” she says.

“Archie. How about you?”

“I’m Mia. Is this your first time here?”

“It is. How’d you know?”

“I know most of the people who swim here this early. There’s a whole winter group. Did you bring tea?”

“No.”

“You can have some of mine later. You’re supposed to drink it after you swim. No sun in the early morning, so tea is our sun.” She launches into a back stroke.

Archie swims laps for as long as he can, then gets out and walks back over to his towel. A man in his thirties wearing jeans and a black t-shirt says, “Attaboy.” Archie does a double take to see if the man was talking to him.

“Thanks,” Archie chuckles, feeling young again.

“I’m Isaac.”

“I’m Archie. You don’t swim?”

“No. I come here for the inspiration. But I consider myself a member of the club as much as the rest of ‘em—just a people-watching member.”

Archie smiles. “Weird.”

Mia walks over layered in sweatpants, a fleece pullover, gloves and a beanie—a contrast to Archie’s swim trunks and t-shirt. She passes Archie a cup of tea that he gladly accepts, bringing the liquid up to his chattering teeth, where the hot water soothingly strikes his frigid mouth. “Oh, you’re freezing, Archie.”

“It’ll be alright.” Mia takes off her wool beanie and places it on Archie’s head; the fabric scratches his hairless head, but he’s grateful for the feeling as his body temperature heats back up.

“Do you think you’ll come again?” she asks.

“Yeah, I think so,” he says.

“You should buy a wetsuit. And bring all the warm clothing you own.”

“Roger that.”

“You’ll have fun,” she says. “It’s fun. It really is.” Breathe out.

Breathe in.

Maybe Suzie’s time is running out. Archie doesn’t have any way to know for sure, but just in case, he talks with her about the past and the “glory days” he didn’t know he was living in until they became a past blur.

“There’s this picture of us that I love so much,” he says.

“Which one?” she says.

“It’s from our wedding day, and you’re in your dress. It was right after the ceremony, and we’re walking toward the camera. You’re a foot or two in front of me, but we’re holding hands. And with your other hand, you’re wiping a tear out of

your eye. But you were smiling, of course, you were smiling. It was our wedding after all,” he says.

“Oh, yes, I know the one. I love it, too,” she says. “Why don’t we find it? It must be in a box somewhere.”

They share a look.

“I’ll go get it,” he says.

They dig through invitations, napkins, pearls before finding the photograph—Archie with a full head of brown hair, Suzie’s a curly blonde, and their faces wrinkle free. All freckles, no sun spots.

He pulls out his bow tie and holds it up to his face, breathing in its stale, rosy scent. “It still smells like your perfume. Here,” he says.

“I can’t breathe that deep. It’ll hurt.”

“Oh, sorry,” he says. “It’s only a faint smell anyway.” He tucks the bow tie back in the box and fixates on the creased-up cardboard. He works up the courage to say, “Where does it hurt the most?” Suzie gives him a surprised look and he knows why—he hasn’t asked her about her pain before. “When you breathe, where does it hurt the most?”

“In my chest. Sometimes a sharp pain. Other times, it’s only heavy.”

“I’m sorry about the bow tie. And how it reminded you of your pain,” he says. Suzie sets the photograph on the coffee table where she can see it daily.

“Thank you. It’s okay.” She points to the picture, “Because I love this. It makes the pain a little better.”

Love and pain in the same part of her body. He takes the box back to the garage. Breathe out.

Breathe in.

Three months later, Archie is a regular attendee of the Barton Springs Winter Swim Club. They’re an eclectic group that represents Austin, Texas. All hair colors are accounted for—from grey to drug store pink. There are parents escaping

hectic mornings before school and teenagers who discovered the wonders of the water alongside their coming of age. They meet before the sun rises, when the outside temperature is at its coolest, and they swim in darkness.

He follows the same morning ritual at the springs. On the edge, his toes dangle over the water, and he thinks of Suzie's face and dives in. The water steals his breath. Every morning until this late February day.

"There he is," Isaac says as Archie hoists himself out of the pool. Isaac hands him a thermal towel and a mug of steaming chamomile tea. With each slow sip, Archie feels the tea move down his throat and spread throughout his torso. As they walk up the hill, club members say things like, "Bye, Archie," and "Gonna miss you," and affectionately pat his back.

"What's that all about?" he asks Isaac. Archie bundles up in fleece, wraps himself in a blanket, and replaces his swim cap with his own wool beanie.

"They're going to miss you," Isaac says.

"They'll see me tomorrow."

"It's the last swim of the winter season. The springs close for a spring cleaning and reopen when the weather's warmer. But this is the last winter swim."

"The club's over?"

"Until next November, yes."

"I didn't know."

"They try not to talk about it—makes everyone pretty sad."

Isaac and Archie share a parting hug. Mia, who's standing nearby, says, "Sentimental about the last swim?"

"Yep," Isaac says.

Mia embraces the pair but sticks her head into an open space where they both can hear her. "It doesn't have to be," she says quietly. "We can sneak in. In the middle of the night tonight."

“Great idea,” Isaac says. “Come on, old man.”

Archie says, “Maybe. I’ll have to think about it.”

Members of the club look over at the group hug and join in. They grab onto each other. Fabric caresses fabric. Warm breath hits chilled necks. The twenty-person group hug collectively wobbles back and forth on the hill, like a field of untrimmed grass in the wind; they’ve grown here and would give anything to stay.

Mia whispers to her two friends, “Meet on Lund Street. 3am. We’ll walk the rest of the way. Don’t tell anyone else.”

The club parts ways on their last swim until November. When they leave the springs, the grass slowly rises where their feet left imprints and the pool goes quiet. The sun rises for the day. Breathe out.

Breathe in.

“So, the first time you ever had a cigarette—”

“Really?”

“What did you feel?” Archie says. They sit at a rusty metal table in the backyard, enjoying the gentle sun that Texas winter generously supplies.

“Would you like to try one?” Suzie says.

“No. God, no. But I want you to tell me about it. The feeling it gave you,” he says.

Suzie flicks her lighter, one she bought on a family trip to Italy when the kids were teenagers, and holds it up to her face. Archie sees her reflection through the lighter’s shiny gold exterior. She says, “I guess I felt like a rule breaker. Like I was testing my fear of getting caught. I knew my mom would be furious.”

“Did that go away when you were the legal age?”

“No, it became more about my fear of death. The reports were getting quite vocal that smoking was bad, but I couldn’t quit. That underlying fear something bad would happen—I guess it gave me an adrenaline rush.”

“Does it still?”

She won’t look at him. “It does.” He can’t look at her either. “I think that was always the difference between you and me—fear stopped you, but it enabled me.”

“Love and pain and fear in the same part of your body,” he says.

He decides to do it. To make an event out of it, he dusts off his bike from the corner of the garage. The first push of the pedals sends out a creak, a cry for the weekly ritual they lost. He sneaks out like he never did as a teenager. Street lamps and neighborhood cats hiding behind trash cans keep him company.

No one waits for him on Lund Street. He hesitates. Maybe they hopped the fence without him.

At the springs, Archie stands still and listens for splashes and whispers, but he is surrounded by silence. Isolated, he begins to turn back. Among the overgrown grass, a cigarette butt. He faces the pool again and grasps onto the cold metal separating him and his haven. Adrenaline suppresses fear. He climbs. The pool is cast in complete darkness; no lights from the office or restrooms illuminate the water; no sign of Isaac or Mia. He cautiously heads to the water.

He thinks of Suzie’s face, teary eyed after their wedding ceremony and of the joy they felt when their babies came home from the hospital. He thinks about breaking rules, sneaking out and trespassing, and he lets himself feel a rush. Love and fear enter his chest and delicately intermix. With one step off the pavement, Archie falls into the water and welcomes pain. His body tingles as the freezing temperature envelops him. There’s pressure on his lungs.

To feel like Suzie.

He swims to the center of the pool and moves his body to a floating position, tensing as the cold water touches his scalp and covers his ears. His arms and legs spread, and he gives the water permission to take him where it desires.

Breathe out.



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**POETRY**

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# Mezquite

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**Natalia Boyd**

You, from which I strip the sweetness of my youth:  
sticky memories of languid afternoons  
en el Rancho—  
Abuelo's legacy of the coded histories in Mexican brush,  
what serendipity  
that you now hang over the precipice of my adulthood  
a shady refuge from this desert heat.

I pluck a bean  
anxious to taste the melancholy  
dream that has followed me here:  
the green pod snaps too easily  
and within I find an alien anatomy  
of fibrous yellow flesh,  
obfuscating the dried suckling seeds  
from my heat ripened dreams;  
Abuelo's secret candy tree  
lost somewhere in innocence.

*Es tan corto el amor,  
y es tan largo el olvido—*  
the thorns press into me  
begging me to remember  
but the only thing I see is  
the shadow games of leafy light,  
the terracotta earth that's stained my  
soles and delineated my palms,  
the frontier of remembrance.

Source: Pablo Neruda, “Poema 20” from *Veinte poemas de amor y una canción desesperada* (1924)

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# Gateway

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**Andrew Martinez**

I am driving down this gateway road  
And I hit a man  
He reminds of my father  
He has no car but he needs a jump  
And I am tempted to help him  
In the hopes that he'll stab me  
Kiss me  
Steal my money  
And kill me

My father on the street  
Makes me hope that abolition comes soon  
His time in prison is nowhere near over  
It hasn't begun  
But I know that he will die in a concrete cage  
Or die at the hands of a cop  
Or maybe rich because I have handed him every last fiber in  
my body  
for him to pawn and survive

I reach a stoplight  
The man has disappeared in my mirror  
my memories of happiness with my father have disappeared  
I hope he dies not because I despise him  
But because he's in pain and  
I love him  
I love him  
I love him  
I love him the way he loves god

I reach my house  
No longer going 60 mph but  
My thoughts race  
And all that I can see is a picture of myself  
Turning out just like my father  
In a concrete cage  
Dead  
Rich  
Alone

Crying in a car I do not own.

I hope he's dead  
With me  
I know he'll take,  
I hope at least  
Because my thoughts are racing and

memories of me in hospitals,  
Being kissed by my father,  
A day in the grass with my grandmother in 2009

Are too much for me to handle this Sunday night

So I hope he dies  
And rests.

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## Footprints *for Han Shan*

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**Tom Jennings**

If I could sit here for another  
season, I might see  
these pebbles dissolve in  
this streambed capillary,

the leaves that abandoned trails, whispering  
tarsals openly fused with droppings  
born in untraced silence of  
bygone egrets:

what once seemed bedrock  
now washed in brief mud-light blebs:

the wanting cicada-  
skin left to boil  
in sunshade, steaming through  
emerald-waked walking fern pigments:

empty lights far off behind the bared  
tulips where turtles merge  
aurora claws and contours:  
shell-beamed topographies:

lush in self-contained rivers  
the ganglia, seaweed echoing sunspots  
    sprouting off my feet and silt-red toes  
like momentary octopi:  
    fanning over the void prehensile  
    silences of mutant  
    footprints: the recycled runoffs,

my twained helices  
    are offspring-prints: maybe mu-  
table to wakened  
    steps—the caterpillar plants a  
    raft-tomb in lilies and  
    laughs 'long no-path laurel boughs

and the unnamable ashes of aspens thrown  
naked in my eyes, sewing  
    microscopic infinite paths:  
the visible mindless loves of the microbes,  
    the archaean sensing and silent  
    passing proteins, feedbacked  
    beating out feet on every shore:  
and I see that all is the vascular dance  
    the connective tissue sprouting out  
    the invaluable intraspecies love:

living is ecology,  
we just need adjusted bones:  
liver-conifers beamed and  
rooted in the canyons of each other's tears,  
the reaching and unreached  
arm-rhizomes to umbilical clouds  
where heaven and earth  
float and  
pass.

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# Sala de los Frescos

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**Rose Torres**

Families of fingers  
danced in  
iron-rich ochre  
on the walls of Altamira;  
polychromes of red  
and black blessed  
empty limestone with  
holy stampedes  
and stenciled chaos  
conceived by  
ancient kinetic hands,  
creating a portal  
to another time—  
transports us  
like a diligent  
chronicler  
relaying the past.

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# harlingen

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**Andrew Martinez**

You're fine tuned to changes in pressure  
The low lying fields and flat farm lands of the so-called south  
Texas valley have taught you well  
Your first words whenever we arrive somewhere new are  
"The elevation has changed"  
And you look around to feel the forces against you  
The changes in pressure

The sun shines brighter at higher places on this earth and still  
With such thin air and so little pollution  
You are the only blinding thing near  
Your voice reminding me what it feels like to be held and  
what pressure  
Your waist against mine  
Should feel like  
I feel only you  
On the coast or  
In the clouds

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# Lacuna

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**Lucas F. Francisco**

They had to put them down,  
the pigs. I saw the pigs in the barn, without looking,  
really. I think I felt us dying. The pigs, I saw them.

I think I thought back to  
when we were still alive enough  
to die. After a time we are dead  
and just keep dying our  
deaths. A lot of talk for

a little poem. A lot of talk for a little person.

A small boy,  
standing in the fields of flowerlessness.  
You know, when you're just a kid? You  
know, when you're just a kid?

I love cats, by the way, and the way  
they walk, untouched of the ground.

She was in or on the hammock,  
slung between two trees. I was  
standing in the field of flowerlessness,  
watching a person in or on the hammock;  
I expected her to be watching me,  
as well.

A lock of hair draped over the side nearest me.

I was thinking about—  
can you hold my hand again?

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# the milk's gone stale again

---

Emma Allen

to be bound—  
or is it bonded?

dirty pots and pans litter our kitchen sink  
my clothes thrown down in heaps, blouses lying undisturbed like breadcrumbs  
leading to wherever i can stand to mope around.

when is it that i began to intrude in our shared apartment?  
(do i need to assert my ownership again?)

the welcome mat of cordiality,  
politeness,  
the please's and thank you's—  
nowhere to be found.  
where do we keep them again?  
smothered & suffocated by dust in the broom closet.

to get to know is a chore (and now without reward),  
as every stone has already been overturned.

is (my) apathy contagious?

i'm.

so.

sorry.

---

# Blanket Toss

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**Morgan Jeitler**

My brother  
in flight—  
Billy the bird.  
His brittle arms flap  
and I swear feathers  
sprout from his ribs,  
peeking out the  
tattered shirt he cut himself.

At the top of his ascent I want  
to shout:  
Bill,  
Wipe that grin  
off your face.  
Put your teeth away,  
except to bare them—  
There's no such thing as fun  
when with your ear pressed up against the wall  
three weeks ago  
you heard your mother  
speak callously of a missing father  
and three bottles of liquor.

But before my voice can shake  
the words out he falls  
into the center.

My hands grip my corner  
and he's invisible  
tucked within the wrinkled  
clumps of cloth.

Only his giggles are audible:  
Bubbles floating up.

*Again?* I ask him.

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## Leaves Taken at Topyre and Yenom

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**Sarah Alnahaoi**

On the quiet backstreets of  
Topyre and Yenom,  
little Ernie's got Silva  
held down by the throat.  
Silva is clawing at Ernie's  
dim eyes, and Ernie is shouting,  
*it's mine! it's mine!*

Now Silva's flipped Ernie  
down on his back;  
her hand's in his pocket—  
she pulls out a patch  
of victory—a leaf, or rather,  
a piece of a leaf:

violet, orange, yellow and red,  
brittle and crumbling between two sets  
of small, sweaty fingers  
turning to dust, what's already dead.

I'm sitting in my window,  
completely calm,  
on the crossroads between  
Topyre and Yenom.

The lights are out  
and my water's cut too,  
but I've got pockets full of  
leaves and leaves and  
lessons in my shoes.

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# To Persimmon Trees in August

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**Sarah Alnahaoi**

Your stalk is like lanky  
adolescence; your cradled palm is low  
enough for easy climbing; and your fingers  
arch backwards—heavy in impatient  
fullness. But your unripened taste —  
like sand—drags across my palate.  
Sweet honeypot of nature: you need aging.

Your sap is most elusive in August,  
when fruit emerges like rayless stars:  
    cold and astringent.  
Yes, the river knows where you have been.  
Its free-fall flow buries your roots: *pasi-men-eu* /  
    *one who dries*, your great-grand father's late  
    companions.

The river also knows your spring:  
you wilt like long-forgotten wine.  
Impenetrable fruit  
shrinks, sweeter and softer,  
into self-caressing solitude.

In fall, you learn what spring cannot teach:  
patience, *pasimenu* tree.

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# Wail Wail Wail!

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**Lilian Garcia**

Abuela says that you  
only appear when the sun  
kisses the horizon.  
Only heard by  
the hurt women  
to missing children, to  
the dead ones, too.

You appear by the trees  
with the giant trunks and long  
limbs, by the stream  
that once tried to swallow me.  
I look up to the branches,  
roped men stare back.

She told me to not take your hand,  
if you offered it, Llorona.  
But I want to, Llorona.  
I do.

The whispers  
that run through the honey suckled air,  
making the leafs shiver,  
beg me not to leave.

Loyal to my family  
I am not.  
I am without the nails  
that bind me to them.

I am loyal to the  
soil below me,  
I stay.

I seek the love  
hidden inside  
the belly of  
a guitar.  
never before  
touched.

The ground aches  
under my feet.  
My shadow breaks  
the moonlight in half.

I know she dreams me up  
from her desires  
to wander,  
to have her own,  
from what's been carved out from  
her hands.

She devours the night  
at the chance to meet me.

Her black hair paints the water  
with despair.

And as I sink  
I taste the salt from her tears,  
from my own.

I am not brave.

I am hers.

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# Tree Core Samples

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**Tom Jennings**

Elms splintered and river-memoried,  
augured for the buried auguries  
in cores of ancient rainfalls, embraced,  
cedar-laced and still lacing taut brown ebbs  
and orbits round our sapwood waists:  
underbrush lips mouthing karst-webs—

Elm's mangy roots flower misty topaz termites,  
tempting me to turn over my own  
nature, to mine the loving  
liquid ore: maybe pour  
it out for others, as the cores  
pour out breaths and  
a sun-drenched heron  
or me—

I see the  
Ordovician scrawls, still seeping in our  
chordated choices, our adipose  
these marble pines,  
still  
stored limestone:

Let's leaf our ankles,  
our boreal suchness, the stipule  
origins of our kelpy, selfless sweat-orbs,  
aquaporins condensing continents of  
seasons:  
time our heartwood.



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## NONTRADITIONAL

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# Quarancomics

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Skylar Epstein





AS I LEAVE THE HOUSE LESS,  
THE WORLD FEELS LIKE IT'S  
GETTING SMALLER

LIKE IN A VIDEO GAME,  
THE WORLD GENERATES  
AS I VIEW IT

AND EXISTS NO FURTHER

LIKE THE BOUNDARIES OF THE EARTH  
HAVE SHRUNK TO JUST MY BACKYARD

I LOOK OUT MY WINDOWS AT NIGHT

AND MY HOUSE, AND MY YARD  
ARE THE ONLY PLACES THAT EXIST

AND AS I SLEEP, THEY SURELY VANISH

LEFT TO MY OWN DEVICES, I ALREADY LEAN TOWARDS SOCIAL ISOLATION, AND THIS STAY AT HOME ORDERS and QUARANTINE SITUATION IS NOT HELPING. I'VE HOLED UP AT HOME LIKE I'M CREATING A FORTRESS. SIEGE WARFARE FOR THE SOUL.



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# Contributor Biographies

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**Andreana Lozano** is a senior Journalism student pursuing a Creative Writing certificate and a minor in History. She is also a newsletter writer and opinion illustrator for the Daily Texan. She prefers writing over talking, dogs over people, and coffee over a set sleep schedule. She credits her mom for getting her this far.

**Andrew Omar Martinez** is a senior at UT studying Environmental Engineering, Mexican American Studies, Women's & Gender Studies, and English. He hopes to one day see the carceral state abolished, Palestine freed, Greg Abbott/Joe Biden/Lori Lightfoot ended, and most importantly, his parents retire. Andrew believes that latinidad is destructive, and aligns himself with the Third World. He is unsure if you can curse here, but would also like to say: Fuck "The Eyes of Texas" and every wealthy UT donor who supports it.

**Emma Allen** is a junior English major with a Rhetoric and Writing minor who plans on going to law school after she graduates. In her free time, she can be found perusing Yelp reviews of restaurants she will probably never dine at, making lists of cities she wants to live in, and being generally anxious about her future. She wishes she could fit a million lifetimes into the one she has.

**Lilian Garcia** is a fourth-year English major. They're filled with both dread and excitement as they graduate this spring. When they're not looking for a new show to watch, they're usually working on new ideas for short stories about queer people of color and how undeniable beautiful we are. One day they hope to become the writer their family is proud of.

**L. J. Dillard** is a half-Vietnamese English major who has a twin and a penchant for naming characters after nouns. Their dream when entering UT was to gain the skills needed to eventually publish a series

of novels, but they are now exploring other opportunities. They have a love for literature (especially sci-fi/fantasy) as well as drawing, video games, and daydreaming.

**Lucas França Francisco** is a freshman English major (although that may very well change) looking to minor in Government (again, changeable). He entered the world of poetry through the theft of an antique copy of Edna St. Vincent Millay's *Huntsman, What Quarry?* from his grandmother's retirement home. Sorry about that. When not pumping iron at Gregory Gym or annoying his friends on his many group chats, he can be found scribbling out poems on the sticky notes littered across his desk. He would like to dedicate his work to his beloved Picrew crew, his six cats back home, and his poetry professor, Dean Young.

**Megan Leal** is an English and RTF double major. She's passionate about bringing her voice to the page, whether it's through short stories or screenplays. Her goal with her writing is to tell the stories she wished she had when she was younger

**Morgan Jeitler** is a third-year English and Plan II major with certificates in German and Creative Writing. She enjoys board games, working out, and getting way too excited about things like data in an excel sheet.

**Natalia Boyd** is an English major pursuing a Creative Writing Certificate in poetry. Although she has been scribbling poems for as long as she can remember, "Mezquite" is her first publication. Her middle school self would certainly be proud, considering only a few years ago, she and a couple of friends would sneak into the woods for meetings of their very own Dead Poets Society. Natalia dedicates this honor to her greatest love and source of inspiration—Abuelo and the entire Familia.

**Paige Wills** is a fourth-year studying Radio, Television, and Film with a minor in French and a certificate in Creative Writing. She can most

often be found writing or playing guitar. As college comes to a close, she'd like to dedicate it all to Barton Springs, the soul of our city.

**Rose Torres** is in her third year, double majoring in English and Rhetoric & Writing with a certificate in Creative Writing. She is also a part of the Liberal Arts Honors Program and a Writing Consultant at the University Writing Center. She has a love for short stories, black cats, and nice people. She can usually be found reading, painting trees, or social distancing with her favorite people.

**Sarah Alnahaoi** is a second-year student of English and French, also pursuing the Creative Writing Certificate program. She is currently living in Houston where she gardens with her mom and practices archery with her brother. In the near-future, she hopes to start an online journal for verseform poetry, specifically modern-day takes on the sonnet, but for now she is up to her ears in homework.

**Skylar Epstein** is a Junior studying English and Government and pursuing minors in Public Policy and Philosophy. Although Skylar loves reading Surrealism and Science Fiction, her true literary passion is visual storytelling. Skylar is especially interested in autobiographical illustration; she plans to keep recreating the world around her in a sketchbook until it makes more sense, and is excited to eavesdrop on other creators who are doing the same thing. When she's not drawing, writing, or thinking about drawing and writing, you can find her listening to podcasts, re-watching early 2000's television series, or playing punk rock on the student radio.

**Stephanie Pickrell** is a second-year English major with too many added certificates. She enjoys collecting very large books of international fairy tales, drinking hot tea at all times of the day, and vacuuming on Saturday mornings. She is currently writing a collection of post-apocalyptic fiction set in Texas, and hopes to one day own a cactus garden.

**Tom Jennings** is a sophomore double-major in English and the Humanities Program, focusing on Buddhist philosophy in American eco-poetry. He spends much of his time reading Murray Bookchin, rereading the *Diamond Sutra*, and finding music as a Music Director for KVRX student radio. He hopes to avoid writing a thesis on Gary Snyder at all costs.

**Zackary Davis** is a senior at the University of Texas at Austin, majoring in American Studies, History, and English. When there isn't a pandemic, you can usually find him in a dark corner of a bookstore, overcaffeinated, and frantically planning a road trip to nowhere in particular. His biggest literary influences include Haruki Murakami, Hannah Sanghee Park, and Daniil Kharms.



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## Special Thanks

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