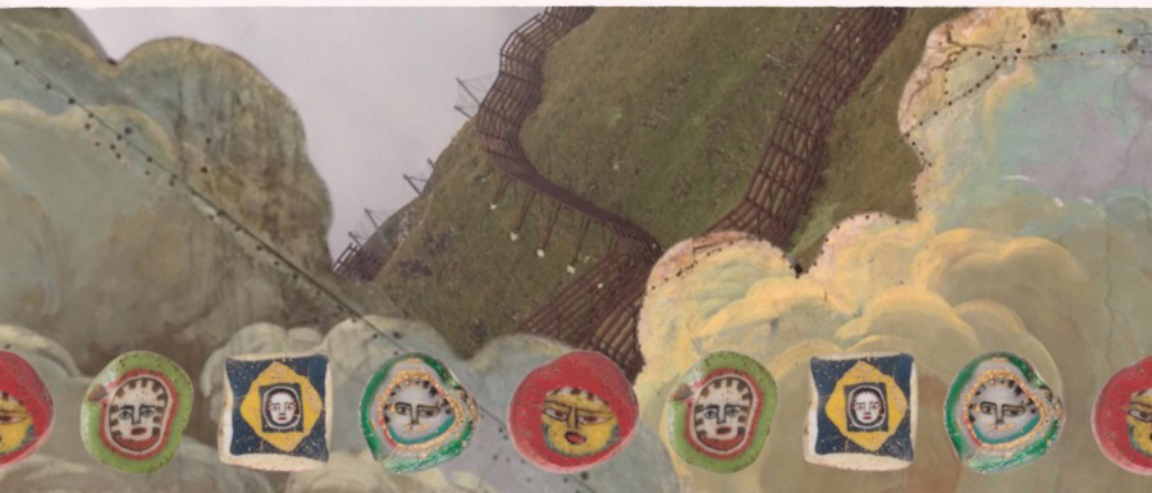




HOTHOUSE

LITERARY JOURNAL



H O T H O U S E



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Dedicated to those who
dream under the Texas sky

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EDITOR'S NOTE

I'm writing this where the old greenhouse stood
Where ants now build a mound. If ants wrote,
I think they'd write like us: so that they could
Understand the leaves and make the mound float.

This book is that mound, these words are black ants,
And in some far wood, wood left for *this* dance.
The authors bled words, the staff have agreed,
Now grab a nice coffee and please, just read.

Lift these leaves to the mound within your mind,
Then write something new, and wholeness you'll find.

— Charlie Sharpe

FICTION

I-10

Wynn Wilkinson

I am driving back from El Paso & have been for three hours. You are quiet; you are letting me drive because the road is open & flat & empty or something, & I am grateful you're letting me focus on the sun dipping in the rearview, restraining yourself from commenting on my drifting in & out of the lane, hands bloodless & shaky on the wheel. I pretend you aren't searching for the right angle, that the silence is peaceful. When you finally speak, I pretend that the silence hasn't ended; your words interlock with the radio, fitting between lyrics like puzzle pieces, like footnotes.

I know this town grounded in a compass...

I think you give up but I can't tell if it's you staring at me or the yuccas spattered across the landscape like parade-goers dotting the street, like bodies crowding the street. How can I admit that my every treasured memory was experienced from the backseat, & that now I'm carsick even behind the wheel? Every time I glance at the side-view mirror, envy blooms within me, the only two hints of deep green for miles sequestered in my throat & cheeks. The rhizome settles deeper into my stomach, feeds off the acid. I'm mulching. I think I interrupt you. "Are you hungry at all?"

Asinine. But we both know that's not what I mean. I mean appetite, I mean the deep pit occupied only by desperate, grasping adventitious roots & bile. I mean we haven't eaten in so long that we're emaciated—God, just look at us. But I've tried this before, insisted that *he who eats My flesh & drinks My blood abides in Me, & I in him*, & yet you never budge. I can tell you're starving—right? I guess in the end I still can't look at you.

I keep going over it over & over, my steps iterate my shame...

If the New Testament is ever revealed to have its own set of Satanic Verses, I'd not be surprised to learn it was the Devil's pen

which scrawled 1 John 4:12: *No one has seen God at any time. If we love one another, God abides in us, & His love has been perfected in us.* We are proof of this diabolical incision— the loveless in whom God is a chick pecking at the shell, the rat snake disguised as a lover. But you would never accept this infantilizing assessment, long-chewed but ill-digested, & it slithers back down my esophagus to flavor the simmering pot of vomit. I try again.

“Actually, the yearning isn’t so bad, I think. It’s hot to the touch & it burns to hold. But its extended existence in the psyche or (*uh*) the soul (*or the heart*) demonstrates a zest (*I won’t say lust*) for life that one can reflect on & receive as generally positive, & like when Mitski sings *I love everybody because I love you*, one can experience the inverse, wherein because I love everybody...”

I grip the wheel tighter, white-knuckled & desperate for stability amidst the potholes of my own making, for something to hold onto. The asphalt cracks a little more. “Well, I love everybody.”

I kept saying I just wanted to see it, saying “what’s wrong with that”...

We’re quiet for a while, entranced by a distant mesa out the driver’s side window. Mesas are deceptive because there’s no elevational feedback; I mean it’s just flat, cliff face, flat. Consider the mesa-dwelling wolf hunting the mesa-dwelling deer through the thicket. One moment the chase is on, the next moment the chase is vertical, the next moment the chase is over. If I were that wolf, I’d try to draw up a quid pro quo with my prey: *You run at 50%, & you’ve got my word that I’ll do the same.* Then again, I were the deer, I’m sure I’d skip the meeting & take my chances with the plunge. To each their own.

When you finally speak, you’re so quiet that at first I imagine it, but your voice determinedly peeks out above the radio’s static-backed hum, cautious, probing. I get distracted thinking about groundhogs, how your speech is similarly careful, but you know better than to appear as shocked; after all, you’ve already lived much longer than the average groundhog, even in captivity. At least their shock is expressive,

external, while yours is masked... but I cut you off mid-thought to ask you to start over.

"It's fine, it wasn't important. I was just saying, that's how living beings were made: discrete, never merged. It sucks. I empathize. But everyone's song is their own to perform, right?"

"Well... you've never wanted to sing through someone else's throat?"

I mean mine.

"I like my own throat just fine, honestly."

I don't feel undone in a big way...

I want to tell you the sculpture is already complete within the marble block. There's no need for violence, the chisel & hammer in the glovebox; gradual erosion will do. I am patient. I want to tell you that the way to your heart is through my ears, locked behind mountains of Bianca Carrara, & that every time you speak the bird call sounds a little clearer. I don't want a sculptor, I want a river. I want to tell you that I promise, but I can't. You're a better liar than me anyways. I nervously swerve around a pothole instead.

"I guess it's less about attaining continuity with another individual & more about prolonging the anguish of desire. I think that's noble, at least when the coals of that desire are stoked for all beings."

"On one coast a cinder, on the other a conflagration. I don't give a shit you skimmed Batailles."

I laugh nervously because you'll never know how sorry I am, & because I feel like your voice wasn't always this loud.

"Damn, I thought you liked me."

"If I didn't, I wouldn't be sitting here right now."

I should tell my friends when I love them...

The truth is, I think everyone was right about amalgamated selves before they brought the gross sex stuff into it. I think exposure can look like cruising uncomfortably down I-10 together. It can look like me, anxious in the driver's seat, sweat in my eyes, fiddling with the radio, trying to find a song that matches your voice. I dare you to agree. If all you wanted me to admit is that the right atrium does, in fact, burn

brighter than the other quadrants, then I'd blush & say sure, of course, just a moment. & then bashfully: My everybody is the many yous, a sunflare for each solar system of yous, yous in whom everybody's seen God & fought or fled, yous in whom God's love is perfected & shelved.

I got too caught up in my own shit, how every outcome is such a comedown... Now I begin to cry for the first time in three hours (or at least tear up, which is enough for me to have been taught to smother, but I have grown tired of smothering & could use some time off) because I experience a revelation that you carry like a burden: the pious butcher recites *Tasmiyah* but remains a butcher. The car clatters clumsily through another depression in the road. I drove right into it, preoccupied with images of you called to the light in my heart, nearer to me than my jugular vein, et cetera— you get the idea, you get these visions before I do. The sudden movement jolts us, & your curious ātman splashes unceremoniously— I wasn't sure you could do that— into my bloodstream. I speak without thinking, which means I really mean it this time: "Sure you're not hungry?"

& when you inevitably don't reply, I bite the bullet, take in the external shocks first: the yuccas & mesas beyond the plexiglass, beyond the weighty absence in the passenger seat. I pull over slowly, listen dully as the song fades out, taking your voice along with it. *I knew happiness when I saw it...*

Then I swallow the nascent shoots of hunger & heartbreak & half-hearted references to books I haven't read & I'm honest for the first time all evening: you're lonely in El Paso & I'm lonely in Roosevelt-or-whatever-the-fuck & tomorrow— when we somehow get to tomorrow— we'll be 57,000 heartbeats closer to being strangers. The sun tumbles behind a mesa cliff (*it really ought to know better*) & drains the final fleeting daylight from our landscape. Dull-eyed out the window, your window, I struggle fruitlessly to differentiate the celebrant yuccas from the slain. I wonder if you'll wait for me.

(I saw it...)

I daydream that future the whole way home & decide, in the end, that you shouldn't.

Spitting Image

Abigail Pfeifer

They're waiting on me. I'm late and I need to leave now, but I've sunken into the floor, the foundation, the earth below. It's all too heavy to push off. I can't move.

"Get up," Dad says.

I can't move. The sofa cushion below me is damp with drool.

He jabs my shoulder. "Up."

He rips away the jacket I'm using as a blanket. Morning air pierces my skin like hail. "No no, no nono no no." I tuck my arms under my body and curl into a ball. "I can't." "Stop whining. You knew we had practice this morning and you went and did stupid shit anyway. Made all the wrong choices."

Everything was right, though, until that last shot. I'd been teetering sweetly on the edge before then. Until I hurled myself off. Always do.

"Sorry," I say into a pillow.

"You're not. And I'm not either."

My nails cut into my palms. It wakes me up a little.

"Car in ten," he says. Then he's gone.

I sit up. I know what will happen if I don't get in the car, don't run. He'll leave without me. I'll sleep for another three hours. He'll come back and not say a word. I'll go to my room, sleep more, scroll on the computer until the space behind my eyes starts pulsing. Then dinner, more or less silent, maybe some questions about school or Alice. Nothing about last night or me stumbling in at two, nothing about the training session I missed. I'll be the first to crack, I'll say something safe, like did Nate show up? Did he make up some ailment to get out of shit like always? Dad'll answer, detailed and animated. He knows how to tell a story. Quiet again then I'll finally start. Nosedive into the grimy pool we've been dancing around. It was an off day, I'll say. It would've been a shit practice anyway, not even worth it, won't happen again.

He'll say he's not keeping me in it, you can quit if you want, there's no point if you're miserable. I don't want to quit. I don't. Then stop acting like you do. Empty hours. *This is the one thing you're good at. What are you without it?* Drown out all the noise with a police procedural. Probably an episode I've already watched. A detective gets kidnapped, and the rest of the team has to race against time to save her. They trace calls and decode messages hidden in sonnets sent by the serial killer. Everyone starts yelling at each other, swinging dicks, losing it. They're too close to the case, they shouldn't be working it. But they break procedure because they care. Their friend's in trouble. They don't want her to die. I'll miss the rescue operation and the final shootout. I'll already be asleep with my earbuds still wedged in.

Not worth it. Never worth it. So instead I stand and tie my hair up, ripping my fingers through matted knots. My breath comes faster. I swallow the nausea.

I tie my sneakers as tight as they'll go. The knotted laces dig into the top of my feet. The heat's on full blast in the car and we don't talk. No radio, either. Just the sound of the blinker and the engine and the snowslush spin of the tires.

We park at the track and it's bright, nearly glowing under the floodlights. The rest of the team's already there, fidgeting to keep the cold at arm's length.

Alice looks at me then looks away. I called her last night and left a voicemail. I might've been crying. Was definitely wasted. This is how we communicate now.

I fucking chuck it. *See? See? There.*

My body's vibrating, singing. My thoughts are watery. I can't hold them long enough for anything to form.

Dad gives me a "good," but only once. He gives Nate pointers about his technique for the whole practice, though. I run so hard I feel the impact of my feet hitting the ground all the way up through my jaw.

It's not enough. I gave too much too early. Alice beats me on our last rep. I scream and kick the fence. It feels good but only for the split second before the ache sets in.

Dad sniffs.

Alice walks over, hands laced behind her head, chest heaving. "Are you okay?" she asks. I'm leaning on my knees, still catching my breath. "You've been saving up.... all morning....just to do that on the last one."

"I haven't."

"I'm fucking better than you. That doesn't mean anything."

Alice goes to stretch, but she keeps glancing back at me. Trying to get a glimpse of the flipped eighteen-wheeler on the side of the interstate. She has to move on, though. Eyes forward or she'll wind up in that ditch, too.

I watch from the car as everyone files out, thanking Dad. He locks up.

"You could've beat her," he says. "You got sloppy on the last hundred."

He idles in the Andover cul-de-sac and waits for me to get out.

Before he can say more, I start. Dad stays in the car, driving it alongside where I run on the sidewalk. It's stopped burning. Now it just feels like nothing. Like floating. He calls out my pace and it's not enough. It's never enough. I stop. Legs wobbling, I fall and land hard on my ass. Bone meets cement.

"We're not finished," he says.

"I'm done."

"You want a repeat of today? You want to keep getting beat? You want to feel like this again?"

Not enough. Never enough. I start again. Two more loops around the neighborhood. Three more. I trip on the fourth and skid forward on the heels of my hands. The icy concrete scrapes off skin. My wrists nearly bend the wrong way. I prop myself up with an elbow and vomit.

Dad crouches next to me. The car's still running. Exhaust flows into the sky. "Let me see," he says.

I hold out my hands. They're shaking and wet with blood. Dad turns them over gently and rolls my wrists around.

"You're alright, bug." He hauls me up by my shoulders, wipes my mouth with his sleeve, buckles me in. "I think that's plenty for now."

"Slow down, M," Alice says.

She doesn't do parties. I didn't expect her to be here. I wouldn't have come if I did. Morning practice, when I last saw her, feels like a week ago. My throat burns and I breathe fast in and out through my nose. The bottle suctions my lips. They lose circulation as I drain the last of the drink. I swallow the air that bubbles up from my stomach, and it lodges somewhere behind my sternum.

"Why are you hovering?" I ask. She stands with her arms crossed like the old lady on the corner of Strawn and Hillside shuffling outside to get her paper.

"You're kind of freaking me out lately."

"I'm fine."

I root through Dill's ice maker and crunch a cube between my molars. The screeching nerves steady me. I move toward the living room. Alice is still there with a sour notch between her brows.

"If you want to go home, Alice, just go home," I say.

"Come with me. This sucks anyway."

"I'm staying. Do what you want."

A few girls I know from class huddle in a corner. There's a gap in their circle, and I imagine myself walking up to them, filling it. They'll smile, whole-face genuine. Their eyes'll get a little brighter.

Alice asks, "Does your dad know you're here?"

"Can you fuck off?"

"You know. I'm tired of your shit. I'm done. You're mean and—and...you're just mean."

"Okay, Alice."

"I don't know why you text me and say you're sorry and you want

us to be good if you turn around and do this every time. So stop doing that. You can fuck off.”

“Okay, Alice.”

Then she’s gone, I’m free, let the night begin. I linger behind the group I’d decided on, close enough to hear their conversation. I wait for them to say something I know how to respond to. It’s not promising.

Ryan B’s shoulder smacks into my face and I bite my tongue. Some of his drink sloshes over the edge of his cup and soaks into my shirt. The shock of it makes my eyes water. While he’s getting his bearings, before he can figure out if he hit a wall or a person, I shut myself in the hall bathroom. I don’t want his sloppy apology or his blank expression when he can’t remember my name. I know my way. Earlier, I laid on the cool floor and found patterns in the tile while I waited for everything to kick in.

There’s a body in the bathtub. I flinch when it sits up and looks at me.

“...Sorry,” I say.

“Shhhh.” She blinks. “Too loud.”

I reach for the knob.

“No,” she says. “Stay.” She beckons with a hand. I sit on the toilet. She shakes her head, flaps her fingers some more. I step into the tub. She nods and pulls her legs to her chest to make room. I hunch forward so the faucet doesn’t dig into my spine.

She asks, “Why are you upset?”

“Someone ran into me.”

“Okay.”

“Why are you in the bathtub?”

“It kind of makes me feel like I’m in one of those log flume sleds from the Olympics.”

She presents a wrinkly bag filled with rainbow gummies. I choose a blue star. The ceiling spins.

There's pounding on the door.

"Cops are here!" someone says.

It takes me a few tries to get out of the tub. "Come on."

She says, "I'm good here."

"You'll get suspended or expelled or something."

"Bye, Mommy."

I put my coat on backwards as I run out of the house. Mud snatches at my shoes and does its best to pull them off, but I'm gone I'm gone I'm gone. Into the woods, legs eating up ground. I'm faster than everyone, nobody's better, I'll never get caught.

I duck under branches and sidestep divots in the ground that wait to twist my ankle. I swear I have night vision.

"M! Mary!" Someone stumbles behind me. I whip around. The motion makes me queasy.

"Jesus, Nate!" I say.

"Sorry, sorry...I didn't..." He wheezes. "Didn't mean to scare you."

"What are you doing?"

"Same as you."

"Going home?"

He nods.

"Can I come?"

"Fine. But if coach asks you were never there."

"No shit."

Nate pauses his video game. His character's hidden in a bush preparing to snipe an enemy. The TV screen bathes the basement a pale green.

"You're gonna get your ass handed to you," he says.

The carbonation from the vodka Coke makes me feel like I could float away. "He'd still shit all over me if I stayed home and went to bed at seven," I say. "He'd find something." My legs throb. They're still

fucked from this morning.

Nate flicks at the Xbox controller. “Yeah if coach was my dad I’d be getting hammered, too.”

“Well, do it anyway so I’m not bored. You need to get on this level.” I pass him his can. Later:

“Nate do you think I’m a hard worker?”

“What?”

“Do you think I’m a hard worker?”

“You’re the fastest girl on the team. You grades are—”

“That’s not what I asked.”

“Yes, obviously you are. I don’t think you can do what you do without working hard.”

“Dad— I mean coach says I only give eighty percent. Says I can be better.”

“Eighty percent’s a lot. I don’t think I’ve ever given eighty percent to anything I’ve done ever.”

I straighten. If I touch Nate’s hair, it will probably be soft.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” he asks.

“I’m just looking,” I say.

“Do you wanna make out?”

“I think maybe.”

“Okay.”

“Okay.”

We stare at each other. He doesn’t move until I do. I keep my eyes open and watch his lashes flutter. He pulls away.

He says, “I—I don’t think... This isn’t... Your dad’ll kill me.”

“Yeah,” I say.

We don’t talk any more but I stay until he falls asleep on the sofa with his arms cradling his head. I go out his sliding doors. It’s snowing. Heavy flakes, big. They’ll stick. In the morning the ground will be covered.

I claw a hand through the grass. There’s not really enough to roll a snowball, but I try. Water drops trickle down the lines of my palms, stinging the cuts there. I hurl the ball at the brick side of Nate’s house

and it bursts and breaks apart in every direction. I mold another, and another, sliding one into my pocket to see how long it'll keep. I toss the other straight upward and it lands softer than I expect. My shoes leave prints on the sidewalk. I jump as far as I can, then shuffle my feet without lifting them off the ground, connecting the pairs of prints with straight lines.

On a pole, I see the individual flakes. Their delicate points and perfect symmetry.

(See this, buggy? No two are the same.

They're actually pretty like that? I thought snow was round.

Just all pretty in movies.

He smiled, pointed to one. Clear as day against a black mailbox.

Nope. Real life, too.)

The block is dark. One side of my coat is wet now, the snow melted into the fabric. I'm shivering but I feel hot. Like I need to strip a layer. I wrench off my jacket, drag it behind me. Just a thin sweater between me and the winter.

The long way home is still too short. I'm standing on the porch, frozen. I can't get the key out of my pocket, can't fit it in the lock, can't go inside.

I sit cross-legged in the yard. Snow seeps into my jeans. A flake catches on one of my eyelashes and the world is half-white until I blink it out.

The kitchen light snaps on, and I can't see him moving around with the blinds closed, but I know he's there. Wiping down the counter, maybe cleaning out the fridge, leaving crusted old glass jars to soak in the sink. He doesn't sleep. Hasn't for as long I can remember. *I'm just like you, now.*

There's a picture of me from when I first started cross country. I'm holding the first ribbon I ever got. It's pink or something. A participation prize. Back then, my ponytail was stubby and my face was my father's. I was always called his spitting image.

I used to be so proud, Dad, when they said that. I was so proud for everyone to know that I was a part of you. And you were proud, too.

You'd put a hand on my shoulder and look down at me with a crooked smile. Maybe a wink. But you lingered for a second too long on the slope of my nose, the curve of my chin. It was like you were checking that they matched yours. Like you weren't convinced that you—*you*—had brought me into the world to cling to your side.

"Mary?"

The front door opens.

"What are you doing?" he asks. "I was worried."

I'm quiet. I haven't spoken in a while, and I don't know if sound will come out of me now.

"Come inside."

I shake my head, cross my arms. Like a toddler would.

He goes in, and without the warmth from the hall light, the snow seems gray. My socks are soaked through and the wind makes my nose run. Snot trickles down my nostril and I suck it up.

Footsteps behind me. Dad's in his boots and coat. He holds out a hat and sweatshirt for me. I take the things but don't put them on. He grunts as he lowers himself beside me. "Where were you?" he asks.

"Nate's," I say.

"You're drunk."

"No."

"Yes."

"Fuck you."

"What was that?"

"Fuck you."

He exhales like he's trying to push something out of him. Something stuck deep in his center. "Why are you doing this?" he asks.

"Not doing anything."

"It's my fault." Dad zips his coat up as far as it'll go. I wrap my arms tighter around myself.

He says, "Your mother always said I would ruin you."

"Do you think I'm ruined?" My teeth sink into my bottom lip. I taste blood. He gets up. "I just..." The snow comes down steady.

The Shadow Beast

Reese Beebe

I only have one secret. It's the thing that comes in the night. As I lie flat on my mattress, I expect her. I brace myself for her warm breath, her cool touch, the way she hovers over the ground, footsteps so light they do not seem to exist. I study the grooves in the popcorn ceiling to distract myself, finger the old quilt blanketed over me. To the rhythmic droning of Abuelo's snoring in the other room, my eyelids flutter shut.

The shadow beast meets me in the alleyway behind the old arcade, always the same place. She does not have a face. Yet I know she is me, I am her. I'm leaning against a red brick wall that's damp and warm, like the summer air. The shadow-beast moves closer to me beneath the violent gleam of the lone street light. She is me, I am her. I hear Mama's favorite song playing somewhere far away. I hear the scrape of cars speeding down the highway. She comes closer, closer, closer. Her blackened hand cradles the side of my face, and I can feel it is wet with blood. Her fingers meet my lips, then my neck. I taste the blood in my mouth, the tang of overripe berries and strong perfume overcoming me.

I know you.

She doesn't say it, but I hear it. I know it is meant for me somehow.

I know you. I say to the shadow. I know you.

Then I brace myself, squeezing my eyes shut as her grip tightens around my throat, as jolts of pain shoot through my veins. It has to hurt. There is no other way. I understand this now. Then I awake to sunlight teasing my eyelids and the sound of pots clanging in the kitchen. She is gone.

I do not feel at home in myself. Never have. It's a scary thought, but one that constantly follows me around, follows me to sleep, follows me up to the loft of the barn. We sit in a circle amongst stray hay and mayflies, the Texas heat bringing a suffocating stillness to the air, even

in the dead of night. The dull moonlight streaming through the open window paints our skin with a milky, watercolor white. The inside of my cheeks taste of cheap tequila. Alex sits beside me. The boy is made of sharp lines, cigarettes, and deep wells under his eyes. He keeps his hand on the back of my neck, stroking my skin to show some kind of ownership over me. I don't mind it much when I'm drunk. Lorenzo sits beside him. I see him at school sometimes. All I know about him is that he stole the tequila from his older brother, and we drink it inside his family's barn.

My eyes wander across the circle to those cherry lips, always cherry. *Ines, Ines, Ines*. The curly shape of her name flutters through my mind. Her long hair cascades down her back, dark like a black sea, shiny and wet. I can only look at her like this when I'm drunk. Her skin looks too smooth, her laugh too musical, her eyes too soft when they fall on me. I drink from the bottle. Its fire blooms in my chest.

I first met Ines in art class last year. She sat next to me once and then stayed there the whole semester. She used to doodle cats with big, cartoonish eyes. We would spend the entire period chatting about our favorite music artists. She liked the punk bands that I always thought were too cool for me. As she spoke, describing the lyrics to her favorite song, I admired her hoop earrings and the one dimple that appeared on her left cheek when she smiled. I see it now as she laughs at whatever stupid thing Lorenzo said.

He scratches his underdeveloped mustache with yellowed fingernails and gestures for me to hand the bottle over. I do so reluctantly.

"Gettin' greedy, I see," Lorenzo grins.

Greedy. Greedy. Greedy.

"Where is your church dress, mija?" Mama only looks at the coffee mug she cleans, hunched over the sink. Water streams from the faucet, tumbling over piles of bowls and plates. I grab the crimson washcloth

hanging over the oven door and begin drying off the dishes she hands me.

“I had to wash it,” I say, though I don’t mention why. I don’t mention *her*, the shadow beast. My hands work mindlessly as I stare out the window above the sink—the old porch swing sways in the wind, covered in amber oak sap and buzzing flies. I don’t think anybody has sat there for years.

“Go put it on. We’re going to be late.”

I don’t mind going to church. Sometimes, it makes me feel clean. As I kneel in the pews, sunlight streaming in through a high window, I almost feel holy. I feel like a good girl. I finish drying off a plate, then hang the washcloth back over the oven. When I turn around, tio Carlos is standing by the front door, a cigarette lazily hanging from his lips. “Morning,” I say.

His sharp eyes rake over my body in an all too familiar way, the crinkle of his crow’s feet, the raise of his overgrown brows.

I am paralyzed there, barefoot on the cold morning tile. It is my fault that my pajama pants cling to my hips. It is my fault that the shirt I wear exposes the adolescent curve of my bare shoulder.

“Valeria!” says Mama, “Go!”

And I do. I walk down the hall at a brisk pace, rush into my bedroom, and close the door tight behind me.

And I know she is angry at me, not for something I did, but for something I am. Something we both are.

The burn of the tequila had felt so good in the moment, the rough scrape of it traveling down my throat, ears ringing with the sweet satisfaction of knowing nothing at all. But the mirror scared me later that night. I stumbled quietly through the door, the agile bones in my body now sticky and lethargic. I locked myself in the bathroom, and that’s when I saw her beneath the eerie flickering light, trapped behind the dirty mirror Mama would ask me to clean the next morning. But

everything was red: my hands, my clothes, red and slick, the tile floor, red smeared over the mirror. Only my church dress hanging from the towel rack behind me was clean. A pristine white rose blooming from such a hellscape, floating behind me like a wrath.

My shadow self moved only when I moved. When I approached the mirror, sneakers squeaking over the bloodied floor, she seemed to get closer as well. At first, she didn't have a face, like always, but the more I blinked, the more her features began to take shape. Soft, doe-like eyes. A strong, wide nose. Elegant, pouty lips. Her skin. Her hair, still the deepest black, the deepest shadow you could think of, but now she was familiar. *Ines, Ines, Ines*. Yes, she was beautiful.

It had to have been some compulsive, demonic force inside me that forced me to climb onto the bathroom counter. I straddled the sink basin, blue jeans painted a deep merlot as I scrambled closer, closer, closer through the wild marsh of blood. Ines brought her blackened hand to my throat, her other hand caught in my curls. I'd never kissed a boy like that before. It was deep and dark and hungry, but not a greedy hunger, not one that can be satiated with a hardy meal. This was a yearning, a begging for something sweet, a dessert that's served, savored. Tongues swiping over and in between lips, silky, sweet. She tasted like overripe berries and a hint of tequila. It felt as if we were on the brink of complete osmosis. We would soon disappear as individual, separate entities, and then it would just be this, forever, over and over again.

I don't remember pulling away, but I remember seeing her face, though it wasn't her face anymore. I was looking at myself, caressing my own skin somehow, feeling the frizzy texture of my hair between my fingers.

I felt the fire in my belly arise again, then the burn of the tequila creeping up my chest into my esophagus. I scrambled off of the counter, away from myself, away from her. When I turned around, I came face to face with my church dress, that hanging angel, that ghost. I yearned to reach out and touch it, prayed that it would take me away from here, take me to the clean, pure feet of Mother Mary. Instead, the

fire inside me exploded. A thick, black substance dribbled out of my mouth, over my chin, besmirching the crisp white fabric in front of me. It was hot, the rancid tang of rotten berries overcoming my senses.

I know you. I know you. I know you.

It was a mercy to wake up in my bed the next morning, a mercy that I did not remember how I got there. The bathroom was not covered in blood, as I had remembered. It was just as before, somewhat clean, mirror blemished by water droplets. But through that mirror, I saw it. The dress hanging behind me was no longer holy, ghost-like, but now cursed with the dark pigment that possessed me the night before. It scared me to death. It scared me because now she was here. She didn't just occupy my dreams, my darkest fantasies, my mortifying shame. She was now living among me, haunting me.

Dress shoes clomp on cobblestones as we walk out of the church. Mama's hand snakes beneath my hair, and she adjusts the collar of my dress. I had to wear my old dress. It's an ugly pastel pink and too tight around my ribcage. Her hands are too cold for summer. They shock me as her fingers graze my warm skin.

Ines stands on the corner by the streetlight. She's talking to her older brother. He's checking his watch. The noon sun shines bright on her silky skin, and I think I may die when she smiles at me when she waves subtly.

I wave back, but it hurts. My wave is tainted. It's a sin. She doesn't know I've kissed her all over. She doesn't know I'm rotten on the inside.

"Why do you wave at that girl," Mama's arm comes down my back, pulling me closer to her.

I watch Ines, her hair half up, tied with a ribbon. She and her

brother walk across the street, out of my line of sight.

“She’s my friend,” I say, “from school.”

Mama looks back at her over her shoulder before adding, “I don’t like what I hear about her, mija.”

I look down at the hem of my dress.

“She will go to hell for all that, you know,” she whispers. Then she grabs my hand, almost as if she is about to kiss it. Instead, she inspects my fingernails. “You need a bath, mija.”

I look at my hands, and I see it too. Black. Black dirt caked beneath my fingernails. Black dirt coming to the surface.

Our Lady of the Mountain Sumaqanka

Jacob Keiser

For dinner, there are tubers, some yellow with flakes of pastel pink, and the rest are deep purple. Their skins are soft, and several have split, spilling steam that smells of heavenly dirt. Abuelito is standing over me. He puts a third potato on my plate and commands me to eat.

“Listen, or he’ll bring more,” says Valeria. She smiles and flicks my tummy. Abuelito finds this funny and gives a faint laugh, more cough than chuckle. He hobbles to his little chair and sits across from us. I know he’s looking at me expectantly, though his face is half covered by a stack of sandwich bread.

Andean hospitality and the mythicized appetite of Americans compound dangerously. I’ve eaten enough food in the town of Chinchihuasi to make my belly noticeably larger.

I grab the smallest purple tuber and take a timid bite. Abuelito laughs again, this time harder. He’s shaking his head, saying “veneco, veneco, veneco...”

I glance at Valeria.

“He’s calling you poor.” She looks embarrassed. “It’s because you didn’t peel it.”

“Ah.” In Peru, only slum-dwellers and *indios* eat potato skins. I start peeling, but it’s too late. An American desperate enough for pig food must be ravenous! Abuelito grabs the offending tuber and throws it into the rubbish bin. He gestures for me to grab some bread.

It’s white sandwich bread sold in plastic bags. The brand is Limean, made with wheat grown in North Dakota. It’s a little stale and more expensive than Chinchihuasi bread. Abuelito has money to spend and food to waste. His garden is ever bountiful, and his eight children

have long left Chinchihuasi.

Valeria squeezes my leg and rests her head on my shoulder while I press a bit of potato flesh between two slices. Her head is sweaty, and her skin is unusually pale.

“Are you alright?” I ask.

She nods her head.

“You look sleepy.” I smile.

“I am a little.” She smiles back.

I take a bite. It dissolves into a starchy mush. Desperate for flavor, I reach for the little porcelain jar at the far end of the table. It’s filled with *salsa de Rocoto*, deliberately placed away from the gringo who will never learn to handle it. I smear a little on and wince as I chew. My tongue is shriveling, and I feel like I’ll die. Valeria has already passed me her mug. The drink is warm and filled with a third carbohydrate, ECCO roasted barley—a subsidiary of Nestle and perfect for hard-working farmers and stupid Americans. It’s coffee-brown and smells like plain oatmeal.

Now Abuelito is dying with laughter. His knobby shoulders shudder as high cheekbones pull up, stretching his lips and hiding thin eyes in rolls of brown wrinkles.

Valeria pulls me closer to her while the barley washes away the Rocoto flakes. I hear her breathing slowly and deeply, like she’s trying to smell me. Her chin is quivering, and I think she’ll cry again, but she only smiles and says, “I love you.”

Abuelito calms down when he starts coughing.

“Abueliiiiito,” says Valeria, “El pescado!”

His eyes widen. “Oohhh.” Abuelito slowly stands. He bites his lip and winces. Some weeks ago, his leg was hurt in a farming accident. Abuelito has money and does not need to work the land, but he is stubborn and has lived off his plants for too long. Valeria says each would wither without the other. I know she feels guilty. Tomorrow morning, we will return to Valeria’s home in Lima. It’ll be a while before she can visit again, and no other family will come. They have their reasons, and I cannot say I disagree with them. I look at the old

man. He's so thin and angular. Abuelito can't be younger than ninety. How do you look at a man you know will die before you ever see them again?

There is an understanding between Valeria and me, one established long ago. Her exchange program in the United States has ended, and I cannot run away from my life and move to Peru. This is our goodbye trip.

Abuelito shuffles to the kitchen, where a portable gas stove sits on the red clay floor. On the stove is a little pan filled with tuna, an onion, and diced tomatoes from the garden.

I clear my throat. "Should we..." It feels wrong to stay seated.

"No, no." Valeria shakes her head. "It's rude to make guests work." As she spoke, however, Valeria was already standing and sneaked a kiss on my cheek. She grabs a clean plate and crouches next to the stove. Valeria is the old man's granddaughter, and she's a woman. Helping with food is expected.

My belly is close to bursting, but still, the tuna smells divine. Peruvians love their fish, even deep in the Andes. Their tuna is canned in oil and bits of garlic, which makes it rich and creamy. American brands are canned in water and use too much salt.

Abuelito spoons the tuna onto the plate, and Valeria sets it on the table. He pours warm water and hands me a bowl of bitter herbs from his garden. She has not told Abuelito what will happen. He would not have hosted us if she had. He would say, *'Why show him to me if things are to end?'* One does not show a boy to their abuelo lightly, but Valeria said she wanted this. I am her first boyfriend and likely the only partner of hers Abuelito will see before he dies. She wants him to have these memories, but secretly, I suspect she also wants them. For me, I think the plane ride home will be long and miserable. Abuelito often talks of marriage.

Valeria rubs her bloated stomach. Dinner is set, and neither of us has recovered from lunch. For our last day in Chinchihuasi, Abuelito spared no expense. He took us to Texas City.

Surrounding Chinchihuasi is Our Lady of the Mountain Sumaqanka, a ring of mountain peaks that form the shape of a woman lying flat on her back and staring into the cosmos. Halfway up her bosom is Texas City, the best restaurant for miles. It's covered in American iconography and many posters of women in bathing suits.

Abuelito ordered their most expensive meal for us, ceviche. It was raw trout caught from Sumaqanka's streams. The fish was served with toasted corn called Cancha and potatoes with splotches of white and yellow and flecks of black. There were also sweet potatoes, which Abuelito found revoltingly small. Those in his garden are *thrice* the size! Finally, the server placed a large pitcher and three bowls on the table. It was alcoholic Chinchá. Abuelito filled our bowls.

For breakfast, Abuelito's neighbor brought thick slices of roast squash. We ate it with rice and leftover Cui, battered in cornflower. I looked down at my plate, my belly moaning in protest. "How much do you think the fish would be back home?" I asked.

Valeria was looking into the bowl of Chinchá.

"Forty, fifty dollars?" I sipped the Chinchá. It was strong.

"At least sixty."

Abuelito quietly stuffed his mouth with fish and periodically drank from his bowl. On the table, he had piled his potato skins and the Cancha kernels that were small or burnt.

I took a bite of ceviche and turned to Valeria. Whenever I try something new, she asks what I think, but her attention is still on the Chinchá. "Wow!" I said. "I don't think fish is meant to taste this good."

Her ceviche sits untouched. "It tastes better without the microplastics and Imperialism." Valeria looked up at me. "You'll miss it, the food? That's what I missed the most."

"Yeah," I looked down at my plate. "It's much cheaper and less greasy." I take another bite. Surely, there were other things I could say, but I didn't. I know what I will miss and that nothing can be done about it.

Valeria nodded her head slowly. Raising the Chinchu, Valeria closed her eyes and drank deeply.

We ate and drank bowl after bowl, making us very sleepy.

When it was time to pay, the owner, delighted to have her first authentic American, gave us a discount. Before we left, she brought out a jar of something orange. She said it was *salsa de Aji Qasqu*.

“Bring my *Aji Qasqu* to the United States and make many good things with it,” said Valeria, acting as translator.

The owner smiled and pressed the jar into my hands. She spoke again very happily.

“And when you come back, bring me some real American barbeque.”

Abuelitio drives us in his shabby car that coughs and sputters like him. Its tires are old, and the mountain roads are nothing but dusty gravel.

I look out the window drinking the landscape. When we leave tomorrow, it'll be early morning, too dark to see. Valeria shuts her eyes and nuzzles her head into my lap. I place one arm across her belly and the other under her head.

Chinchihuasi is a land of eternal spring. Pastures blanket the valley, crisscrossed by streams and groves of avocados. As Sumaqanka steepens, she becomes geometric, a patchwork of terraces filled with freshly planted corn and very legal coca. Above the terraces are potato patches and great squares of alfalfa. A thousand souls feed off Sumaqanka. Little clumps of houses clutch to her ridges, stubborn as their inhabitants who are very old. We see them on the road. Most are women, squat, and very short. They wear long braids and bowler hats adorned with orchids, some unknown to botanists. Their skirts are bright and their quipis colorful. The women come from the fields carrying crops and animals for their families. Abuelito stops for a little abuela and lets her in. She holds a headless chicken and has a sleeping

lamb wrapped in her quipi. They chat in Quechua.

I look down, and Valeria's eyes are open. Her golden skin is pale from the Chinchu. She's staring at the back of the little abuela while the lamb drools on the headrest. Three years ago was when they buried Abuelita. This was two months before Valeria left for America. God, she was a mess when I met her. Those were the hard days, but she got better. We got better. It was easy to love and not think about the future. Valeria's holding the jar of *Aji Qasqu*, turning it slowly like there was a secret about it. Her knuckles are white, and her eyes are moist. I try to think of something to say but cannot. I'll be gone so soon, and words are wind. Instead, I hold her tighter. I will miss her weight on my lap.

We wind down Sumaqanka's spine and onto her leg, curving eastwards through wild groves of eucalyptus. Her foot delivers us to the valley, where streams burst from her rocky toes. A group of tios waves from the water. They are waste-deep, and their nets are full of splashing silver.

After the avocado fields, we reach the town outskirts, where gangs of puppies trail the car. Chinchihuasi dogs aren't mean like Limean dogs. Most have owners and are *yap-yap* dogs rather than the dreaded *bark-bark*, or even worse, *yip-yip* 'dogs' (it's actually factually proven that chihuahuas are rodents). Abuelito drives slowly, and the people on the streets wave at us because everyone knows Abuelito, and very few know me. The only other gringos are a pair of Polish priests who run the church. They are very tall, have red hair, and speak terrible Quechua, worse English, and no Spanish. Everyone pretends to understand them at mass. Valeria suspects they're lovers.

Abuelito stops the car, and the little abuela gets out, thanking us all.

Chinchihuasi is built around a central asphalt road that curves along Sumaqanka. Jutting out are smaller cobbled lanes with homes and little shops. Many are empty, and others are ruins. They are covered in cacti that thrive in decomposing adobe blown open by dynamite and RPGs. In the 1980s, Chinchihuasi was torn open by Shining Path rebels and government forces. Many, including Abuelito and his eight

children, fled, making new lives in Lima or Huancayo. Only the old have returned. Valeria sits up, her eyes now clear. I hold her hand, and she responds by chomping my nose all cutesy. “I love you,” she says. I know she does.

I think I love Valeria, but I know I fear finality. I do not want to date long-distance, but I fear her absence. I don’t know if Valeria’s understanding fully matches my own. Is there a concrete stance for Valeria to match? This is our goodbye trip, but neither of us has called it that yet. The only comfort is that there’s nothing to be done. It is a cozy veil that’s suffocating. Tomorrow, we will leave Chinchihuasi, and two days from then, I will be on the plane.

We come to the central plaza, lined with municipal buildings and the church. In the middle are two large statues, a man and a woman. Valeria scoffs. They are Santiago dancers dressed in local finery. Their hair is light brown, and their skin is white. She’s written three papers about them.

Abuelito turns onto a side street and reaches his home. We will rest for several hours, then convene for dinner. Before we enter, he buys the sandwich bread and canned tuna from his neighbor’s window shop.

We follow Abuelito into his large compound of a home, surrounded by thick adobe walls. Attached are many buildings, enough to house twenty people. In the center is an open space, every inch filled with plants with purposes. Abuelito goes straight to the potato patch blooming with purple flowers. They blanket a low mound of earth from which thrusts a tall stone cross. Even in death, Abuelita provides. The old man sinks to his knees and starts pulling potatoes.

I spread the tuna just enough to wet the bread. The sandwich is further thickened by a yellow potato, mashed, and mixed with a white-friendly quantity of Rocoto. Valeria covers hers with a healthy coating of the Ají Qasqu, and Abuelito dutifully eats his tubers plain.

The fish I must ration carefully. The meat-to-carb ratio in

Chinchihuasi cuisine is low, and if I finish the tuna before the carbohydrates, Abuelito will be embarrassed and will fry me an egg.

Dinners are challenging with Abuelito. He gets tired early and, unless prompted, will keep to himself. I would talk with Valeria, but it would be rude to exclude our host. My Spanish is not terrible, but Abuelito's Quechua accent is thick. I think he finds my gringo accent equally incomprehensible. Still, it's my last meal in Chinchihuasi, and I do not want to eat in silence. I nudge Valeria.

She looks up from her heavily sauced plate. Strands of loose hair hang in her face, bound together in wet clumps. Why is she sweating so much?

"Those statues..."

"The Santiago dancers?"

Valeria's told me all about them. They were erected some fifty years ago by Abuelito's brother, who was mayor. I nod my head at the old man. "What does he think of them?"

Her face furrows into a mischievous smirk. "Do you want me to ask him why they are white?"

I grin and shrug. Valeria's condition is probably just indigestion from the high altitude. She asks the question, and Abuelito's tired eyes sharpen a little.

"I was working as a doctor," says Valeria translating. "The dancers came from Huancayo. The department was paying them to go to little towns, and I wanted Chinchihuasi to have a real statue because every city needs a statue. So I told Miguel—that's his brother—to put one up, and he did. We all came together—I don't think he understood the question—and made the man." Valeria pauses, and to my surprise, Abuelito keeps talking. "Then I became mayor, and I built another statue, the woman. I thought the man was lonely."

Abuelito points his finger at me. "Cada hombre necesita una buena mujer."

"Every man needs a good woman," says Valeria.

Abuelito is looking me up and down. I take small bites of bread. He's trying to read me. What for? He can't change the plane tickets.

I can't move to Peru. I quickly glance at Valeria. Her beautiful brown eyes are calm, too calm. God, she's terrified.

I try to redirect. "¿Qué otra adiciones haces a la estatures?"

Valeria laughs a little too hard and translates the question correctly: *What other additions have you made to the statues?*

Abuelito looks down at the food. "Después de que los terroristas colgaron los cuerpos, se cubrieron de sangre. Los volví a pintar."

"I repainted them." Valeria clears her throat. "Why don't you tell us about the Inca and Huanca!" The Huanca are this area's native culture.

A look of pure satisfaction erupts on Abuelito's wrinkled face.

"Tawantinsuyu—the Inca—tried to kill us," translates Valeria, "but we fought back and won. They killed everyone around but not us, Huancas. We were protected by Our Lady Sumaqanka." Valeria gives me a smirk. Abuelito loves Chinchihuasi history but is wrong. While never fully incorporated, the Inca formerly subjugated the Huanca, but she doesn't tell him that.

Abuelito's face shrivels like he ate something tart. "Malditos cobardes."

"Cowards," translates Valeria.

"Sumaqanka siempre protege," his eyes are distant. "La abandonamos. Ella te proveyó y tú la abandonaste."

"Sumaqanka would have protected us." She bites her lip. "¿Estás bien, Abuelo?"

The old man shakes his head but continues. Valeria nods along but does not translate. Abuelito clinches his jaw. "Dile lo que yo digo." He wants her to translate.

Her eyes fill with unease, but she speaks. "Chinchihuasi was so big," says Valeria. "There were many families. Now, they are all packed in cities like anchovies." She is breathing heavily. I see her hand twitching. She sees I see and moves the offending hand to scratch her leg.

Abuelito says more.

"Without Sumaqanka, they will wither away, and she will have no

one to love. Her forests will fall. Her fields will rot. Chinchihuasi will be weeds and dogs, and Sumaqanka will die of sadness.”

Now Abuelito is looking at me. His chin is quivering.

“Chinchihuasi needs young people.” Valeria is staring at her cold plate. “It needs children. The quiet has killed more than the terrorists.”

I reach for my plate and find it empty. Somehow, I have eaten it all. My throat is bone dry, and the water is tepid.

“I cannot blame them,” translates Valeria, “the people who left. I made my money in Lima like everyone else. When you find love, it lays you a path. I walked off mine again and again and again, but it will drag you back.” Her body is still, except for her hand, still scratching.

I wait for Abuelito to blink, but he does not. He speaks and stares.

“It dragged me back screaming. It dragged me back...” Valeria stops. Abuelito’s Spanish is incomprehensible, but I catch a name. He speaks of Abuelita. Valeria is trembling, but Abuelito doesn’t stop. He’s no longer looking at us. The old man stares past us. What is he looking at? “When you find love,” Valeria closes her eyes, “you grab it tight and let it pull. You keep your grip strong and don’t ever let go.”

Abuelito’s eyes are wide as saucers. He is desperate. He knows the gringo will not marry his granddaughter half a world away. He knows because he wouldn’t. Valeria has told me. Theirs was an arranged marriage. Abuelito had a job in Lima and could speak Spanish. Before they married, Abuelito had another lover driven from Chinchihuasi by her father. Some say he was shot. Abuelito was unfaithful and was aggressive when he drank. After fleeing Chinchihuasi, his children moved far away and will not speak to him. Now his wife is dead, and the silence will kill him. Abuelito’s gaze lowers to his plate. It is half-full and cold.

“Hey.” I reach for Valeria’s leg and squeeze it reassuringly. “You okay?” Her leg is wet. “Valeria?”

She looks down, and her eyes widen. “I need to use the restroom.” She stands suddenly.

“Valeria?”

“I love you.” She excuses herself to Abuelito and leaves the

kitchen.

I'm about to follow, but then I see the blood, a thin sheen on my palm—a spike of cold shoots through my belly. My body is petrified. Valeria has always had a nervous tick. She must have scratched her legs bloody.

“A-Abuelito?” I raise my bloody hand. “Es de Valeria’s pierna.”

The old man nods his head. “Ella es así.”

“¿Q-qué?” *What?*

Abuelito says each word slowly and clearly. “Muy nerviosa.” *Very nervous.* “Valeria es una chica muy nerviosa.” *Valeria is a very nervous girl.* Abuelito stands, groaning softly in pain. He starts gathering our plates.

I also stand, my heart thumping so fast it hurts. The blood is sliding down my palm and into the crevices of my fingers. “Ayuda para Valeria de medicas?” There isn’t a modern hospital for a hundred miles.

“Tranquilízate, chico,” says Abuelito. I think he wants me to be calm. He gives a tired laugh. “He visto más sangre. Chinchihuasi ha visto más sangre. Ñuqayku Huancayku Sumaqanka kutichipuyku...” He trails off, murmuring in Quechua and bits of Spanish all jumbled together. He dumps the plates in the sink and grabs a first aid kit.

Why is he so calm? I slam my bloody fist into the table. “WHAT DO WE DO?”

Abuelito gives me nothing but an uninterested look and puts on his jacket. I follow him outside. It is dusk on the verge of night. I can see light and distant movement coming from the outhouse.

“Abuelito.” My voice is shaky. “¿Qué hago? *What do I do?*”

He stops before Abuelita’s cross and gives me a long look that speaks a million words. “Quédate aquí,” *stay here*, he finally says. Abuelito walks across the garden and knocks on the outhouse door, then enters.

I want to follow him in, but my phone buzzes. It’s Valeria. She texts sorry more than a dozen times and begs me not to intrude. So, I am stuck.

I cannot go to Valeria, nor can I simply leave. I am trapped in

the garden's center beneath Abuelita's cross and the looming body of Sumaqanka. The blood on my hand is starting to thicken. I drop to my knees.

I grab leaves, vines, and stalks, and I pull, and when I have a fistful of plant, I scour my bloody hand. I clean until I see no blood, but I can still smell it. My bloated stomach screams. It must be on my arms. I remove my shirt and dig my shaking fingers into the soil. I pull clumps of dirt and handfuls of roots, and I scrub, and I scrub, and I scrub, but the smell only grows, which I know is impossible, but it's there, and I will leave her, and so I *must* scrub, but it's only getting stronger, and I'm taking off my shoes when I hear the outhouse door open. I jump to my feet. Abuelito comes out and gives me an incredulous look.

"Sangre," *blood*. I gesture at my filthy body like it would make me look less insane.

To my surprise, Abuelito laughs. It's a long and wistful thing. "Sí gringito, *sangre*." Abuelito says nothing else. He shuffles past me and retires to his room.

There is quiet except for a mountain breeze that makes me shiver. I really must find my shirt, but before I can, the outhouse lights snap off. My body freezes. I see only her silhouette.

"Are you covered in something?" says Valeria.

I don't respond. It's not blood I smell, only Chinchihuasi dirt.

She comes to me and buries her face in my chest, and I press my cheek against her head. I pull her tight, and together, we rock.

"I'm okay," she says. "I'm okay, I'm okay..." We sink to the ground.

The last bits of light are sinking behind Our Lady of the Mountain Sumaqanka. Her body is pitch black, the sky above a little lighter. The ridges form a single perfect line. I trace the tip of her nose down the gorge of her neck, up again for her breast, then down gently across her belly and leg.

Valeria and I lean on each other. Her eyes are shut, her heartbeat quick. It would be cruel to disturb this moment, but I know one of us must. When I speak, a lump forms in my throat. I manage only, "Hey."

Valeria nuzzles her body closer to mine. “Hi.”

“Your leg...” I see it wrapped tightly in gauze. “I think some things have been unspoken about us, about this trip, and what comes after. By not talking about them, I think some tensions have been caused, and,” my body shutters slightly, “I think we should talk about them.”

Valeria says nothing.

“My understanding is that once I leave, our relationship will end. I don’t know if this is your understanding, and I do not know if you agree with it.” I take a deep breath. “Honestly, I don’t really know what I think. Selfishly, I think I’ve been thinking more about what you think, so I don’t have to think about what I think as much, and that just makes it harder for everyone.”

Valeria says nothing.

“I don’t know if we can agree before I leave. If not, then just an understanding, something we can work off of—” I stop when I see Valeria shaking her head.

“You’re right,” she says. “It is healthy, and responsible, and necessary.” She is crying. “I want to, I want to, I want to...”

“But It’s been a long day.”

“I’m really fucking tired, and I’m really fucking full.” Valeria smiles. There are so many things contained in a smile. “I’m going to hate tomorrow. I’m gonna hate it so much. I just want tonight. Can I please, please, please, please have tonight, just one night, and we don’t need to worry about anything at all?” She looks up at me. She is scared, and I am scared.

I grab her head and kiss her. We fall into the dirt and are content because in Chinchihuasi, at this moment, time is liminal. We stare into the cosmos with Our Lady of the Mountain Sumaqanka and everyone else who is looking.

POETRY

Intolerable Iteration

Iliana Tangarova

On Sundays,
the woman wise enough to measure the amount of alcohol pours three fingers of vodka into the bohemian wine glass that sits two feet away from the kitchen countertop's vast ledge. Her arms, fastened by her perished lover's (was there more than one?; she cannot remember), cradle, are spasming, confined by unperceivable safety straps crisscrossing her body. She takes a step back, unknowingly unfastening the makeshift ghost lover's seatbelt that carefully molds into her figure. Once she ignorantly steps out of the confining cocoon, she stares at the Holy Grail sitting two feet away from her. It sits frivolously, naïvely, almost mockingly, unaware of the unholy damage it will do once taken off its altar of damnation.

On Mondays,
the woman allows herself only two fingers of whiskey added to the vodka. The goblet sits there, glittering and clear and stocked with stale, yet purifying, vodka, silent and pleading, mutely thirsting for the molten honey gold presented to it. She raises her hand, securely clenching the whiskey above the wine glass, looking past her shoulder and staring at her counters, before viciously dumping the heavenly damned contents into the Grail. She looks back, scans the altar for any spillage, glances at the cup, and nods, a heavy glaze of murkiness traversing her eyes.

On Wednesdays,
the woman is high off her tears. The tear tracks left trailing from her eyes have burned through her cheeks. Red, angry welts in the shape of distressed static lines flow down her face, her lips trembling in stormy turmoil. Her teeth bite through the skin and fat of her cheeks. It is not

blood that flows through her drooling mouth, but a blend of drool and rancid whisky and stale vodka. Sluggishly, her eyes widen and shoot to the chalice sitting upon its altar. Tempting, it is.

On Thursdays,
the woman is sitting on her heels, rocking back and forth and praying to the cup. Every inch of skin is purple and blue and red and yellow and grey and bruised.

On Saturdays,
the woman is naked, crawling to her restitution. The ghost lover's ripped seatbelt rests two feet behind her. On the floor, she lays pure. Purple and blue and red and yellow and grey and bruised, she crawls. Her knees are scraped and bloody, oozing whiskey and vodka from her scraped knees.

On Sundays, again,
the woman is nude and sobbing.

On Sunday, sweat oozes from the woman's pores, and holy water drops from the woman's tear ducts and she is wobbling on her feet. On Sunday, she is reaching towards the cup, damned be the consequences.

On Sunday,
she grasps the bowl of the glass and chucks it towards her purple and blue and red and yellow and grey and bruised chest. On Sunday, she cradles the chalice like a baby to its mother.

On Sunday,
she sees her reflection in the vessel. She's smirking, and purple and blue and red and yellow and bruised are swirling under her skin. Black tar leaks from her eyes. She frantically shakes her head and blinks. She looks back at her reflection. She is still pure.

On Sunday,
she reaches in between the almost mountainous valley between her
breasts and rips into herself.

On Sunday,
she rips into herself, parting rib cages and stabbing organs.

On Sunday,
she pours the holy liquid into her being. Into every crevice of her soul,
it flows.

Feast Your Eyes

Bella Devega

I wonder whether he would have wanted us to gaze
upon those fourteen unsigned olive trees. Fifteen billowing
wisps of hue, only one stroked with *Vincent*, pride etched
onto canvas pulled taut.

Batty might be synonymous with genius these days,
and we couldn't leave dead and well alone,
because he dared to see cerulean and indigo
in a place men only find green.

I think a real man of Van Gogh,
whose shame was stolen and framed,
lit under the dim glow of mahogany and
granite, claimed for the feast of insatiable eyes.

We can't help but stare at monkeys in a cage, and I bet
you thought yourself a savior after you made that poor girl
your purpose to fulfill, because she was empty
and alive.

No penance left by the bedside, just
a stale glass of water three-quarters-downed.
That should be enough after she tempted your palate,
and she should be thankful for your eyes.

Perhaps boys choose heroes when they're young,
men flashy and quick-witted. Ones who *win*,
drawing blood from unapproachable *girls* who
Wouldn't know a good thing when it slaps them upside the head.

Vincent was no hero, and nobody
worships a martyr. He submitted himself to life,
to death, to you and to me,
to the hungry.

Mortals pay no mind to the violent red that spills
along the cliffside where Prometheus is bound.
Only the eagle, who hungers at the stench
of ripe, gooey flesh.

Streetcar

Joshua Cirotto

Moody as the vagaries of the New Orleans weather,
her clothes hang off her nonchalantly
like the moss off the tall trees.
We walk down a long sidewalk flanked on either side by them,
courtiers in her royal hall
pillars of St. Louis cathedral.
When she curses,
sun flits through the clouds and warms my cheek.

She broods on the patio of Cafe du Monde,
looks out at the rain gracing the park, reads her book—
I sit quietly next to her,
crowding her like the gray clouds,
but in my heart
the saxophone of a street band blares and drums beat, people murmur,
fortune tellers swindle, bouncers stand guard, tourists shop, libations
are made in honor of Bacchus in this filthy temple—
the multitudes swarm in their various purposes all to one end.

I'm one of the kids that's beating a turned over plastic bucket,
calling out to god and begging for tips.

Leaven

Genevieve Kent

Grief is when you are sour
dough, a puddle from the mother
no end, no beginning, amorphous
spread out, held only by the shape of
what happens to contain you.

Then, you are beaten, again and again
thwapped against the wall
of the mixing bowl
or the counter
however god prefers to toughen you up.

Each beating you grow tighter
you cling relentlessly to anything
anyone
that touches you
begging to be held
until you give up, smooth
round, contracted.

At last, some rest
drowning in olive oil
or smothered in flour
shuffled away with a cover on
your troubles. You belong in a warm, still place.

You feel you ought to be
O.K. But this is only the beginning.
Everything sweet in you gets eaten up

your guts boil
you shout hot, angry, boozy air
at the thin film separating you from
the rest of the world.

You think of being flour and water
again, and again
you're stretched this way and that
into the shape
the world wants you to be.
Making you stronger feels like
tearing you apart
Is there any difference?
You learn how to hold yourself.

If you're lucky, your tense
exterior will soon be slashed
with the razor of
Hope/Expectation
a deliberate fault line
where you can safely explode
and show the world what was once
on the inside.
You will look beautiful.

Rest, again,
wonder, again,
Will I be able to take much more?
Will the flames burn me to a crisp?
Will I keep staying stuck until
I am overproofed
airless, levelled, grotesque?

Or

Will I Rise?

Goodbye, August

Victoria Trevino

You still waltz with me in my dreams.
Gifting me the nurture I've always craved from you.
The warm, gentle kisses I've never secured.
Viewing life from a rose-tinted lens.
Forgetting to hide my soft underbelly.
Like a child's gaze for approval.
Why do I ache when I've given everything you wanted?
It's been years since I've felt your painful, rugged grasp.
Years since I've seen your cold, dead stare.
Your shrill cry, warning me of every mistake I've made.
Though you still visit me; smiling, pleading for my embrace.
Like a serpent waiting for its prey.
Do you still dream of me?

cyanotic

Cain Yin

I was once a perfect angel— now I spin in empty rooms.
Picture me on fire, now paint me as the star.
When I'm good I sing like preachers. Every good thing
comes to life. Day dreamers, starlets. Dead girls and their
pills. Claria Bow splits a fag, ashes it in a can.
I'm beyond saving. I can dance on the points of pins.
Move over, honey; I'll set this whole town alight. Second
moment. Jilted lover. I'm the maestro of the nickel
screen. Everybody wants a miracle, but no one wants to
see it through. Not me though, I'm a crack shot. I never
leave a witness behind. I ask the dresser what he thinks
of heaven, he brushes lashes from his eye. I think it must
be awful, he says. Not knowing wrong from wrong. I
need good things by the dozens. Vodka tonics. Crushed
up pills. But we don't have a choice; we can only stand
and wail. Doctors streaming in with their knives and
pills and all I wanted was a life worth living. In an instant
I've forgotten everything, all the roses and the starlets
and the bright gold gleaming lights.
I'm just a matchbook again.
All my angels have left the room.

alameda

John Thompson Guillén

me and momma kept a puppy named alameda
secret from poppa and joie and clarice and dee-dubya and anne-beth
asking why me and momma made a collar outta pull tabs off
coke cans and a sweatpant drawstring
while alameda slept beneath stars and the wheelbarrow
where she lapped hose water and ate the stale ends of breads we snuck her,
ends alameda couldn't tell weren't bones,
that she dug and buried and hid in the yard
that poppa tilled in aprils and asked where'd all these holes come from?
each spring like a joke til i was fourteen
and became a girl
and left this world for good.

NONFICTION

On Beasts and Gods

Stephanie Ro

'I am growing up,' she thought, taking her taper. 'I am losing my illusions, perhaps to acquire new ones,' and she paced down the long gallery to her bedroom. — Virginia Woolf

Looking back, it was a peculiar aloneness that I felt during those months in Korea—donning the superpower of invisibility. The first night I landed, with only two suitcases in tow, I felt the strange and chilling freedom of finally being alone. This was the homeland of my parents, a city of 10 million strangers. Here my black hair and Korean eyes did not make me different and the clamor of voices in a familiar language, my mother tongue, blurred into a distant hum. Yet, here, no one knew my name.

Aristotle's *Politics* describes isolated people as being “either a beast or a god.” As the blearing lights of Seoul's skyline came into view through the fog of the bus window, I couldn't help but wonder: ‘What is this isolation going to make me? *A god or a beast?*’ I sat in the silence of the packed bus, my signal-less phone idly in hand, overwhelmed, perhaps for the first time since childhood, by the loudness of my own thoughts.

A few weeks into my six months in Seoul, I took the blue city bus from my dorm to the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in the Jongno District. It was an especially cold February day, and my thickest coat from Texas did little to protect me from the biting chill. I was there to see a special exhibition of one of my father's favorite artists, Lee Jung Seop. The showroom was warm and crowded, filled with only the sound of the clicking of shoes on the polished floors

as people silently made their way through the maze of paintings. These works, donated from the personal collection of Samsung's founder Lee Gunhee after his passing, had never been displayed before. Lee Jung Seop's signature oxen painted with bold strokes and teeming with vitality hung near the entrance under the soft glow of the lights.

Lee is beloved as one of the greats in Korean modern art, his most renowned work, *Bull*, is instantly recognizable to any Korean schoolchild. However, as I made my way through the displays, I noted how the monikers of 'tragic artist' and 'lonely painter' have haunted his legacy. As the Korean War ravaged the peninsula, Lee was separated from his wife and two sons as his family fled to Japan as refugees. He remained alone in Korea. The letters and postcards that he sent them hung on the walls of the exhibition, revealing his fond doodles and affectionate nicknames. Poverty-stricken and mentally deteriorating, Lee immersed himself in painting and turned to heavy drinking. He died alone from hepatitis at the age of 40. Perhaps it was the loneliness that killed him.

Towards the middle of the exhibition was a section with dimmed lights, kept low to preserve the art. Curiously, I approached the display and was met with a kind of shiny foil adorned with a careful but abstract sketch of two children embracing, all tangled together.



(Lee Jung Seop, 'Eunjihwa 19')

I learned that during the war, Lee did not have enough money to buy proper supplies to paint, so he etched his art onto the inner foil wrapping of his cigarette packs. Peering into the glass at the delicate carvings, I wondered what desperation, what courage kept him drawing. The more I stared at the etching, the more it stared back at me. I thought of the beast and of the god. It was loneliness that drove Lee mad at the end of his life but it was also loneliness that drove him to create amid despair. How much had he yearned for warmth? For love? Dozens of his foil etchings lined the room— an artistic cry in his war-torn and lonely reality. These were drawings born from necessity, of a pain that demanded to be expressed. A pain that demanded to be shared.

My dorm room was long and skinny, fitting only a bed, a desk, and a closet, with an attached private bathroom and balcony. I lived in a hallway of singles, surrounded on all sides by girls like me, alone in their rooms. I wondered what we looked like to God from above. What would he think of the walls we've built?

Like Lee's art, those months in Seoul taught me how painful loneliness can be. The times it seems like no one truly hears us or sees us. When our bodies and minds cry out to be known. Aristotle never knew that that isolation in the 21st century is being simultaneously always and never alone. Aristotle didn't know the beastly isolation of having hundreds of Facebook friends but no one to call.

Cities, I've found, are often the most lonely places on earth. On my daily evening walks through the ritzy financial district in Gwanghwamun, I would stare up at the hundreds of windows on the corporate offices of Seoul, some dark and some filled with golden light. I sometimes saw strangers moving about inside, revealing a strange paradox of exposure and separation.

I had always believed that a person was lonely because they were alone. But on that first night in my Korean dorm room, when I overheard the boisterous laughs of my neighbor in the room to my right

as she called her mom, and later in the quietness of the night, I listened to her muffled sobs of homesickness seeping through the thin wall that separated us, I wondered how I felt so connected to this girl whose face I barely knew.

Even as I began to make acquaintances with classmates and girls that I shared a hallway with, on most days in Seoul I ate meals alone and took the bus alone and stared at the dark ceiling at 3 AM alone. I had been scared to face myself, to truly be alone with her. She knew too much—my every thought, my every fear. The thing about solitude is that it gives a person superhuman hearing. It is only in the very quiet where you can hear the sound of your own heart beating.

In high school, my English teacher spent four weeks teaching about the American transcendental movement of the 19th century, assigning Thoreau and Emerson. I remember reading and re-reading “Self-Reliance” and “Nature,” asking myself: *What would I become if I set down the burdens of history, tradition, and religion? What did he mean by “man is a god in ruins?”* The texts had struck something in my 17-year-old self who could not be herself because she was too busy being who she was supposed to be. When my friends would complain about how boring it was to read about some guy who lived by a lake all by himself, I feigned agreement. I remember being embarrassed about the Emerson quote that I had secretly scrawled down on the front of my planner: “Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string.”

Seoul’s solitude taught me that I love eating alone and hate sleeping alone and that my chest sometimes gets tight when I think too much. It showed me that the cure to loneliness is not simply meeting new people but befriending oneself. The power to hear yourself above the noise is to be divine.

Emmaline

Zane Duzant

See, all that I ask for is a glass of water with ice. Now that I am moving nearby, I'd like to stop in, ideally, on a daily basis. I hope to not be a bother. I'm positive sometimes I'll be bothersome; after all, you and I are only human. That is, I have the potential to bother and ultimately you are entitled to be bothered. I just hope not to be wholly a bother. I've only asked for a glass of water with ice. I imagine if I had asked for six ice cubes—no more, no less—that I could be considered a bother; I don't care how many there are, really. I just ask that it be a glass - not a mug - so that I may see your skewed image through the tilted cup as I drink; I wish to know how you look from elsewhere. *How do you mean?* All I mean to say is that someday, there will surely be no more days—for me or you—and the film will be lifted from our eyes. I'd like to know how you look from elsewhere, in case I might see you there after all of this is said and done. *I'm not sure I understand.* Well, it's not exactly a science. I do sympathize with your inability to understand and I hope you'll be patient with just how long it may take me to explain. All that I ask for is a glass of water with ice. Now that I am moving nearby, I'd like to stop in. Ideally, on a daily basis. This will allow me the time to clarify what I mean by all of this. I've known you for all I can remember, as far back as the arrow of time extends in my mind. I'm sure there were moments before you, but those memories have long since vanished. I've not been alive for even half of your life and young me couldn't imagine your red hair turning silver, though it has. An early memory is cemented into my being. It is of you, my father, your daughter and I. You took us to a park for a playdate. Emmaline and I did our best to run alongside each other with stumpy toddler legs. You and my father were like gods. You roamed in slow motion as we zipped through the grass. I remember Emmaline's every detail. Only ten years old when she was taken from us in the most

heinous and brutal of ways: a knife through the heart, wielded by a man she trusted. I couldn't bear to live with that truth, but 9-year-old me pictured it. I heard what happened. I watched it play in my head, and I knew I should've been there. Surely I could've saved them from him! I was brainwashed by television to think that I could ward off evil. I was wrong, and I know that now. I have lived with the guilt of knowing that it was her and not me and that I couldn't have helped even if I had been given the chance. I remember her as her 10-year-old self, immortalized and set in stone. She was unique. I understand that everyone says that of a lost loved one, but something was different about her. She was truly special. I loved her! *I love her, too.* Well, of course you do; she is your child after all. But, I want you to know that her memory is intertwined with every fiber of my being. I've found myself breathing differently since that day. All that I ask for is a glass of water with ice. Now that I am moving nearby, I'd like to stop in, ideally, on a daily basis. Just to watch you be. My father left us only a little while after her, and I see them both in you. Every moment with you is a moment with them. I'm sure you must be tired but in no rush to sleep for good. The very essence of our relationship is built on loss: the loss of a child, the loss of a father, the loss of love. Eventually, it will happen again, and I'd like to be nearby when it does. I want to take care of your plants and help take the trash out. I can sprinkle the driveway with salt to melt the ice before you wake. I will hold your hand if you need help to the mailbox in the snow. I know you are alive and well, and so am I! And I'd like to stay that way, but I must admit I have grown a bit hoarse after all this talking. *Would you like a glass of water with ice?* Why yes, that's exactly what I need.

Motherless

Sarah Rizvi

Modeled after “The Father From China” in China Men by Maxine Hong Kingston.

I have watched you beg, Mother.

You would say please after every request you had for my father, “Can you wash the dishes today, please?”, “Will you bring me some water, please?”, “Can’t you be nicer today, *please?*”, and each “please” would be more desperate than the last. You would ask with a casual smile on your face, but I could see the way your eyes widened slightly, quivering with the effort to keep your emotions from spilling out. And after every “no” you got in response, I would watch your face fall further to the ground with every passing day. Sometimes you would sink to the ground and mutter streams of Arabic with your eyes closed, and I would sit beside you and try to copy the sounds as if to multiply the effectiveness of your prayer. You would turn to me and drape the long end of your headscarf over my head, and you would correct my gibberish pronunciation by moving my mouth and squeezing my cheeks. I would laugh and start running around with you playfully running after me, and we’d soon be joined by my three older siblings, a big game of tag.

But often, you would stay sitting and the Arabic would get more and more intense, faster, and you wouldn’t wipe your tears. They ran down your face and left damp spots on the collar of your kurti that would grow larger until the bright green of the cloth would darken into a soggy moss color. You would scream if I interrupted you, and I would run upstairs and hide with my ears covered, until my siblings would find me and distract me with the special art supplies that they only took out for school projects. My eldest sister played the token obedient role of the eldest daughter in an immigrant family. She was a

second mother to me. Mother, what you could not do for us, she did. We learned how to make friends properly, what jokes were appropriate and what weren't, what family stories we could safely share and which ones would result in the downfall of our family. At the time, I didn't understand what she meant; how could our family get lower than we already were?

I remember the first day you put a hijab on me. I was seven years old, and at the time, the idea of hijab seemed far away, too adult for a child like me. You told me, "You're a woman now." Despite the Islamic required age to wear hijab being nine, you deemed me ready enough two years earlier. I felt the prickly feeling of discomfort in the pit of my stomach. Everyday, each wrap of the cloth around my head amplified the suffocating feeling. The first day I went to school with my hijab on was jarring. The same classmates who would sit next to me, talk to me, play with me, were suddenly strangers. The experience of watching the people who I thought were my friends start to look at me with fear and disgust was one that I would never forget. In their eyes, the cloth on my head was a label, I was now *visibly* Muslim, someone to be scared of. Mother, the same cloth that gave you freedom was what had chained me to a role I wasn't ready to live yet.

One time, you caught my brother talking to a girl (a crime worse than anything for a Muslim family,) and you dumped orange gatorade over his head and locked him in the backyard for three hours. I watched from my place under the kitchen table as the backyard door rattled and shook with my brother's punching and kicking, his angry face distorted by the cloudy glass of the door. You had your back to the door with tears in your eyes, as if looking at your son would break the strained thread of control you had. You let him back in the house right before my father came back from work. You said, "Don't say anything to Baba, he will send you to India for this." Your punishment was always only a small taste of the anger of my father. This was your way of being merciful, your way of protecting your only son from the wrath of his father, something you yourself could not escape.

There was a day that you could not act fast enough as a shield

between my brother and my father, a day etched into my memory. Earlier that day, my brother and father had started their usual bickering about a topic I do not even remember. As usual, the argument spiraled onto bigger issues, issues that had been boiling beneath both of their skins, straining in their popped veins and white knuckles. It was a bizarre sight to watch from the safety of the stairs, the banister acting as a shield between me and the chaos, an eighteen year old boy looming over a 48 year old man, the same anger reflected in both of their eyes. When my brother's fist made contact with my father's face, I don't remember my father's reaction, I remember my eyes darting to you, Mother. You were pleading with them, crying for them to stop amidst the mayhem of the scene; a chair was thrown across the room, there were repeated thuds of fists beating on a back, slurred curse words so gruff and tense that I couldn't even recognize the voices. It was strange to watch you so desperately protect the two people responsible for your irreversible sadness. I watched as my brother sprinted to the phone and dialed 911, saying "My dad is crazy, my dad is crazy" over and over. Before the ambulance arrived, my sister grabbed me and told me frantically, "Don't say anything bad about Baba, no matter what." There were two officers, a man and a woman; I remember both of them smiling at me and I tried to smile back the best I could, but my face felt like it had been dipped in ice water, my mouth too stiff to follow the directions I was giving it. The woman sat me down on my bed, and I rehearsed my lines in my head. I was ready to get into my script, but her first question was just "How old are you?" to which I said, "eight.." and she smiled again. I didn't attempt to smile back. She reached past me to the picture my sister had quickly hung onto the pole of my headboard, a picture of me and my dad. She asked, "Is that you and your dad?" and I thought about how stupid she must be to not know when she had just seen him downstairs, but I answered obediently with a nod and a quiet "yes." I was waiting for the question, the one where I would have to say my lines, but she just patted my hand and said, "it's a lovely picture." I wondered why the officer had not asked me anything about you, Mother. But I suppose I wouldn't have known what to say,

anyways. I only remembered the proper etiquette you had drilled into my brain after the officer had already left the room, so my belated “thank you” was met by the closed door.

Sometimes, you would talk about your family back in India, your father, your sisters, and rarely, your late mother. I would listen closely because it was the only time you would smile your real smile. You told stories of your father’s education, how he was the top of his class and how his older brother was a famous speaker. I would sit and imagine my Nana, grandfather, through the stories. I remember in particular how your face would light up with pride when you told me about how his university had given him a plaque to honor his years as a professor. Your face would dim slightly when you talked about your mother though, with a longing I could see even at my young age. I would hear the pain in your voice mixed with the happy nostalgia of your short memories with her. There were only a few stories about her and they lacked the detail Nana’s stories had. You would mention her cooking, her fashionable clothing, the way she loved your father, but when I asked about what she looked like, you would get quiet and I would know to change the topic. Sometimes I would listen to you talk about the Jinn that supposedly roamed your courtyard, and I would get so scared that I couldn’t sleep at night thinking about it. The image of dark spirits listening in on me, watching me, haunted me for years, and at times, I felt like I could see them out of the corner of my eye at night. I was afraid they could see my thoughts, the ones I kept not only from you, but Allah too. I wondered if the Jinn would side with me, with my rejection of faith, or if they were really secretly devout and would rat me out to our god. But more than Allah, I was afraid of *you* finding out, Mother. But my thoughts would get cut short when we would hear the thud of a car door shutting and the jingle of keys in the front door. The abrupt silence was my signal to run upstairs, cover my ears, and wait. When my mother was born, her father was so disoriented that he wrote “baby girl” on her birth certificate where her name should have gone. For 6 weeks, my mother’s official name was Baby Girl. She was the first daughter, so she was pampered and coddled only up until

her sisters were born, and then her child status was taken from her, replaced with “Apa,” urdu for older sister. My mother was allowed to experience the joy of being a child for a total of nine years, until the day her mother had a heart attack. Everyone in the family worked fast and rushed her into a car, but the traffic and unforgiving roads of India killed her before they could even reach the hospital. My mother was left with the burden of being the caregiver of her family at nine years old since, supposedly, it was a role no man could ever take. My mother says she chose to step up on her own, but the version I know is much more believable than hers.

My mother was left motherless at nine years old and her father was so crippled with grief that he took her own right to grief away from her and replaced it with the weight of maintaining a family all by herself. She played the role for seven more years until her name was signed onto a document, tying her to a man twice her age. Her father knew the man from his years working as a professor; he was the top student in Nana’s class, and his academic prowess was apparently enough of a qualification to take my mother’s childhood away from her. She was told she would get gifts and get to see the grand life of America, so she happily agreed, unbeknownst to the manipulation she was being faced with. At sixteen, my mother met my father for the first time at her own wedding and was across the world by the next day.

My mother’s first impression of America was the airport security’s “random” check, a story I would hear for years before every flight, our family’s token cautionary tale. They made her remove her hijab and interrogated her in a room for three hours. They asked her questions and dissected her life. She slipped up by saying her real age, sixteen, instead of her new age which was now twenty one, but got away by saying she was just tired from the flight. (If they found out a sixteen year old was traveling with her thirty one year old husband, there would have been bigger problems than just getting into America.)

They used her broken English as a weapon, telling her she would need to work on becoming more American if she wanted to live here for the rest of her life. She was given question after question and lectures about America and what was deemed too “cultural” about her, and they let her go only after they had stripped her of the little dignity she had brought with her from India.

My mother’s experience of marriage started out the way a teacher and student’s relationship might be. Her husband, a thirty one year old man, spent a year learning the strengths and weaknesses of his wife, and took notes on what she should improve on, be better at. My mother was never treated as my father’s equal. But it wasn’t all that surprising to see an adult unable to see a child as his equal. At seventeen, my mother gave birth to a son. A mother at last, she had a new purpose for her life. She devoted her every living moment to raising her son, to make sure he was not motherless the way she was. The age difference between my mother and my brother is the same as the one between her and my father, and that must have explained why her son grew up to be a monster, just as my father was.

My mother gave birth to three more children, all girls. For every birth after her son’s, she was alone at the hospital, gripping the nurse’s hand as she pushed out another purpose to live. After hours of giving labor, my mother would drive home and make dinner for my father, and he would eat without guilt. When my father wouldn’t be yelling at my mother, my brother would. My father and brother were constantly at odds with each other; their differences and issues with each other grew more and more, but their one connection was their shared abuse of my mother. Bigger and more muscular now, my brother would often get violent. Once, my mother scolded him for not studying for his SATs when he was supposed to, and in a fit of rage, he pushed her and she fell and cut her arm on the counter. My father, in his usual place in the garage, ran into the house after hearing the noise and, happy for an excuse to be angry with his son, for the first time, my father was angry *for* my mother instead of *at* her.

At 35 years old, my mother’s hopes were slowly disappearing one

by one, so she did the one thing she knew how to do: pray. She prayed at every given moment, and when she wasn't praying she was thinking about what to pray for next. Her devotion to religion gave her a crumb of renewed motivation, and she became a well known reciter at the mosque. The mosque was the one place she could put on a facade of being put-together, the mask of a perfect family. Her practiced smile and script was always so polished that it would even convince me at times. But the ride home from the mosque would rid me of all those thoughts; her perfected act would drop almost immediately, replaced by her usual dim gaze. But slowly, the dimmed light behind her eyes began to flicker again. Her visits to the mosque and her mosque friends' houses would keep her busy, distracted from the reality that waited for her at home. The same faith that had driven me away from my mother was keeping her alive. The prayers may have fallen on deaf ears, but my mother's devotion to religion gave her a new purpose, one that couldn't grow up and turn on her like the previous ones had.

My mother turned 36, and 37, and 38, but also 41 and 42 and 43 (legally), and she continued her praying though she saw no changes for the better in her life. Religion was my mother's fixation; it came with a community of people, a hope for something better, and she thrived in the fact that religion wasn't a definite thing. The unsurety of religion was key to her passion for it; it could never hurt her the way a human being could. But religion could not stop the passage of time. My mother watched as her children grew older and moved away, and her ache for family grew more and more painful. She spent each day the same, fulfilling her daily tasks demanded from her by my father without complaint. Her silent obedience was her resignation to the role given to her 22 years before. Her hobbies were childlike; the life she could not live in her youth she tried to replicate in the little pockets of time between my father's demands. But despite the appearance of my mother's inner child, she was undeniably getting older. Her face had begun to sag and her bones were colder. The weight on her frail shoulders grew heavier by the day, it was as if the ground was pulling her to it, waiting for her to sink down to her knees and resume her

position beneath everyone else. But still, my mother remained upright, barely, but surely, alive.

Contributor Biographies

Alex Bartholomees is an Arts and Entertainment Technologies major at The University of Texas at Austin.

Wynn Wilkinson is a fourth year student studying Government and Religious Studies at UT Austin. He likes pointing out cute birds to friends and vice versa, as well as climbing trees and agonizing over empty Google docs. After graduating, he hopes to mysteriously vanish for a number of years only to return when he's needed most with a cool eyepatch.

Abigail Pfeifer (she/her) is a student of English and Creative Writing at UT Austin. She was a member of Texas' NCAA Division I Swimming and Diving Team. Also, she enjoys baking and trying new coffee shops around town.

Reese Beebe is a Sophomore English major currently attending UT Austin. Along with English Literature, she studies Creative Writing. She is originally from Fort Worth, TX. In the summer, she teaches kids singing, dancing, and acting. In her free time, she enjoys baking cookies, listening to Taylor Swift, and playing competitive games of catch phrase with her family. She hopes to be a writer or teacher one day.

Jacob Keiser is a Junior History major minoring in the Creative Writing Certificate Program. He is unpublished but has worked on several history manuscripts as a research assistant, several of which are in the process of getting published. Finally, he is an aspiring author working on my debut novel, an original epic adult fantasy book, an undergraduate history thesis about the historiography of the Ethiopian Empire, and various short stories.

Iliana Tangarova is an aspiring writer and poet who is studying English at the University of Texas at Austin. She enjoys reading by big windows, watching films that make her ponder about the human condition, and trying lattes at new coffee shops. She hopes to enter the publishing industry and someday publish her own novel.

Bella Devega is a fourth year Psychology student with a minor in Rhetoric & Writing. She mostly enjoys writing narrative and fictional pieces in her free time, focusing on themes such as love, perception, and humanity. This semester, she took her first poetry class which has inspired her to try writing within a new literary sphere! (UT Austin)

Joshua Ciroto is a History major and aspiring law student with a passion for writing. He was born in Austin, Texas in 2005 and poetry has played an important role in his life. His favorite poet is Walt Whitman. (Austin Community College)

Genevieve Kent is a mother and student of Psychology, whose own experiences with grief led her to pursue education to become a trauma therapist. (Austin Community College)

Born near the murky waters of Port Arthur, Texas; **Victoria Trevino** has always been known as a creative soul. Like a book, she will open and tell you her story, no matter how raw the subject matter is. Her work navigates the complexities of personal trauma, forgiveness, and the struggles of letting go. (Austin Community College)

Cain Yin is a third year student at the University of Texas at Austin. He's been writing poetry for five years. Cain currently lives in Austin and is working towards finishing school.

John Thompson Guillén is a Costa Rican-American writer from Houston, TX. He will graduate from the University of Texas at Austin with a degree in English and minor in Cultural Anthropology. He currently resides in Austin, TX.

Stephanie Ro is a Senior at UT Austin double majoring in Government and Rhetoric and Writing. Born in Chicago and raised in Seoul and Austin, she has been a lifelong reader and admirer of writers. But it was not until she serendipitously stumbled into a creative writing class that she first seriously put pen to paper. Through her writing, she hopes to show the power of small and personal stories to change the world.

Zane Duzant is a lifelong student, a forest dweller; but most importantly he is a thinker. (Austin Community College)

Sarah Rizvi is an aspiring writer and artist who draws inspiration from her culture as an Indian Muslim woman. Through her writing, she wishes to portray the importance of the uniqueness of stories rather than catering to a universal outlook of cultural experiences. Rizvi's focus on family is reflected in much of her work and emphasizes the complexities of having familial struggles paired with unbreakable bonds. As she writes, Rizvi hopes to continue to put her experiences into words that resonate with others. (UT Dallas)

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