

SAGA Literary Journal

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SAGA Literary Journal Volume Four

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Foreword

Emeralds, diamonds, and rubies are often locked away or hidden in every community. But some communities such as our very own at Long Beach City College dedicate an effort to seek out and discover the gem stones that have been stepped over, missed, or ignored.

The authorial voices embedded in each piece of poetry and prose are the precious jewels we selected in this volume. At times, the voices are gritty and raw, yet they brilliantly radiate forces of love or laughter. In moments, the pressure and weight in an author's voice shear and cut to unearth pain, suffering, or loss.

The English Majors and Minors Club members, with the indispensable help of Professor Jason Casem, labored earnestly to showcase each creative work with care, for we believe these unburied treasures will never depreciate, even long after the reader has shelved this fourth edition of SAGA.

Damon V. Moore II, English Majors and Minors Club President

Carmen

by Ben Shani

He watches her draw while a re-run of last year's Super Bowl plays on the television. Her fingers hold the pencil in different places along its yellow body. Sometimes on its side to create a light stroke, sometimes straight down on the lead to darken an area. He likes watching her draw; he likes becoming a wall in the room of her mind. He never knew how to draw. He wishes he could draw her.

"I wish I looked like her," she says, brushing up the headless body's waist. She's drawing a figure of some sort, a woman to be exact. He looks at the picture, watching the fingers draw. Her fingernails are chewed off, like his, and there's dried blood and loose skin on every one of her cuticles. She used to count the white spots on his nails and after she finished counting she would say, "You lied five times this week." Or ten times, if there were ten spots. He would try to remember the lies, counting a couple he couldn't forget, and the others he did forget became pink and blended into his skin eventually.

"I need a taste," he says, hoping she wants one too. It's 9:00 pm and the liquor store owned by the Cambodians on Anaheim and Ohio closes in half an hour. She's adding a belly button to the waist. "What you want?"

She puts the pen down and looks at the screen, watching a cheerleader move her body around a man dressed in a dolphin suit. "I need a name for her." She looks up at him, tapping the side of her forehead with the pencil, deep in thought, "find me a name, love." She goes back to her drawing, turning the pencil on its side and shading in the empty stomach, making sure to draw around the new belly button.

"I'll be back baby," he says. There's a skateboard with the name "Gume" written in block letters on the board next to the door. He grabs it and walks out the door, leaving the screen door closed and the front door open so she feels the breeze.

With a running start, the board is placed under his left foot as he pushes with his right, and after a couple kicks he's in a comfortable roll, strolling over cracks and trash. A man powerwalking in the opposite direction of Gume stops in his tracks when he hears Gume's wheels turning.

"Yo man, you got a dolla?" The small man calls out over Gume's skating.

“Nah man, I’m sorry,” Gume shouts as he rides by, kicking faster.

“Yea, sorry knows everybody.” The man continues, mumbling and throwing punches to an invisible opponent, walking faster.

The liquor store is close and they overprice but the Cambodians are sweet to him and his girlfriend, but they always ID because of how young they look. Turning a left onto Anaheim, he rides a block until he notices the Ohio street sign. The strip mall the liquor store is in has a wide parking lot. He cuts across it, and then screeches to a halt right before the store’s open door. The Cambodians, mother, father, and son, are behind the counter speaking their native tongue. Only the mother looks over and smiles at him when he walks in.

“Gud E-ven-ing,” she says, her eyes following his strides toward the back-right corner of the store.

“How ya’ll doing tonight?” Gume says, looking over his shoulder and smiling at her.

“Gud, Gud, Sank you,” she says, her smile never fading. Gume turns to the beer, a collage of colors and shapes, like a circus he concludes. Like always, the Lil’Sumpin’s are under the Hairy Eyeball’s so he grabs a six-pack of the Sumpin’s then walks to the register manned by the Cambodians. He places the beer on the counter and nods to each of them, and they nod and smile back. The mother scans the bottom of the pack and says \$11.31 and before she can ask for an ID, Gume’s reaching into his pockets. But the wallet isn’t there. He looks around at the ripped ground then walks back to the beer section, but only sees damaged tile.

“I think I forgot my wallet. You guys close soon right?”

The father answers this time. “Ah, yes, nyne thurty.”

“Well aite I’ll be back.” Gume walks outside, walking in the direction he came skating into the strip mall, his phone out with its flashlight pointed towards the ground. He continues onto Anaheim, his head down, searching the chipped cement. Then he feels a small body bump into his, and they both stagger back some. Gume looks up, his phone still in his hand. The flashlight beams at the man. It’s the same man from before who asked him for a dollar.

“My bad youngin’,” the man says. The man is small, square-faced, with bugged eyes and a bald head. His white t-shirt is long and his jeans a couple sizes too large. A shoestring lace falls out from under the right side of the t-shirt, holding the pants

onto his waist. There’s a fresh gash above his top right eye, the blood still oozing out, running down the side of his face. Red stains are splattered on his shirt. There’s something in his hand. Gume’s wallet.

“Yo, dude, that’s my wallet.” Gume takes a step forward and the wide-eyed man takes a step back.

“How I know that huh?” The man grasps the wallet with both hands.

“Look inside, my ID’s in there. Dylan Salabeen, that’s my name bro.” The man opens the wallet, looks at Gume, and then goes back to retrieving the ID. “There’s three dollars in there G, don’t fuck around.” The man looks back to Gume, his eyes relaxed but hands still moving. He grabs the ID and narrows his eyes, holding the ID up a foot or two against Gume’s face.

“I can’t see shit in this little picture. Ya’ll youngin’s looks the same,” the man says while putting away the ID. Gume steps forward again, but this time the man doesn’t move. He puts the wallet in his pocket.

“Fuck you, give me my shit man.” Gume steps forward and just then the man takes his shirt off, revealing tattoos scattered on his chest and the handle of what appears to be a knife under his pants.

“Look nigga, I ain’t usually the stealing type, but I need some skrilla, and you happen to be the dumb nigga to drop his wallet in the street. Now what we gunna do is walk to that Chase over there and you going to take out some of that dough from the card and then you’ll be on your way and I’ll be on mine. And that’s that.” He adjusts the knife handle tucked between his pants and skin. “Sound okay, G?”

Gume grips his skateboard while he towers over the man, noticing the man’s eyes. His dilated pupils flower into a large circle, then retreat to a small period. He’s dabbled in sweat, and his muscles are flexed. A tattoo stands out to Gume, on the man’s left chest. A cursive font “Carmen” followed by “January 14, 2014.” Gume loosens the grip on his skateboard. He is speechless.

Carmen.

He can hear his girl saying her name.

Carmen.

He wonders how far along his girl is with the drawing. He looks to the man, wondering where his Carmen could be tonight.

Goddamit. Let’s go.” Gume retreats, placing his skateboard to his side and walking back toward Ohio. The man follows behind him, his shirt back on. They have three blocks to walk till they hit the

Chase on Anaheim and Ximeno. They pass the Cambodian's. Gume can see the father and son unloading cartridges of something inside while the mother stands outside of the store smoking a cigarette. She waves to Gume, but Gume only nods and keeps walking forward.

"Just \$50 man, just \$50. I know you college kids got it." Gume turns back, still seeing the eyes flowering and deflowering. Nostrils flaring.

"Yea, whatever man," Gume says, then mutters, "crazy ass crackhead."

The man powerwalks to the side of Gume, grabbing his arm and twisting it.

"I ain't no muthfuckin' crackhead son." The man's grip is tight, and Gume feels the man gaze upon him.

"Yea, yea, right." Gume doesn't budge. His phone is vibrating with texts. "My girl is hitting me up man, she expects me back soon. Let me call her and tell her everything's aite."

The man reaches into Gume's pocket and inspects the phone. He takes his time looking at the home screen picture.

"What's Rebel Mafia Music?" the man asks. Gume keeps walking, and the man stays at his hip. "You a rapper?"

"Yea. It's my label." Gume looks at his phone and reads over the name he and his friend came up with two years ago, in the basement of his mom's home.

"You ain't got a picture of your girl though on your front?" The man's voice is concerned. Gume turns to him, then back to the phone. The image of his girl lying in bed with a half-cut shirt on exposing her breasts flashes across his mind. That's the only picture he has of her on his phone.

"Nah, not right now." Gume says.

"You got to put a picture of her there man. I had my little girl Carmen up there before she had to leave." The man says this with a distance. For a moment, he is not there with Gume, but with Carmen, wherever she is. Gume notices this, but stays silent. "But she be back. She always comes back."

Gume lets him have his moment, and the cars ride by and nobody notices what is happening, just two guys on a street hustling toward somewhere. Gume is given his phone back, and the man allows him to call his girl.

"Yo, babe, I'll be back soon. I got caught up. Don't trip though. I'll be back in a minute." Gume tries to say this calmly.

"Can you please just come back? If you went to Casper's to smoke, I'll be fucking pissed." She pauses, noticing the sound of a bus rolling by. "Are you outside? Just come back."

"Babe, I'll be back goddamit. I'm getting us dinner." He doesn't know what else to say.

"I thought you were buying beer? What are you getting?" she replies. The man stares at Gume, remembering his own similar conversations of the same nature. He thinks Gume loves this girl. He could tell because he doesn't look around or down or up when he talks to her. He looks ahead as if she were right there in front of them.

"They didn't have my Sumpin's. And I'm getting Chinese." Gume knows what comes next.

"Again?" She sighs deeply.

"Okay well what you want? I haven't got it yet." Gume switches his phone to the other ear.

"Let's go out tonight maybe? I know you just got the new job but I'll buy. A little celebration, for you." She's watching TV. Gume can hear the voices from the screen in the background.

"I should write something for Thursday. I got a sesh set-up at the studio." The man falls back slightly, giving Gume his room, but not out of earshot. He takes in the area; the moon is bouncing with each step, and the rays from streetlights follow him and then leave until the next one catches it and replaces it. He doesn't remember putting his shirt on but he wants to take it off again. The sound of cars passing by is soothing, and gives him a sense of direction, like he's actually doing something. He can't tell if the blood is still flowing down his cheek or if it's tears. All he feels is something coming out of his head. He decides to walk next to Gume again, sniffing and bumping into him here and there. He can't feel his feet.

"You can write later baby. Tonight, you're with me, please?"

Gume smiles, and the man remembers this smile as well. He doesn't remember the last time he smiled like this. He wants to take that smile and keep it. He wants to be where Gume is. He wouldn't mind being the victim here. For once.

"Alright, mama. Whatever you want."

"Well okay then come on home. I'll be here. I finished the drawing. She's beautiful."

"Cool. Hang it up on the wall." The man falls back, unable to keep up with Gume's walking. He might pass out any moment. His breathing is all he can hear.

“Bye love.”

“Peace.” Gume hangs up and puts the phone in his pocket, wondering if he’ll tell his girl what has happened. The man stares at the back of Gume’s head, wondering if where he has been and what he has done will ever lead to him smiling like this young man has. He adjusts the knife in his pants. The hit from his pipe is still with him but is chipping away, step by step he’s losing that feeling that has brought him here. He pictures himself stopping this escapade for a nap on the church steps that are to the right of them. But soon Gume is walking past the blue lights of the Chase bank, straight to the ATMs, and the man is still following with his jelly legs. The Chase sign breathes with him. Gume turns to him with his hand out, and the man can’t hear him, but when Gume points to the man’s pocket he remembers what he is doing.

“There you go, make it fast now,” the man says. The wallet is returned and Gume takes it like he knew he would get it back. The man is wobbling around, his eyes and thoughts heavy. He walks toward the Chase sign, the light showering him with blue.

Gume takes out \$80 from the ATM, pocketing \$20. The other \$60 he intends to give to the man. He figures it will be his good deed because he can’t remember his last true good deed. The man is hungry and high, and just a man anyways. This could be the start of something for him, Gume thinks. Gume holds the money out to the man. But the man is face to face with the blue Chase sign. His eyes are closed as he whispers “Carmen, she be back, Carmen, she be back.” Gume stares at the man with crystallized blue blood on his face and a long knife of some sort in his pants whose forehead is leaning against the Chase sign on the corner of Ximeno and Anaheim.

“Carmen. She always back. Carmen be back.” The man mumbles this to the “H” of the Chase sign, his hands dangling to his side. Gume watches and wonders if his girl would like to draw this image. He takes a picture on his phone, placing Anaheim Street to the right of the frame and the blue man leaning against the Chase sign to the left of the frame. The blue grass and the sidewalk are in the foreground, and the rest of Anaheim Street and the night sky are in the background. The moon is in the top right corner, peeking behind the streetlight that is green.

Gume places a twenty in the man’s pocket, making sure he’s still breathing before he takes off on his skateboard. His pumps are swift and the wind whispers in his ears and waters his eyes.

He looks back, seeing the man still leaning against the sign. Cars pass by and turn right onto Ximeno, yielding to make sure no one is crossing.

His girl is in the shower when he returns. Her clothes for the evening lie out on their small cot, the picture she drew right above it on the wall. She never added a head to the woman, just a naked body with a belly button and the word Gume imprinted below it. He grabs the pencil from her work area, a littered coffee table next to their cot, and writes “Carmen” in his sloppy handwriting on the woman’s shoulder. He takes his money from his pocket and places it on the coffee table, then proceeds to take his clothes off and enter the shower with his girl. She is more than excited to see him, and vice versa. She asks if he saw the drawing. He says he loves it.

Jack Quack

by Robert B. Shockley

Mornings, as I pass
the yard of the neighbor,
cluttered with rabbit hutch, bicycle parts
and stray broken boards,
I hear the quack greeting
of the pet Mallard duck announcing
his presence, afraid he'll be passed up.
As I approach, the greeting becomes more frantic.
The green, ring-necked fowl
recognizes my broken-footed gait,
black walking cast clomping on cracked concrete.
We meet at the side fence,
Jack stretches up through
the chainlink fence
to nibble and pinch my hand,
possibly checking for feed or just being friendly,
looking up at me black, beady-eyed.
His beak looks inert, like plastic plates,
but it always shocks me
how livingly warm his grubby beak is,
caking my bare thumb and hand
with muddy beakprints.

I worry for Jack, though.
He looks alarmingly plump nowadays.
The cane toting grandmother
might serve up his fat feathered body
for a New Year's Feast.

Quackquackquackquackquack
he sounds out nasally,
as I move to go catch the bus,
Talking softly as I back away,
Jack hangs his head as if disappointed.
I imagine the empty, silent, duckless yard
and a stripped, steaming, pimply carcass
resting on a platter

in the center of the table,
family gathered around,
the ancient grandmother,
croaking cryptically in Khmer.

At The Mayhem Hotel

by Robert B. Shockley

Along a dreary street the Hotel falls,
Moldering like Poe's fabled House of Pain.
At night the creatures roam the filthy halls --
Addicts, the poor, the old, the dead insane.
All hours of the day and night the rooms
Are lit up blue with ghastly vampire light,
Revealing hopeless lives of loss and gloom,
Nightscreaming, crying, babbling, endless fights.
The monsters muddling here are oddly weak --
Sucking stinking cigs and left forgot.
They've come at last to die, now mild and meek,
To live as victims, feeding on the rot,
To gobble one another to the bone,
For soon the gravelly ground will be their home.

Do Black Sheep Dream of Electricity?

by Adam K. Cardenas

I've some scars better left unlearned from
Scars for just being me. But
I can't press reset on my life, so instead I just skip.
I wander the forests of Kokiri, or the streets of Pallet
because you have not seen half of the shit in my closet,
not just skeletons and ghouls, the demons too.
Sometimes they all coo in unison an eerie tune to beckon
me to the hole in their corner of the room, where they huddle
"to keep warm" they say. I suspect rather, to stay sane.
I pass their way from time
to time. I admit
not always to pick away at plastic bricks that
tolerant of neglect it's a wonder still kick.
Lost to these pixels in drawers,
the pain they ignore,
in the retreat of this bad dream
I count myself 'til I fall from sleep.

In My Head, My Brain, and My Guinea Pig

by Kaitlyn Manoogian

Forgive me Father, for
I am in a comatose phase.
An unwashed zucchini half
rotting, forgotten, in the
back of a yellow stained
fridge. A cooled cubicle
for those crippled with fear.
Perhaps slipped into a stupor
where you are browned and
boiled then consumed.

Forgive me pet guinea pig,
the ringworm you contracted
frightened me. It bombarded my
senses and I thought I felt it
in my sleep. A crawling fungus
and a mocking laugh in my head.
I took you back to the pet store
and didn't rescue you again.

Forgive me body, I have to shave
you entirely. I've learned softness
stems deeper than looking nice.
When hair gets too long it feels like
bugs tip-toe on my skin. I lie in
bed and feel them parade on my legs,
then fall asleep to the unwanted caress.

Five Steps

by Ashley Summers Flynn

Step One

I open my eyes, try to blink away the dust and the flies. It's dark. It's always dark, except when the barn door opens. I used to watch the door, hope for a glimpse of that bright, warm light. But the burning in my empty belly gets worse every day and it's all I can think about. My mother lays on her side, covered in bruises and filth, my brothers and sisters pushing through the bars of her crate. I think about trying again, about squeezing past them and finally tasting my mother's milk. But my siblings are so much bigger than I am, and my mother feels so far away. Hunger rips me down the middle, all the way up to my throat, and I cry. I can't stop crying. My mother's legs twitch, but she makes no move to help me. She used to slam herself against the crate, kicking her legs and gnawing on the bars. She doesn't struggle anymore. When the barn door opens again, I feel the warmth on my face, but I'm too tired to open my eyes. I'm too tired.

Step Two

There's only one Red Bull left.

"Damn it."

He pulls up to the traffic light, takes the lukewarm can out of the box. He's almost at the drop-off point, but the drive back to Utah will be a long one. A motel room waits for him there, and at least a few hours of uninterrupted sleep. Maybe even a hot meal he can sit down to. Small luxuries.

A loud squeal echoes from the trailer, answered by restless snorts and the stamping of hooves. Pigs hate the road. After their long trip through the desert, he doesn't blame them. At least they wouldn't have to make the drive back.

The light turns green, he turns left, and there they are. The animal people, with their water bottles and cardboard signs. They come every Sunday, more faithfully than even his granny attended church. One of them, a short redhead, stands in front of the gate, holding up a cardboard stop sign and two fingers. She looks friendly, but he avoids eye contact, fixing his gaze straight ahead. There's no ill will between them, and he doesn't mind stopping, but it's an uncomfortable pause. Behind him, there's the trickle of water, the rumbling of the motor,

the squealing and stomping of pigs, and the hushed voices of the demonstrators. Beneath the noise, softer than a whisper, is a song. He can't hear the words, but recognizes the melody. His mother sang them to him once, a lifetime ago.

"You'll never know dear, how much I love you."

The gate opens. The redhead steps aside.

"Please don't take my sunshine away."

Step Three

He takes his place on the line, his white, rubber boots sticking to the floor with each step. He knows better than to look down. The knife waits on a small table beside him, freshly polished and gleaming, nearly as sharp as the scalpel he used at university. He cleaned it every night, after bleaching his uniform and scrubbing his boots. Every day, he arrived to work, perfectly clean, despite the fact that he could never leave that way. The conveyor belt sits still, waiting. The trucks had arrived at the same time he did, had driven away by the time he suited up. Looking down at his blue gloves and white scrubs, it's easy to pretend that he's back in medical school, back at home, with his whole life ahead of him and his dreams within reach...

With a steely whir, the machinery comes to life.

Clack-clack-clack.

The platform begins its long descent into the gas chamber.

And then, the screams.

He shuts his eyes, because he can't shut his ears. He's home, his wife in the garden, his daughter in his lap, her smile outshining the sun, a smile far brighter than his future ever could be.

The conveyor belt kicks into gear, with a resonating, electrical hum.

His daughter would never see any of this. She was inquisitive and beautiful, the best in her class. A Canadian citizen.

He opens his eyes. The pig hangs from the conveyor belt, lifeless and limp, cuts and bruises all over her body. Her eyes hang open, unfocused and empty.

It was wrong. It was all wrong. He studied to be a doctor. His strong hands, his steady hands, were trained to heal.

But the war had torn that world apart. Here, in this strange land, he is a butcher, a killer...

A father.

He picks up the knife.

"I will do anything," he says to the little girl in his arms. "So you can

be anything."

He shuts his eyes.

Anything.

Step Four

She's wearing a new dress today. It's black, with white polka-dots. Underneath it, she wears black stockings and a white crinoline. She leans over in her booster seat, looking down at her shiny black shoes and kicking them together.

"Stop that, now," Mommy scolds. She turns in her seat and leans over, handing her a bacon sandwich and a cold milk. "Hurry up and finish your breakfast. We're almost at the church."

"Is Uncle Ray at the church?" she asks, taking a bite of her sandwich.

"Yes, baby. Eat your breakfast."

She obeys and they ride the rest of the way in silence. There's a lot she doesn't understand about what happened to Uncle Ray: the cancer, the funeral, where he was now, where her cousins were going to live. She tried to ask Mommy while she put on her dress and fixed her hair, but she cried so much she couldn't answer her.

They park in a field just a little ways from the church. A few cars are parked outside, but everyone is either inside of them or inside the church, to avoid the stink.

"You got five minutes," Mommy says. She pulls down the mirror to fix her lipstick.

She nods, taking a big bite of her sandwich. When most of it's gone, she takes a big gulp of milk and asks, "You... you won't get cancer, right? It's just Uncle Ray?"

Mommy freezes in the mirror, her eyes crinkling up like she's about to cry again. She takes a deep breath, nice and slow, and meets her eyes through the mirror.

"No, baby," she says, her voice shaking a little. "I promise you I'm not going anywhere. I'm going to make some changes. We're gonna start... eating our vegetables... and jogging!"

"But we're not supposed to run outside!" she says, patting the inhaler in her pocket. "Remember? Doctor says..."

"You're right, baby." She puts her lipstick in her purse and sighs. "I'll get us one of those workout videos. Something fun, with dances we'll do together. Would you like that?"

She nods excitedly.

"Good. Now, finish your milk."

Once her breakfast is finished, she hands the wrappers back to Mommy, who pushes them into a plastic bag. They each pull a black handkerchief from their pockets, holding it firmly over their noses and mouths.

"Ready?"

The little girl nods.

At the same time, they open their doors, jump out of the car, and make a break for the church. It's a hot summer day in August, and the handkerchief does little to keep out the stench. By the time they make it inside the church, her eyes are burning, hot tears rolling down her cheeks. She takes a greedy breath of cold, clean air, and then, almost immediately, begins coughing uncontrollably.

"Baby!" Her mommy kneels down beside her, starts rubbing her back.

"Are you okay, do you need water?"

The coughing slows down, but her throat feels itchy and sore and full of yuck.

"Lydia!" Aunt Hannah pulls Mommy into a hug, casting a look of pity at both of them. "Oh, you poor little thing..." She turns back to Mommy. "Are you sure you'll be able to make it through the burial? They're draining the hog lagoons today..."

Her heart sinks. It was hard enough being outside on normal days, with the stench of the pigs and that awful pink lake by her house. When the lake got too full, they emptied it through a sprinkler and sprayed it all over the place. She wasn't supposed to go outside on those days, and often she had to miss school.

"We can do it," she wheezes, wiping at her eyes with her handkerchief.

"I wanna say goodbye to Uncle Ray."

For some reason, this makes Mommy and Aunt Hannah cry. After a few hugs, Mommy takes her to the front of the church, where they sit down. Around her, all the grownups cluster together, whispering about "the heat", "hog season" and, "colon cancer, such a shame."

"We're burying Uncle Ray at the cemetery, right?" she asks, coughing a little.

Mommy nods. "Yes, right next to your grand-dad."

"Then, what do we do here?"

Mommy's arms pull her close. She feels a kiss on the top of her head.

"Well... we're bringing Uncle Ray to church one last time. So we can pray for him and help God bring him to heaven."

"The good place."

"That's right."

Leaning against Mommy, she closes her eyes, dreaming of heaven. A place where no one gets cancer, anyone can play outside, and all the lakes are blue.

Step Five

He leans back in his chair, admiring the glow of the twinkling lights. They hang from the ceiling, and wrap themselves around the columns and freshly cut evergreens that stand proudly in every corner of the banquet room. Light and life are everywhere; in the candlesticks on the tables, the poinsettia arrangements on the banquet table, the holly on the chandeliers. Everything is shining and beautiful, a brilliant testament to everything he has built.

“As always, they’ve outdone themselves.” The director of marketing is at his side now, in a festive red pantsuit. She holds two crystal goblets of cabernet and holds one out to him. “But you know what, I like to think we’ve outdone ourselves, too.”

“We have.” He clinks his glass against hers. “Merry Christmas to us!”

“To an even better New Year!”

They drink. The wine is rich and sweet, and clings thickly to his lips and tongue. “This is wonderful,” he says.

She pulls a red, velvet box from her pocket, no bigger than her hand, and holds it out to him. “A little something from me,” she says. “I really appreciate everything you’ve done for the company this year.”

He opens the box. Inside is a tiny, silver paperweight, in the form of a pig. “Excellent!” he laughs, turning it over. “Look at the little curly tail!”

She smiles. “I thought you’d appreciate that. Besides, they are the guests of honor tonight!” She gestures to the banquet table, which is filled to bursting with Smithfield’s best products: spiral-cut country ham, cinnamon apple pork chops, bacon-wrapped shrimp, even a small suckling pig, complete with an apple in its mouth.

“And where would we be without them?” He places the paperweight back into the box, pocketing it. “Thank you, Deidre.”

“No, *thank you*.” She claps a hand on her shoulder. “For what you’ve done for this company, for all of us.” She gestures around at the guests, clustered around the banquet table and the open bar. “We all owe you so much...”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way,” he says, wrapping an arm around Deidre’s shoulder. “I wouldn’t trade a single person in this room for anyone else. I wouldn’t change a thing. We all ended up exactly where we were meant to.”

They toast again, and as the rich wine sweetens his lips, he smiles, enchanted by the glow of lights and the warmth of the season.

Everything is right. Everything is perfect. It had been a long and

difficult journey, but they had completed it together. And that made each and every step worth it.

#MeToo, We Re-Member
by Marie Cartier

I need the grandmothers to help me
re-member my rage.
Cross stitch. Double knot. I sew it back on. The raggedy parts I let fly
loose
when I thought it was OK to not be “so angry.”
“*Boys will be boys.*”
And so then, girls *will be angry.*
And we will re-member—our rage.
I need the great aunts, and all the old women with the signs that read,
“We are still protesting this shit.”
I need them, this herstory to help me
re-member my rage, feel it strong and tight. Cross stitch. Double knot.
Those women re-member
me. I am that woman. She is me.
Our rage is a song.
After all this time, we are still singing it. Our rage
is a river and we swim in it, even if it’s upstream. There is a fierce
mermaid goddess,
Yemaya. She protects us. She knows
our rage is our best defense.
Our rage is a
swarm of bees. Not yet extinct. Our rage
is holy. Terror.

The grandmothers rise like the trees
at the end of *The Lord of the Rings*. The last force,
called to battle. And they come. They come ripping their roots from
solid earth and moving
slowly, but they move.
And they change—everything. Their roots upend the known world.

I need the grandmothers to re-m ember my rage.

The poet Muriel Rukeyser wrote,
“When one woman tells the truth about her life, the world will be
split open.”
She wrote that mid-century America and here we are-- with one

woman, *telling.*
And as the world splits, there is another, and another and another.
Women fall from this cornucopia
of truth, and the grandmothers surround them. This, they say, is why
we came,
why we walk, and we march, with the pussy hats and the protest signs:
We re-member. We never forgot.
This is our lineage of resistance, and the world splits open.
We are telling: in whispers, and in shouts, on paper and keyboards and
into microphones.
#MeToo#MeToo#MeToo
We are the news we’ve been waiting for. *We are the song*, the swarm,
the force.
It’s not “good news”, but necessary news-- we-remember.
Our roots free, we are no longer just walking, or marching.
For we re-member—our rage.
Cross stitch. Double knot.
We re-member us.

Gloria Steinem said to speak, even if your voice shakes.
We are now more afraid of the silence, than we are of speaking out.
#MeToo
Can you hear it? The trees are moving.

If you are someone who needs to be afraid of the trees, of the truth,
of the #MeToo directed at you... now is your time
to get out of our way

For we re-member.

—September 26, 2018
*On the eve of Dr. Christine Blasey Ford’s testimony to the Senate
Judiciary Committee in opposition to the nomination of Brett
Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court due to sexual assault allegations*

Age of 5

by Marcos Martinez

You called me a Pussy at the age of five
while I watched my happiness slip away

I realized I was never on your mind when it was too late

I was just an afterthought
I lingered long enough for you to
remember my existence
You wanted a boy
You got a disgrace
You avoid me
Even in my absence
You called me a Pussy at the age of five

Because you knew I was gay

Pressed

by Monya Walker

Straight lines are better than any curve I was told.
Whether it be planted upon your face or along a winding road.
I'm supposed to be straight?
That's what society told me.
Because to be anything other comes with a fee.
Kinky, coarse, or curly?
How about neither.
I could put it in a bun, but they don't want that either.
I am supposed to be identifiable to you? Not a reflection of me?
Why is it my problem you don't see what I see?
Instead of asking I conform
Because questioning civilization isn't social norm.
Impressed?
My skin with no wrinkles in sight
My clothes ironed to be worn just right
My tidy apartment with central air
To my many many strands of hair
I'm pressed
For time
Because this way of life is anything but mine.
Still straight lines are better I'm told.
Flat ironing, straightening
What happened to standing out and being bold?
These expensive instruments to damage hair are becoming less feasible.
I could protect my tresses with braids but that's still unreasonable
Yet you preach that change starts with me, but what about other
people?
So I stand before you straight and pressed
Wondering if I were to remove this wig would you still be impressed?
Here's the truth in it I must confess
Although society thinks so
I'm not such a mess.

“Autumn shows us how beautiful it is to let things go,” she said.

by Emily Thompson

But, it doesn't pick me up off the ground;
I'm scattered
Shattered
Crisp and cold.

Each new step crunches beneath my feet.
A memory
Of what was once effortlessly hanging on.
Each year more float through the air and join the others.

I'm hoarding the piles,
Arms wide open- scooting them together.
I lightly throw my body over them
guard 'em from the air, I keep 'em still.
Once in-a-while I let a few free
And watch them
Dance about.

Some slip through my grip
Disappearing without my gaze,
Joining the others I've lost
And she's lost.
And he's lost.

I'm lost.

I swim in the orange,
A veil of flickering lights
cover my eyes
As it has since the first leaf fell.

A new one drops and I allow it to slip through my grip.
The new are not precious.
Later I will wish for it,
But, I am too entranced with my piles to even look up.

I free only the ones that once held
on to a single branch;
They skip
Dance
Breathe.
But, their breath is ancient
As mine is now.

Stale.

I've lost almost the entirety of
The single leaf,
From the branch
Of the single tree

But, my thumb and forefinger hold on to the last;
It breaks
Cracks
Crumbles,

Leaving only the bit my fingers are directly holding onto.

“Autumn reminds me to hold on with both hands,” I replied.

The Necklace

by Yasmin Khajavipour Thompson

I destroyed everything of yours.
Burned the objects; buried the thoughts.
Except for a necklace that floats throughout my house.
It appears unexpectedly; in a closet. In a drawer.

A reminder
I can not erase.

A silver plated chain connects to
YASMIN.

A name you gave
me while introducing me to
this world—
But, before I was able to vocalize

That name I would
Sing
DADDY—every key.

I would scream your name in joy,
The moment you entered the house.
Screaming
Stop!

As you whipped my brother.
Screaming profanity as you'd leave,
Silently taking tokens to let you back in.

With a token of grace,
Of repentance,
You presented me with
My—personalized gift—
Handing it to me through,
The last door—cracked open.

A necklace, that squeezes my throat until I can't speak.

Weighed down with love and pain,
I closed the windows—locked the doors.

And without a noise—a knock,

I am left—

A necklace.

A name.

Flowers Filled in a Mason Jar

by Candice Romero

Summer of 1997

One weekend afternoon, grandma told me I would be staying with her from now on. I was five years old and confused as to why my grandma had full guardianship over me. I moved from the Hawthorne house to the little brown house in Long Beach, where all gardens on Falcon Street were in full bloom. The scent of sweet star jasmine and red wild rose calmed my mind about where I was going to school that year.

I liked to pick the pink geraniums out of the next door neighbor's yard. There was a rusty-red bricked bed full of them. They called to me like a best friend would to play. I pinched the green stems with my chubby fingers and placed the flower friends at the bottom of my white tee-shirt.

I ran inside the house to the kitchen. I placed the flowers in an old Mason jar half filled with water. I arranged each flower as if arranging the future events of my life; thinking about my parents and if they loved me. I also wondered if my brother was alright.

I found my grandma inside her bedroom watching a mystery show on channel 28. Giving these flowers to my grandma was the only way I knew how to express my feelings of love and pain at the same time. As a child I knew it was rude to ask, *why did my parents get a divorce?*

I held the Mason jar high above my shoulders, while standing at her entrance door in the hallway. I closed my eyes as if making a wish to offer up the love and pain; to place my heart and trust in these pink petals as they will soon fall, expand, and die.

My grandma smiled at me, looking above the top of her glasses rim, "Did you pick those flowers from the neighbor's yard?"

I shook my head "no" with that Dorothy Hamilton wedge hair cut as if shaking the lies off my scalp would create an illusion of the flower's appearance, or the illusion of our family's togetherness. I tried to shake off the feeling as much as possible with a smile and grin; showing the gums of my missing two front teeth while sticking my tongue through like a baby snake.

During this long pause my eyes slightly opened to see her smile back with that intense Scorpio stare.

"Don't let her catch you picking her flowers. Thank you sweetheart."

I entered her room and walked towards her bedside. She took the Mason jar full of pink flowers and placed them on her night stand next to the stack of T.V. Guides. She reached out to me for a hug and a kiss. I embraced her for a moment and ran out of the room.

I could not run from truth about my family. As I got older, I knew the answer to why my dad left. My mother lost the power of choice and drugs became her lifestyle. My grandma told me she didn't love me, but I knew that wasn't true. My father had to find peace for himself and made a hard decision to start a new life. Later, I'd learn where my mom was: living in a car with my brother. Sometimes my brother would spend the weekends with me and the bunk beds would be complete. If I could change places with him I would, but my voice was still drowning in that Mason jar on my grandma's nightstand.

Winter of 2011

I lived with my mom in Fullerton after she cleaned up and got her own place. She wanted to be a mom and I wanted to be a daughter; I was 18. It was my first year of college at Fullerton JC, the oldest junior college in California. I loved crossing the bridge every morning on Commonwealth, where I could see an aerial view of the old mission-style buildings. Every time I would cross that bridge, I made a silent wish to make peace with myself and reconnect to the true self I was transforming into. As I crossed the bridge I would mentally leave the chaos at my mother's apartment to the liberation that education brings. My hope was to earn a degree and become an English teacher. I worked part time at Café Supreme, the local campus eatery, which serves daily from 6am. to 10pm. It was a Tuesday afternoon when I got the phone call from my Mom's friend Laura; she always let me stay at her place when my mom and I were fighting. Laura called me during my lunch break.

"Hey Candice!" she said with an excited tone

"Hey, what's up?"

"Don't tell your mother. I got you an early Christmas gift."

My eyes widened in curiosity, "What is it?"

As she cleared her throat, "It's your father's phone number and address."

At that moment I was flooded by the memory of sending him my last letter in second grade. The last letter only because my grandparents conveniently misplaced the address, and wouldn't search

for it.

“Oh my God-” as I put my hand over my mouth with shock.

“Well, it is the least I can do for you and your brother.”

I had nothing else to say except, “Where did you get it?”

“Off the internet. Merry Christmas.”

As I hung up the phone my mind started to rush with more memories of unfelt feelings. The ebb and flow of emotions brought a tide of freedom knowing that I had a chance to ask “Why?” Why did you leave me here in California? Why didn’t you write back? I’ve waited 14 years to know if you’re still alive. To know if you got that last letter I sent to you with that picture of me in a marching band costume. The ensemble costume for my first musical play, Music Man. It was the same letter I sealed with the lucky four-leaf clover charm, to keep you safe and protected while away.

I stood up from the dining table in the cafeteria, and went outside to have a cigarette. As I lit up, the clouds of smoke relaxed my mind. I wanted to take a walk to the library but my shift was not over yet. Confiding to myself: *Don’t worry. He is going to be there when you call. Wait until Christmas Eve to call... Break time is over.*

My heart was excited to know he was still alive, I knew he paid child support, but in my mind he was dead. He never came back or called. I wanted to wish him well. *I love you daddy.* I wanted him to come back.

I called the number on Christmas Eve. I was alone in my room with no one to bother me. The holidays were sad, because my grandma passed the year before due to heart failure. As I lay on my side, on my twin bed, next to my bookshelf, I looked at an old picture. It was a picture of my father and me putting together a puzzle of the Peanuts gang. He always taught me to place the edge pieces separate from the other puzzle pieces in order to make the border of the picture. Every night before I went to bed we would put together a puzzle. As I dialed the number, I felt the missing piece of the puzzle would soon be placed in my heart just to hear his voice.

The phone rang a few times before I heard a voice of a young adolescent girl on the other receiver. In soft tone she said, “Hello.”

Taking after my grandma’s stern voice I directly stated, “Hi, Can I please speak to my father, Gilbert?”

She clears her throat with caution, “He’s not here right now, he’s out with my mom.”

“Can you tell him his daughter called?”

Ok,” she replied as if in the middle of doing something else and hung up. About five minutes went by and I hear a ring from my cell.

“Yes—“I answered wickedly.

Her voice hardened with confusion, “Is this some kind of joke-?”

“No. Is this Lindsay?”

“Yes,” she claimed.

At that moment, I knew she didn’t know I even existed. I knew of her through letters my dad had sent. Lindsay was born a few years after my mom and dad got divorced. He remarried and moved out of state. I saw a baby picture of her. She had similar facial features to me, but instead of my thick brown hair and hazel eyes, she had thin sandy brown hair and light brown eyes.

I sighed in dismay, “I’m sorry Lindsay but it is true. Your dad, my father has two other children.” She hung up abruptly.

A few hours later, Lindsay called me again with more assurance in her voice. She wanted to confess her feelings after a sense of shock.

“You know, I always knew in the back of my mind I had an older sister.”

“How did you know?”

“Well there was this random girl, who wore a band outfit on our fire mantle next to all the family photos.”

To my surprise, “Was she wearing baby-blue glasses?”

“Yes,” almost whispering.

She laughed nervously and responded, “Yea, and the thing was when I asked both mom and dad who that random girl was they froze in silence.”

I paused in silence I braced my chin with my hands and held my frown. My heart fluttered with fear to think why I was a secret. Why was I kept a secret? We paused in silence as if something in our hearts died or changed or grew into more questions. Her silence echoed the water that remained in that Mason jar I placed on my grandma’s nightstand. Lindsay’s voice became mine, and reflected back to me the confusion I felt as a child while growing up. At that moment, I stopped blaming her. We ended the conversation mutually saying, “Goodbye Sis.”

I hung up the phone and soon after heard glass break. I stood up from my bedside to see what happened. Going down the hall, it

sounded like from the kitchen. On the floor was a broken picture frame that flew off the ancestor table near the dining room table. The ancestor table had some candles with my grandma's favorite perfumes, Sun Moon and Stars and Shalimar. There was also a blue vase with peacock feathers and more photos of my loved ones who had transitioned time and space. Shattered on the floor, my grandmother's photo at Ren Faire holding a twisted wooden staff remained intact despite the confetti of glass shards. I swept up the pieces and threw them away. I smiled with a chill to my shoulders, knowing her presence.

They All Have Dying Wishes

by Jessica Parker

but hers we could grant.
A midnight wake up call
was made to the chaplain,
who shuffled in with
sleepy eyes and a bible.
We opened the gift shop
to grab flowers for two
make-do bouquets.
The kitchen sent up a
tray of surplus slices
of apple pie.
Then we gathered in that
small hospital room
as a group of well-wishers in
scrubs and lab coats.
Someone played The
Wedding March from a
cell phone speaker
while the bride
held tight to her beloved's
physician as he led her
past us to the bedside.
Vows were exchanged between
two old women,
partners for fifty five years,
one voice strong and steady,
the other a faint but faithful
promise 'til death do us part,
which came three hours later,
just before dawn.

Did He Smile?

by Samuel Pflugrath

The convention center was a round, sprawling, and thoroughly modern building in the middle of a great concrete plaza, packed with people and surrounded by tall, green-glassed skyscrapers. The day was bright and blue, and in the far distance there rose the white contrail of a rocket headed for orbit. From the vantage point of a person standing before it, like the Old Man, it might have looked almost like a classical Greek amphitheater, with the far-distant rocket seeming to rise up directly out of it.

The Old Man wore a fedora and sunglasses, and a blue doctor's mask covered his mouth. He was short but broad-shouldered with a long, spindly neck, and he carried himself with a slight hunch. On this typically blistering Southern California summer's day, he wore a closed and heavy brown trench coat that was much too large for him—along with creased black dress pants and shoes. What little of his skin was exposed was of a very light brownish hue, and heavily wrinkled with age.

It should be noted that for close to fifty years, he had managed to avoid leaving the confines of his small apartment almost entirely—and yet on this day, the twenty-fourth of July, he had finally chosen to leave its solitude. On this day, the center was host to a very particular convention: one that had been calling his name, whether he liked it or not, for what was now the better part of his life. What drove him to finally answer its call, or whether he intended to return, none may ever know: for the mask he had chosen to wear concealed his actual face—his actual intentions—his actual *self*—from the world he now found himself in.

As much as the Old Man might have stood out in the mostly young, far-more informally dressed (aside from the people in costumes, of course), and overwhelmingly white crowd that surrounded him outside the convention center, no one seemed to pay his idiosyncratic self any particular attention. Instead they merely swept him along, almost against his will, into the grand building. Whoever or whatever else he was or had once wanted to be, on that day he was only one more attendee of the fortieth annual American Maggaëlian Convention.

*

Roger T. Maggaël was a short, meek, and unassuming little man: the perfect sort to hole himself up in a dingy apartment and become a science-fiction author. Even at the height of his popularity, very little was actually known about him outside of the very small circle of friends and confidants he had kept. To date, there are somehow no confirmed authentic photographs of him—the author's picture on the back of every one of his novels was a crude self-caricature in pencil, depicting himself as less of a man than (what with the beaky upper lip and jowly mouth; the long slender neck extending out of a hunched and wide-shouldered body; the vaguely concave and tonsure-like bald spot on the top of his head) an anthropomorphic turtle.

On a warm but tolerable evening in early June, Roger answered his door in a dress shirt and ironed pants to greet his agent, Del Morgan. She was African-American, a few inches taller than him, and dressed far more casually: a sunny yellow blouse decorated with little green snakes and fashionably tattered jeans.

"Come into the dining room," Roger said excitedly, just a hint of an odd but recognizably Japanese accent present in his baritone voice. "How much of it have you read?"

"I had to meet with another client, so I was only able to skim bits of it," Del answered honestly, the two of them walking the couple steps to his one-bedroom apartment's kitchenette, "But what I did get to read was incredible, just awesome." Her host smiled modestly and let out a humble chuckle. He pulled out a seat for her and then took him own place opposite her at the tiny plastic dining table.

"Yeah," she continued, "I think this book could really sell if we market it to the right demographic." She closed her dark brown eyes and held a napkin to her forehead, in imitation of a psychic, and intoned in a mock Transylvanian accent: "*Princes of the Milky Way* is destined for *all* the best seller lists."

Roger leaned back in his seat. It might not have shown on his generally morose-looking face, but he was overjoyed at her joking prediction. Already, at this relatively early stage in his career, he had written some six novels; all of them massive tomes of political intrigue and philosophical rumination set in the far-distant future – all of them selling, together, barely a hundred copies. Had he and Del not happened to have been friends back in high school, and had she not been willing to represent him almost *pro bono* (in addition to her other, more established and successful clients), it is unlikely he could

have even survived as an author, let alone have found any sort of measurable success.

“What made you decide to write this?” Del asked, leaning forward slightly. “I mean, even for you, this seems like kind of a bold, ambitious little story.”

“Well, you know how I enjoy classical mythology,” he answered, going into full college-lecturer mode: the only manner of speaking he ever felt truly comfortable in, but rarely found an excuse to make use of. “Really, it’s just a barely-disguised version of the *Oedipus Tyrannus* set in space—um, but with more emphasis on parricide than incest, though,” he added. Then he continued:

“An all-powerful cosmic warlord accidentally fathers a son and, rather than kill the child (as the uber-libertarian culture the story is set in recommends of him), he has the infant sent off to a far distant corner of the galaxy to be brought up by robots—hoping they will never cross paths again. However, the boy grows up, becomes an even more powerful and tyrannical warlord, subjugates and/or exterminates almost the rest of the galaxy, and ultimately the two reunite in battle as strangers. Finally, the son kills the father, the son realizes to his horror what he has done, and the son tearfully commits suicide—leaving behind a decimated galaxy that will likely never recover. *Fin.*”

He closed his eyes and folded his arms across his chest, clearly proud of how succinctly he was able to summarize his own massive work. Del, however, only raised an immaculate eyebrow.

“Oh?” she said. “That’s... way, way darker than what I thought it was about. I mean, just from the bits that *I* was reading.”

“What parts were you reading?” Roger asked, audible concern creeping into his voice.

“Mostly the parts where you describe just this incredible interstellar future,” she answered, wistfully smiling as she recalled more and more of it. “You know, a million feudal warlords scattered across the galaxy, living their technologically immortal lives on palatial starships, surrounded by unfailingly loyal robotic soldiers and concubines, pillaging entire star systems for resources and personal glory: I mean, bluntly, that shit rocks!”

“Really?” came the author of that very fantasy’s response. “It’s just... that was mostly supposed to be... well, satire.”

“Satire?”

“Yes. I was trying to portray a future where the entire human

race has dwindled down to just a million or so petty and bigoted dictators, who shun all human connection and devote their empty lives to mindless dominance and bloodshed purely for their own sakes. Did... did I make that seem too... *enjoyable?*”

“Um... well... ah, it’s probably just me not paying too much attention, honestly. Didn’t I say I only got a chance to skim it?”

“Well, if it’s necessary, I could probably revise it, to make my actual views more apparent.”

“Eh, it probably won’t be necessary. When I get back home, I’ll give it a *real* thorough read-through, and I’m sure when I do it’ll be more in line with what you said. Just so you know, I still think this is going to sell like nothing you’ve ever written before.”

“Well... alright,” Roger finally answered with a shrug and a smile, his confidence quickly returning. The two of them then had a pleasant little cucumber salad that Roger had spent an hour or so meticulously preparing; and then, after that, he saw his agent to the door. He even waved goodbye as Del went down the hall—but in his mind, he couldn’t help pondering what it might imply about her inmost character that *those* were the parts of his book that she had held the most interest in.

*

The convention center was far more crowded than anyplace the Old Man had ever been before – although, since he had always shunned public events, that doesn’t say very much. Close to ten thousand people had gathered that day to celebrate the work and legacy of Roger Maggaël, and events were scheduled almost nonstop well into the night. Hundreds of booths were stocked with merchandise both official and unofficial: books and pamphlets, figurines and bumper stickers, personality tests and voter registration forms.

One booth fairly close to the entrance was staffed by members from one of the local college’s Maggaëlian Clubs, who among other things had just produced a short film adaptation of the final scene of *Princes*, and were selling copies for twenty dollars. The club’s leader was a tall young man with short, sandy blond hair, and he was dressed in a red and gold lettermen jacket with a tiger-print ascot. He hovered around in front of the booth, offering discs at a personal discount to any female attendees who passed.

Unfortunately, the Old Man, apparently too distracted by everything else surrounding him, bumped into the club leader and

made him drop his wares. Unhesitatingly he knelt down to pick them up for him, but was pushed away instead.

“Watch where you’re going, fucker!” the youth exclaimed. His hand brushed against the Old Man’s face: knocking his sunglasses aside and momentarily revealing his small, dark eyes. “Oh hey,” the club leader said, a cruel white smile on his cruel white face, “It’s a goddamn chink!”

The Old Man quickly put the shades back on and began to walk away, a gloved hand against his face. He muttered something under his breath as he went, just loud enough for the club leader to overhear. The youth called out, “You wanna say something to me, fucker? Say it to my face!”

The Old Man stopped in his tracks, turned, walked right up to the youth and said, “My family comes from Japan, not China.” His voice was deeper than the club leader had expected, and even though the Old Man was a good six inches shorter than him, it was enough to momentarily startle him.

“Oh, well,” he replied, struggling to reassert his dominance, “Maggaël is whites-only, didn’t you get the memo?” The Old Man sighed and turned away from him. Though they were concealed by his shades, the youth instinctively knew that he had just rolled his eyes at him. “Yeah,” he exclaimed, shouting after him, “and why do you even wear those sunglasses indoors, old man? Are you blind?”

“You have already blinded yourself,” the Old Man said as he made his way back into the great indifferent crowd.

*

Princes of the Milky Way was published on 24 July, 20-- , with little-to-no fanfare; but after a couple of days with virtually no sales, its popularity suddenly and unexpectedly exploded. By the first of August it had topped most of the bestseller lists, both as an eBook and as a physical product. Reviews ranged from mildly positive to genuinely ecstatic, hailing it as a work of profound and indispensable insight into the human condition.

And thus, for but a few short weeks in August, Roger Maggaël was overwhelmed by his own sudden success. With the promise of coming author’s stipends, he began treating himself to expensive dinners in Beverly Hills and searching for a better place to live. He even started receiving fanmail—no, he even started having fans, actual *fans* of his work, something he never thought that anyone as painfully aware of just how niche and obscure his writing was could

ever hope to achieve.

Del, being the friend she was, even began messaging him with the most glowing reviews she could find online; just to help him feed his previously-starved ego. It was near the end of August when she sent him a video review/analysis made by a mid-ranking YouTuber by the name of Martin Parton.

“He mostly talks about video games and movies,” she explained along with the link, “and a large part of his audience is mostly children; but still, he seems to have really taken a liking to *Princes*, and he’s got over eleven million subs. Have a look!”

From the comfort of the apartment he then hoped to soon be rid of, Roger watched as Parton – a handsome, clean-shaven man in his early thirties—gave a lengthy if largely insubstantial explanation of why his novel had rendered all previous works of American literature obsolete. But, as Del has said, many of Parton’s viewers were children, so he saw no harm in Parton being a little hyperbolic so long as it got kids interested in the arts.

“If you’re like me,” Parton narrated over a brief slideshow of classical ruins and Hellenistic clipart, “you’re probably familiar enough with Greek mythology to think, ‘Hey, this story sounds weirdly familiar: Where have I heard this before?’ Well, look no further, Thinkers, because the plot of *Princes of the Milky Way* is very obviously inspired by the Greek legend of Oedipus.” A picture of a cartoon octopus wearing a crown filled the screen. “Not Octopus: Oedipus!” he added in mock anger before it was replaced by a more appropriate image. “Ugh, I really need to find a new graphics guy.”

Roger, meanwhile, gave this little bit a good-natured smirk.

“And for those of you who’ve never heard of Oedipus,” Parton continued, “It goes a little like this: Once upon a time there was a king named Laius, who was afraid that his son was going to grow up and take his place. You know, exactly the one thing a king’s son is expected to do? But anyway, Laius wanted to prevent this from happening for some reason, and so he ordered his soldiers to abandon the child and leave him to die. Fortunately, a shepherd found him and named him Oedipus, and raised him to adulthood. That’s when Oedipus set out on his own; and one day, as he walking down the road he got in a fight with an old man. Swords were drawn; and in the end, Oedipus murdered his attacker.

“But who was the old man, you ask? Why, it was none other than his father, King Laius himself! Now, what exactly a king was

doing out in the middle of nowhere starting fights with random strangers is anybody's guess. But anyway, Oedipus then unknowingly found his way back home where he killed a monster and, because the old one was now dead, the people rewarded him by making him their new king. In other words, in spite of everything his father had sought to prevent, Oedipus fulfilled his destiny and took his rightful place as king. And that, Thinkers, is basically what happens to the protagonist of *Princes of the Milky Way*."

Roger sat at his computer silently as Parton continued on another somehow related tangent – this one concerning the effects that women in politics have on men's biochemistry. He was now far less certain of how to appropriately react, other than to be simultaneously relieved and saddened that Sigmund Freud never got a chance to hear that particular interpretation of Oedipus.

*

"Fifty years ago today," announced the now-elderly Martin Parton as he stood on the convention center's main stage, "A book was published that would go on to change *everything*. That's not hyperbole, folks: the moment *Princes of the Milky Way* was published, the old way of looking at everything – religion, politics, business, warfare—was rendered obsolete; and a new order began to assert itself. A new order that we, fellow Thinkers, have all done our little parts to help bring into being."

The crowd surrounding him applauded this bit of self-congratulation, although the Old Man now standing amongst them merely stared up at him wordlessly.

"Of course, books have authors," Parton stated quite accurately, "And it would be really selfish of me not to extend a thank-you to Roger Maggaël himself: the man whose vision we are still trying to bring into being. We really wished he could attend this special anniversary year but, as he remains an extremely private individual, no matter how many invitations we sent he never responded. Even so, I like to think that he's here with us in spirit: smiling upon us for all that we've done for him."

The Old Man's face remained hidden behind his doctor's mask and sunglasses.

"And now, let me introduce our next speaker: the man who has probably done more than anyone else – apart from than me, that is—to refine and popularize the theories of Roger Maggaël: please give a big round of applause to Professor Jacob Christianson!"

*

"Are you watching PBS right now?" Roger asked over the phone, frantic nervousness in his voice.

"Uh, no?" Del replied. "Why?"

"Because they're interviewing goddamn Jacob Christianson right now, and he's talking about my book!"

"Oh, wow! That's gotta be an honor. You know, he's got *legions* of fans who'll buy anything he tells them. Literally!"

"No, that's not what I—! He's getting it all—! Just watch," Roger said finally before hanging up and turning his attention back to his television.

"Oh yes, definitely I think Maggaël's written one of the most important books of all time," the pallid, gray-haired academic said with his piping voice; leaning back in his seat with an ankle over his knee. "I think the fact that this book has managed to sell as well as it has, and in spite of its core message running so counter to the establishment's radical Marxist/Feminist narrative that so largely dominates popular fiction anymore, is a sign that the people see something they like in it—something they want to see brought to fruition."

"And what do you suppose they see in it, Professor?" the interviewer asked. "I mean: what, in your opinion, is the core message or ideology of *Princes of the Milky Way*?"

"At its core, I would say that it demonstrates, far better than anything else, why democracy can never function in the long run: because human society is always, as a rule, fated to descend back into some degree of militarist barbarism. The solution I see it offering to this dilemma, effectively, is for the human race to embrace it: to first reduce itself to a few million elect individuals, and then to technologically equip these individuals so as to render them nothing short of living gods – exploring the universe and subjugating it to their wills with fists of iron. This, I believe, is the kind of society that man was intended for."

"That's what my *villains* think, you idiot—that's why my story's a tragedy!" Roger yelled at the screen in impotence, as Christianson continued unimpeded:

"Of course, a hundred years ago, this idea might have been ridiculed as the work of a maniac; but today, as private enterprise begins to explore the stars and the weapons of war are made more and more accessible to the public, perhaps what Maggaël is clearly

proposing here is not so far-fetched anymore. I see no reason to think, one or two hundred years from now, that such a society wouldn't be possible; and I definitely believe it would be infinitely preferable to the godless and anti-masculinist society we are all forced to currently inhabit."

"Fascinating," replied the interviewer unquestioningly. "Quite fascinating."

*

"And now," Professor Christianson announced via live satellite feed from the hospital bed that was almost sure to soon double as his deathbed, his words now slowed and slurred by both old age and ill-health, "It gives me great pleasure to introduce you to one of the highest-profile Maggaëlians now on earth, the Secretary of the United States Space Force, General Harris 'Bomber' Bergeron."

A large pale man with a blond crewcut and wearing a star-studded black uniform now strode out onto the stage, his grand entrance accompanied (inappropriately enough) by a blaring synthwave/Vocaloid cover of "Tough Boy" from *Fist of the North Star 2*. He did not seem to inspire quite the same degree of adulation in the youthful crowd that the previous two speakers had, but the Old Man pressed his way through to get as close to the stage as possible.

"Thank you, Professor," the Secretary said with a gravelly, commanding voice, "You were always one of my idols growing up, along with Mr. Parton and, of course, our prophet Roger Maggaël."

"When I was only eight years old, I read my first book—and that book was *Princes of the Milky Way*. So, when our glorious Commander-in-Chief appointed me to lead our Space Force almost fifteen years ago, I knew exactly the sort of leader I would have to be if I wanted to succeed. But more than that, I recognized then exactly what God Himself was blessing me to do. And so, in those fifteen years, folks, I have worked tirelessly and tenaciously to make our prophet's vision a reality."

"Now look at what I—no, look at what *we*—have accomplished. Thanks to the work of dedicated Maggaëlians like you and me, the Space Force is now almost ninety percent privatized; the number of registered voters in this country has been reduced by almost half; the church and the state are both dying off, and the market is soon to join them. And what will take their place? An independent military, made up of proud, strong men who fight and conquer and die, just as they did in the days before weak and

degenerate freeloaders tricked us all into laying down our arms in the name of so-called 'civilization.'

"Folks, our species' chastic history is nearing its end: from the power of masculine force and violence we were born, and to that primeval glory we shall soon return. Roger Maggaël has shown us this; and, as worshippers before a god, it is in his name that we shall carry out our holy work. Maggaëlians, let us take back our rightful place as the hands of God upon the clay of the cosmos, and sculpt the future that our prophet has presented us!"

The convention's audience exploded with cheers and applause, but over their adulation the General was still able to proclaim, "Long live Maggaël!" And the crowd responded, repeating his words: "Long live Maggaël!" Only one voice refused to join the chant of "Long live Maggaël!" – One elderly voice, which had remained deliberately silent for almost the whole convention, and whose owner was now slowly making his way through the screaming crowd for the nearest exit.

*

"Okay then, so why don't you just sue them?" Del asked. She was pacing up and down Roger's apartment as he sat alone on the sofa with his face in his hands. "Thanks to them, you've got plenty of money to hire a good lawyer, and God knows you're not spending it on getting a better place to live or anything."

"What am I supposed to sue them for? Trademark violation?" he answered. "Even if I did, they'd just start calling their little cult something other than 'Maggaëlianism'; and you can't copyright an ideology, or an interpretation of a work. It wouldn't do anything that'd make them stop or go away; let alone do anything to stop them from continuing to use my book as their Bible."

Del sighed, her friend and client's growing fatalism grating on her more and more. "Well then, what *are* you going to do? Just lie down and wait for death?"

Roger was silent a moment; then he raised up his head and said, his voice rendered nasal and cracking from tears, "Maybe I will."

Del rolled her eyes. "Well, you've certainly built up a fanbase that would probably be more than willing to oblige you there. Did you see they're going to start holding a convention in your honor? I think the first one starts next year."

"I've got a tiger by the tail," he said to no one in particular. "'Tyger, Tyger, burning bright..'"

"Are you even listening to me anymore?" Del asked.

“When the stars threw down their spears, And water’d heaven with their tears –”

“I’ll come back if you ever want actual advice, okay? Bye.” With that, Del went out through the door again, but Roger did not follow as before.

And, as far as anyone knows, he’s still there in his apartment, somewhere in LA County—rocking back forth and ranting to himself about tigers. He was never seen in public again, and he quietly broke all contact with the few who knew him. Groceries and takeout he ordered online; and if nothing else his fans did provide him with easily a half-century’s worth of rent money. Even as his crudely-penciled self-caricature grew and changed into the immortal face of the future, the man behind it all merely vanished silently into its shadow—his fate forever irrelevant and unknown.

*

By the time the Old Man got back to the convention center’s parking garage (where he had left his sixty-year-old four-door sedan), the sun had already set. There weren’t very many vehicles parked there, as most of the attendees had ride-shares and chauffeurs to pick them up; and the few that did use the parking garage mostly cleared out early for fear of being outside the suburbs after dark. Still, it was a badly-lit and low-ceilinged building, and all the security cameras seemed to be broken.

He had left his car up on the fourth level, and no sooner had he stepped out of the stairwell than he heard a voice call, “Hey, look who’s back!” Gathered around a parked sports car just to his left were a few of the men from the University’s Maggaëlian Club—one of whom, of course, was the club leader.

“Hey nip, you came back for more, huh?” the youth said running up to him, and his friends all laughed. The Old Man didn’t even bother acknowledging and tried to walk past him. In response, the club leader punched him in the back of the head, screaming “Speak when you’re fucking spoken to!”

The Old Man fell to the ground and landed on his face – his hat came off and his bald head began leaking water onto the concrete. Getting back onto his hands and knees, the broken sunglasses fell away, revealing his small, dark eyes again. He ripped the doctor’s mask off so he could spit blood. That’s when he heard the sound of a gun’s hammer being pulled back.

“Give me one reason not to blow your brains all over this

garage, you fucking weakling,” the club leader said, now standing before him. “You think anyone’d ever pin this on us? Not a chance, not for some piece of shit like –”

The club leader stopped his little speech, for the kneeling Old Man lifted his head and looked up at him. There was something in his features—something far too familiar—and as the reason slid its way into his head, the youth could feel a pit of sickness forming in his very soul.

“Y... You...” he said, pointing the hand that was not currently holding a firearm at the still-kneeling figure before him. “Are you... Roger Maggaël?”

There was a pause before the Old Man replied:

“No, I am Laius, and this is the road to Thebes!”

Then he spat a wad of thick, bloody saliva into the club leader’s eyes, and the club leader reflexively shot him through the chest.

Panicking, the other club members rushed forward to grab their stunned leader and usher him back to their vehicle; while the Old Man lay writhing on his back, bleeding out. His eyes closed and his face turned toward the concrete ceiling, he laughed like a hyena—even as his murderers drove their car over him to be certain. It didn’t matter to him: nothing did anymore. For the first time in almost fifty years, he felt as though he had control again—and yes, he smiled.

Mexican Poem

by Fernando Salas

Is this where I muse
Orange and red skies of the old country
On the distant mountains of Monterrey
Sipping mezcal to the tune of
A lamenting guitar?

I am not that brown man
Comparing the climb of life to
Woodwork and upholstery
With hands tough like leather
Laboring in defiance of the sun

I know Moscow mules at The Hawk
Pad Thai noodles after closing
Maneuvering the concrete sprawl
“You need to remember where you’re coming from.”

I know
I am not your brown man
And this is still mine
My Mexican poem

How to Beat Cancer

by Lancelot Nava

First time you fly into Mexico will be at the innocent age of 5. Your father’s side of the family will gather from SoCal and all over Mexico to fulfill your grandpa’s wish. Your grandfather was the perfect example of a masculine family man. An event like this wasn’t out of the ordinary but not this big. At the time, your family kept it a secret from you, you were shepherded to believe it was just to expand the knowledge of who was in the family. The enormous fiesta was held at your uncle Cande’s extravagant home. The event was set up in the backyard, fully equipped with bounce houses, taqueros, bandas, and hundreds of family members. This will become one of the most memorable days but little will you know, it was just to get the entire family together for your grandpa to see before cancer would take his life. You aren’t going to know this until the cold fingers of cancer begin to strangle your father’s throat.

Your father isn’t very different than your grandfather, prideful, strong, masculine. He will always have that machismo attitude. When you get in trouble or need to ask for permission, you go to him, even if he was fully aware of the situation. When you’re right or misunderstood, he wouldn’t want to be corrected. If you do, he will just be quiet and think while you stand, waiting for an answer. It’s because he feels vulnerable and he isn’t a man who supports that mindset. He would never let anyone know he was hurting or needed support. When you were born, he started to build a business. A trucking company, but with the house market crashing in 2008, and getting screwed over by an accountant, he fell way under the poverty line. Your father kept this all a secret from you. You had no idea he was struggling because your father didn’t want to show that to anyone. You had family members who would have been more than willing to help but he got back on his feet as quickly as possible because he had a family to keep afloat.

It feels like *deja vu* when your father is diagnosed with cancer...At first it’s not real, your mind gets clouded with terrible thoughts as death begins to whisper in your ear, “He’ll never experience your graduation, first job, your first car, your wedding, your family you build.” Everything gets dark, you can’t think straight, and eventually you break. You become a broken shell of a person, your parents have known this for a few months and you feel

cheated. You want to be angry, but how could you? You need to take control of your emotions, come back to reality. You have to look out for the ones around you. For God's sake YOUR MOTHER!!! You can only imagine having the love of your life leave you and your family at a time like this. You try your best to keep your composure as best as possible as you walk past your father to hold your mother in the garage where he won't see you hurt. A few days pass and it just feels like a nightmare you were trying to forget the morning of. Life continues as if nothing is wrong but you feel as if the air is dense...That's when the first ever 'family meeting' is announced for tomorrow, Friday night.

You've missed school for the past few days because you hate the idea of having others look at you right now. It's been long enough though, time doesn't stop for you. You go to school with the intention to not say a word and just get home as soon as possible. It will be the hardest day of school in your life, your new silent nature is foreign to everyone you've ever met. As teachers call you out for not being happy go lucky. As they ask you what's wrong and all your friends individually ask you what's wrong, you gather all the strength in your body to muster up a fake smile as you say "everything is alright, I'm just a little tired". That will be your new signature conversation for the up and coming months. Now you're home and it's time for the family meeting.

Everything is put on the table, everyone has a turn to speak as if it were an intervention, but nothing of what we said could amount to what your father is about to say. You'll never forget the words of wisdom he spoke as everyone was at their lowest. "I don't know fear...I've never known fear and I've never been scared. I want you guys to continue living your life as happy as possible. You'll never see me crying in the corner, the only thing that will hurt me is watching you guys worry about me. This doesn't affect me, if its my time...It's my time. I lived a good life." that's when the thoughts in your head shift. It doesn't matter how you feel about this, your father is stepping up to the challenge and isn't backing down. He's staying strong to make sure we do the same because as soon as any of us admit defeat, it's all over. When we hear the cancer, we associate it with death. The thing is, when your father was diagnosed with cancer, he was still there and wasn't going anywhere. He may have accepted death as an outcome but that does not mean he is giving up. Your father will stay strong and will take cancer head on because there is always a

possibility of being victorious.

You aren't a stranger to secrets at this point, but now you have to keep one from the woman who lost her husband to cancer and now possibly her favorite child. The only child who truly cares for her happiness and health, not her wealth like all her other kids. This will become very apparent when they secret is revealed to them but with a favor, all your father will ask is for them to watch your grandmother while he goes through chemotherapy. They will agree for now but only days later will tell your family how you should handle this situation, how they don't want to deal with her anymore. They don't understand how much disrespect they are showing to your family. You'll never see them the same. The family isn't all bad, some beloved family members will show their love for one another and provide their undying support. You'll never see them the same. You just have to keep your cool and support your father through his decision. He hasn't led you astray yet, why start now at his lowest? Yes, she is happiest at your house, but seeing his mother worry will only make it harder on both of them.

Now the chemotherapy and the massive crater in the bank account. Your father is ~~is~~ weaker but he won't show it. The only thing that you'll see change for months is his hair. The family comes together and makes sure he isn't alone for one second. You sit there and a single word won't be traded as he goes to the bathroom for the fifteenth time that day. You try to make conversation but the future comes up and you tell him about your college plan and he doesn't want to say a word because he isn't sure if he'll be there to see his only child that pursued education to succeed. This will be common, such as your sister getting engaged, but your father won't say a word about it because he doesn't know if he'll be there for the wedding. After that day, you still have to get to school because you can't stay home to linger in your cloud of depression. That will only show your dad that you are hurting, and this isn't about you. You need to stay strong with him. You can't disappoint your dad. But it will all be worth it once you see your dad attend your graduation. It's a small victory but it means so much, even if he has to leave a little early because the cold was too much for him.

Months have passed and having the looming presence of cancer just seems normal at this point. You see how chemotherapy is breaking your father's body, you see the possibility of death breaking down the family, but your father's spirits aren't shaken for a second. He knows everything will be fine because the surgery to see if

it's all worth it is coming up. You just got a job so you're not sure if you can call out to be with your family. You aren't sure if you can handle being there so you lie in bed for hours contemplating your decision. You end up going to work an hour late, but you quickly realize this was a mistake. You can't put up the facade of being okay. You can't hold it in anymore. You just want to see your father, so you leave and make it before he goes into the operation. As soon as you walk into the waiting room you see the family that supported your father's decision, and, surprise surprise, you don't see any of your gold digging aunts or uncles.

You and your family wait hours for your father's results as you stare at the screen that says his operation is over. You all are waiting by the window hoping to see him get pushed by to give him support. But everything gets hazy because you just want this to be over. You are now able to see your father and a million questions are running through your mind as you walk with your mother and siblings down the hall to see your dad who is waiting for you in tears. This is one of the only times you've seen him like this and you can't help but breakdown in his arms. He finally says everything that has been on his chest because the operation went perfectly, but now you must wait with bated breath for a week to get the test results. You receive the text from your mom as you hide at work. This is it... all the pain and suffering has led up to this moment. You can't believe what you're reading, but it's all over. Finally, you've beaten cancer.

Astronauts

by

Featured Los Angeles Writer

Pete Hsu is a fiction writer. His stories are featured in The Los Angeles Review, Flapperhouse, F(r)iction, and others. He was a 2017 PEN America Emerging Voices Fellow and PEN in the Community Writer in Residence at Fairfax High School. He is the Associate Fiction Editor at *Angels Flight * literary west*. He has an English Lit degree from UCLA and a Psychology degree from CSULA.

Douglas Li is an immigration specialist. His business is to transport undocumented Chinese nationals into the United States. His current consignment consists of 27 coolies from Fujian. Fujian is Douglas's ancestral home. This is just a coincidence. Douglas is not nostalgic. He hasn't any personal motivation to do business in or with Fujian. Fujian is a wealthy province, but these coolies are not wealthy. They are coming to the United States to work in a meat factory. They are good at this kind of work. They don't mind the loneliness or the injuries. They don't mind the long gruesome hours. They don't mind dropping dead, on average, at the age of 52. 52 is just a guess. It could be longer, though Douglas doubts that. The coolies don't mind any of this as long as they get paid, and their money finds its way back to Fujian, to the greedy and/or hungry hands of their gambling-addicted fathers, their crippled brothers, their boyfriends on the down-low, their village leaders, their mothers, their children, their wives.

Douglas does not prefer to work with coolies. Coolies are not interesting conversationalists. They are not politically influential. They are not rich. Douglas prefers to work with rich people who can pay him to arrange visas and amnesty. He is doing this job with the coolies under duress. It's a personal favor to the big boss.

Douglas has had these coolies for a week. This is too long. They are in the garage of Grangia Roja, an artisanal tomato processing facility in the interior of Sinaloa, Mexico. A Mexican man known as the Chief discusses technical parameters with a mechanic. Douglas knows the Chief. They are friendly, but they are not friends. The mechanic slaps his hand onto the wall of a 40-foot shipping container. The Chief frowns and looks up to meet Douglas's eyes. The Chief shakes his head.

The shipping container is used to ship tomatoes. The 27 coolies Douglas is transporting will be hidden inside of this container in a stowaway chamber underneath 24 pallets of tomatoes. This delivery strategy is dangerous. Douglas is not happy about this. It's a bad situation if it goes wrong. If it goes wrong, either they'll get caught and the coolies get deported, or the equipment will fail and the coolies die. For Douglas, there won't be much difference either way. If the coolies get deported or if they die, Douglas would go to prison, if the bosses even let him get to prison.

The bosses want this job done. The last few trucks full of coolies have been picked up at the border. Those coolies were also

hidden inside cargo containers. They were sniffed out by dogs. This cost the bosses money and also respect. The bosses don't want this to happen again. They like Douglas, they say. He's done a good job. But business is business.

Douglas thought to send the coolies through the desert on foot. But he realizes he can't send a platoon of coolies through the Mexican desert. They'd be killed by the heat almost certainly. Or by bandits or, on the other side of the border, by vigilantes. Douglas has no reasonable alternative. The tomato container is the best plan, the only plan. It's Douglas's plan, and Douglas is doing it.

Meanwhile, the 27 coolies are gathered in a corner of the warehouse. Douglas has literally seen a million coolies in his lifetime, and still he's surprised by how terrible they look, skinny, short, fucked-up teeth, hopelessly unkempt hair. Douglas feels like a god next to them.

The coolies mostly talk amongst themselves, or sleep. One seems attentive to Douglas and Douglas's goings on. He nods at Douglas. Douglas is familiar with this coolie. His name is Yiming. Yiming is young, much younger than Douglas. He looks young enough to be a teenager. This means he is probably around 25. He smiles a lot. Usually when coolies smile a lot, it means they're embarrassed or scared. But Yiming seems to smile because he's happy. Douglas likes that.

In Mandarin, Yiming says: *Boss, what's wrong? Can I help?*

Douglas replies: *I'm not your boss.*

Douglas doesn't trust Yiming to help, but he enjoys being called boss.

In English, Douglas says: There's nothing you can do. Just stay out the way.

Yiming says: *Thank you, boss. I can help. Your machine. I've done that work.*

Douglas ignores him. Yiming taps Douglas on the arm.

Douglas says: *Tou nee ma. It's fine. Leave it the fuckalone.*

Yiming does not seem bothered. He seems to make an attempt to comprehend Douglas's English. He mouths *fuckalone*. Douglas rolls his eyes. Douglas can speak Mandarin just fine, but he enjoys using English with the coolies, pretending it's for their own benefit.

Douglas says: *Too bad you aren't a woman. You know what I'm saying? Woman? Piaoliang nuhai?*

Yiming nods with enthusiasm. Douglas pokes a finger to

Yiming's chest, an impolite gesture among Chinese. Yiming looks down at the finger. Douglas wonders if Yiming will say anything about it.

Douglas says: You don't like that, huh?

Douglas scans Yiming's face for anger, but Yiming doesn't seem bothered.

Douglas says: Too bad you ain't got money. If only you were some rich PRC motherfucker. Youqian. It's the honey or it's the money. But your ass got neither.

Douglas frowns and raises both his hands, palms up. He looks at Yiming, who is still smiling. Yiming mimics Douglas's gesture, hands raised, palms up. Douglas looks at Yiming, at Yiming's hands, and at the whole gang of busted-up broke-ass coolies. None of them have anything but their hands.

Yiming says: Wo yo piaoliang nuhai.

Douglas says: You? Yeah, I don't think so.

Yiming nods. He reaches into his front pants pocket and takes out a wallet. The wallet looks new. It's the size and shape of a checkbook. It has a brass latch securing it. Yiming opens the wallet. There is no money in it, just wallet-sized pictures and other nostalgia. Yiming takes a stack of small pictures out, just three or four, and begins to show them to Douglas. There are two boys in the first two pictures. They look happy, smiling even though most rural Chinese still believe it is bad luck to smile in pictures.

Yiming says: Wo de erzimen.

Douglas says: The fuck you have two sons?

Douglas laughs and pats Yiming on the back.

Yiming shows Douglas a third picture. It's of a woman. The woman is wearing a blue dress. She is thick-boned and pale-skinned. She is not smiling, but she has kind eyes. Douglas thinks she has kind eyes.

Douglas says: Ugly.

Yiming doesn't seem to understand.

Douglas says: But good. That's a good woman.

He pushes the pictures and the wallet back to Yiming. He points at Yiming's pocket.

Douglas says: Now put that shit away. Some coolie's gonna think you have money.

The shipping container ostensibly carries tomatoes. In actuality, the 27

coolies will be hidden inside of this container. They will be hidden inside a stowaway chamber. The stowaway chamber is designed to be undetectable. Invisible, sound-proof, smell-proof. The design of the stowaway chamber is as such: The stowaway chamber is an airtight steel structure contained within a 37-foot false floor. It is 1.75 feet deep. It runs nearly the entire length of the interior of the container. To avoid detection, the false floor and the stowaway compartment is recessed at least the length of one pallet from the gate. This allows at least one row of pallets to be stacked in front of it. The stowaway chamber has a hatch that lifts up and then slides towards the container gate. The hatch is at the back of the trailer. The hatch locks from the inside of the stowaway chamber. This is to minimize its detectability. However, it will not be possible to open the hatch while the pallets are still loaded on top of it. The shipping container itself is equipped with an H-VAC system. This is separate from the H-VAC system mounted inside the stowaway compartment. The stowaway compartment's system is retrofitted with oxygen canisters and a CO₂ filter. This system is called Life Support.

The Chief yells at his crew in Spanish. Douglas doesn't speak much Spanish, but from the looks of things, there are doubts about Life Support. The apparatus is old, which the Chief explains could be a good thing. It's easier to modify. But the modifications have been elaborate. They've hidden Life Support inside the container in a way that makes it invisible from the outside. But those border customs motherfuckers know every trick. They have likely even seen 27 coolies stashed up in a tomato freight before. But border customs is also busy. Border customs is also understaffed. They are also sometimes lazy. So, as long as Douglas doesn't flaunt his operation, it's as likely as not that they won't poke around inside a trailer full of tomatoes. It's like everything in the U.S. and in the whole world really. Anything is possible. You just need to know the game. You just need to know the loopholes and the shortcuts, the subtext, what's written between the lines, how to skate the edges, how to shoot the gaps. Because, if the illegal thing is indecipherable from the legal, isn't it for all intents and purposes legal?

Douglas walks into the empty container. He stands over the hidden compartment. His thumb is behind his back, hitched into his belt. A small revolver is tucked in there. He rests the palm of his hand on the gun's hard rubber grips. The hidden compartment is underneath the main storage area, where the tomatoes will go.

Douglas pats the metal wall of the container. The hidden compartment is typically used to smuggle inanimate things, like drugs or weapons, or car parts or knockoff toys. Things that don't need Life Support. Douglas stands next to the Chief.

Douglas says: What's the problem?

The Chief says: There's no problem.

Douglas says: Then what's the hold up?

The Chief says: It's the air. Self-contained. Sealed. Dog proof.

But with 27 of these guys packed in there. It's not like you can just turn on the Oz and let it go. Too much and it'll kill 'em. Not enough and it'll kill 'em.

Douglas says: You need an engineer.

The Chief says: I need an engineer.

Douglas says: You don't have an engineer?

The Chief doesn't say anything.

Douglas says: But if you did, and the Oz worked out, then how's the rest?

The Chief says: Container's no problem. Not comfortable. They have to lay down in the dark for eight hours. They crap and piss, they just have to lay in it. But there's no problem. They'll have air.

Douglas says: What if we get held up?

The Chief says: No problem. Once it's set, they can live for days, a week.

Douglas doesn't believe this. A few feet from the container, some of the coolies are gathered around an old tube television set. The television set is not working. Yiming has removed the back of the television and is tinkering with its wiring. Something happens and the television comes on. The other coolies applaud. It's the happiest they've been all week.

Yiming comes out from behind the television and takes a seat. He gives the other coolies a thumbs up. The other coolies laugh at him. The other coolies pat him on the back. One coolie goes to the television and starts to turn the channel selector knob. He flips through two channels. He stops at an old black-and-white episode of *The Twilight Zone*. The audio is turned down low. The coolie tries to turn up the volume, but it doesn't get any louder. Yiming leans in close. His head is slightly turned, like he's trying to listen to someone whisper. Douglas walks over to Yiming and pats him on the shoulder.

Douglas says: *You fixed this.*

Yiming says: *Yes, boss.*

Douglas says: *No tools?*

Yiming smiles and shrugs. Douglas nods. He motions for the coolie seated next to Yiming to move. The coolie moves, and Douglas takes his seat. He then takes out his cigarettes. He offers one to Yiming, who accepts. He lights his own cigarette and passes the lighter to Yiming, who does the same. Yiming holds the cigarettes out for Douglas to take them back, but Douglas waves his hand in the air.

Douglas says: You keep those.

Douglas reaches out and turns up the volume knob. It cracks and then gets very loud. Douglas exhales and leans back in the flimsy plastic chair. He pats Yiming on the back and smiles at him. The fuck I care about this little fucking genius coolie, he thinks as he blows smoke into the air. Together they watch the show. In it, an astronaut returns to Earth after a 40-year mission. Upon his arrival, he finds that his lover has not aged. Meanwhile the astronaut has become an old man. This is not scientifically accurate, but it is how it happens in the television show. The old astronaut then tells his young lover to leave him. She does.

Douglas says: The fuck was that?

On the television, a beer commercial comes on. In it, several white people enjoy the beach at sundown. A pit fire is roaring. The music is Spanish guitar. A beautiful woman links arms with a handsome man. They are both young.

Around the television, some of the other men have turned their attention to the program. Their looks vary, from confusion to amusement to sadness. Although they may not be sad. They may be just tired. It's possible that Douglas is projecting his own sadness on to the men.

Douglas says: That show, shao di, is the truth. This is the world, and the joke is on the astronauts. Sacrifice everything. Go across the universe. All for what? You come back worn out, old, and busted up. And nobody cares. Your lover don't care. Your kids don't care. Rod Serling don't care. Nobody cares.

Yiming says: *Same as us.*

Douglas says: Same as you.

Then Douglas says: Same as us.

He grabs Yiming by the back of the neck. He kneads the scruff of the younger man's nape. He feels Yiming relax under his grip. Douglas gestures to the shipping container.

Douglas says: *You fixed this television?*

Yiming says: *Yes, boss.*

Douglas says: *How?*

Yiming says: *I know about electricity. My work, in Fujian.*

Douglas looks at Yiming. He thinks this is dumb. He thinks there's no way he can trust that some dumbass coolie is gonna fix something even the Chief can't get a handle on. He tells himself to forget about whatever he's thinking about. But still. This coolie. Douglas looks at him. This coolie is different. There's something in his eyes. Something in his hands. Like a spark or something, an illumination.

Douglas says: *Can you really fix the truck. The air?*

Yiming says: *Yes, boss. Yes, I really can.*

The coolies are packed into the hidden compartment. They are laid down flat on their backs, shoulder to shoulder. They look like sardines in a can. Douglas places Yiming in last, at the far end where the hatch closes.

Douglas says: *First class.*

Yiming says: *Thank you, boss.*

Douglas pulls the hatch closed. It drops with a clang. The clang echoes inside the empty shipping container. Douglas taps on the hatch. He listens for the sound of the latch securing. He waits. He taps again. Then a dull, clunky click. Douglas stands up and waves to the forklift to load the tomatoes. The Chief is already sitting behind the wheel inside the tractor trailer cabin. He gives the thumbs up to Douglas. Douglas is silent, listening as the Life Support system hums loudly. He turns his head, pressing his right ear to the container. The sound is warm and sustained, like static on the television.

The Chief raps his knuckles on the outside of his door. He looks over to Douglas.

The Chief says: *We good?*

Douglas nods back.

Douglas says: *We good.*

Douglas lights a cigarette and smokes without talking. The Chief pulls the truck out of the garage and rumbles onto a hard-packed dirt road. It's just the two of them in the tractor trailer, the two of them and the 27 coolies in the cargo. They'd like to have another guy in the cabin for security, but it'd be suspicious. It's already suspicious with a Chinese in the truck. But Douglas has good paperwork. His documents say he's an American citizen, lives in La

Habra, California. These are real documents. Douglas is a real American. He's voted in every presidential election since H.W. He even speaks English with a slight southern drawl, which makes no sense except that Douglas likes how it sounds.

The fastest route to New Mexico takes five hours. They're taking a longer route to avoid attention. The early part of the drive follows the western coast of Mexico, close to Mazatlan, facing the Gulf of California. Douglas looks out at the beaches, the layers of blue water. Douglas likes the beach. He plans to retire on the beach. Not Mazatlan. Too many bad memories. Someplace he's never been. He doesn't mind the cold. He thinks maybe Seattle. He's never been north of San Francisco.

As the sun is setting, the sky turns orange, and the water turns purple. Douglas closes his eyes. He is tired. He's been on alert for the past week. This is the home stretch. He just has to see the drive through, get the coolies to Los Lunas. If everything goes right, they won't even stop at the border. Just get waved through like friends. Good morning. Morning. Morning to you.

Douglas starts to nod off. He tells himself he shouldn't. He should stay awake. It's just another few hours. But the fatigue grabs hold of him. This must be what dying is like. In the end, no drama, just relief. He thinks about Yiming in the cargo. He wonders if it's cold back there. He wonders if Yiming would like to visit him in Seattle. These are his last thoughts before he falls asleep.

Douglas does not sleep well. He wakes up several times. Each time, it's darker than before. It gets to be the kind of dark that is all consuming. Pitch black. He can see the tractor trailer's headlights project beams into the darkness. They illuminate a small spot of road, the asphalt, the markers, and then nothing. No other cars, no road signs, no shadows of the horizon. It's as if the light disintegrates into space, is absorbed by the darkness itself.

The Chief has the stereo on.

It's American rock music.

Douglas says: *Que pasa.*

The Chief says: *Nada.*

The Chief offers Douglas cocaine. Perico, he calls it. Douglas accepts, taking the vial and preparing a small mound of powder on the fleshy part of his hand. He snorts the cocaine. He licks his forefinger and wipes the residue off his hand, rubbing it into his gums. He drops the vial into his shirt pocket. He makes a mental note to throw the

empty vial out the window once he's done. Then he feels the numbness come over his face, seeping in from his nasal cavity and to a lesser extent from his mouth. The Chief opens a can of beer and hands it to Douglas. Douglas takes it and sips. He looks out into the darkness. He takes another sip.

Douglas says: How much longer.

The Chief says: Que?

Douglas says: To the border?

The Chief says: Dos horas.

Douglas says: Bueno, muy bueno.

The Chief says: So, what? You want to fuck that guy?

Douglas says: It's not like that. He's smart. He's too good for this shit.

The Chief says: So, what. If he's so good, he'll move on. He'll do something else. Eventually. Work his way up. Go to college. Work for Rocketdyne. Buy a big house in the oasis. American dream. Right, boss?

Douglas says: You know it don't work like that.

The Chief says: He's not your problem, boss.

Douglas says: Yeah, I know.

It's four miles to the border check point. Douglas is wired. He is both drunk and high. His temples are tingling. His eyes aren't blinking. Blink, motherfucker, he says to himself. Blink.

The stereo is turned up loud. Douglas turns it up even more. The speakers start to crack. It's still American rock and roll. Douglas shakes his head and slaps his face to clear his thoughts, to get ready to perform for the border agents. A song comes on that Douglas knows. He sings along. He gets the words wrong. He's surprisingly self-conscious. The Chief seems to know the correct words, but he doesn't make a big deal out of it. Douglas appreciates this.

Douglas takes out a travel-sized mouthwash and takes a swig of it. He passes it to the Chief, who does the same. Both men swish the mouthwash around and then gargle. Douglas spits his out the window. The Chief follows suit. Douglas then fishes the empty cocaine vial out of his pocket and tosses it out the window as well. He does the same with the beer cans, one after another. As they go, some of them catch the wind and whap against the side of the cargo container.

The song they were singing along to ends. Douglas sees something from his side mirror. Headlights. The headlights are closing

in on them.

Douglas says: Fuck is that?

The Chief turns his head to look out the rearview mirror. Douglas sticks his head out the window a little bit and turns to look out back. A bright spotlight turns on and shines into his eyes.

The Chiefs says: Federales.

A federal police pickup truck is behind them. It flashes its lightbar, red and blue and white. The brightness cuts through the dark. Douglas squints and bangs a fist on the dashboard.

Douglas says: Fucking shit.

The Chief says: It's fine. Stay cool, boss.

The Chief points to the cargo and makes a shush gesture. Douglas quiets down. He listens. The noise has stopped. Behind them, the police instruct them to pull over. The Chief downshifts the tractor trailer, going backwards through the gears. They slow and come to a stop on the dirt shoulder. Then the police pickup pulls in front of them.

The Chief says: I'll deal with this.

The Chief holds his hand out to Douglas. Douglas hands the chief a small roll of hundred dollar bills. The Chief looks disappointed, but Douglas doesn't give him any more. The Chief puts the money in his pocket just as one officer comes to his window. Another officer stands underneath Douglas's window. This one is holding a shotgun.

In Spanish, the first officer says: *What's in the cargo?*

The Chief says: Tomates.

The officer says: *Tomatoes? Really? That's an extravagant transport for tomatoes.*

The Chief says: *They're special. Artisanal.*

The officer says: *What?*

The Chief says: *Special. They are special tomatoes.*

The officer with the shotgun starts to walk over to the cargo container. He taps the shotgun against the container wall.

The second officer says: *Jefe, There's something strange about this cargo.*

The officer with the shotgun waits for a response. Douglas smiles at him and tries to act as if he is slightly bored by the process. He eyes the container through his mirror. He listens. The hum of the machinery rumbles on, but the coolies stay quiet. It's soundproof, he tells himself. It's soundproof. But Douglas hears something. He thinks

he hears something. A voice. A knock. A breath. Breathing. Breathing. Then nothing.

Douglas reaches behind his back, feeling the handle of his revolver. He feels a coldness. The coldness starts in his arms and moves into his middle. Douglas has only rarely fired his gun, and never at a living thing. The Chief puts a hand on Douglas's elbow. Douglas looks at the Chief. The Chief shakes his head.

The officer under the Chief's window says: *You think we need to see your tomatoes?*

This is an invitation for a bribe.

The Chief says: *You're welcome to. But why waste time?*

The officer says: *True. It's been a long night. My partner has been itching to get home to his new wife.*

The Chief laughs. The officer under the Chief's window laughs. The officer with the shotgun does not laugh. It's not clear if he hasn't heard the conversation or if he disapproves of them talking about his wife. The officer under the Chief's window gestures for the Chief to get out of the cabin. The Chief opens his door. It swings heavy and then clicks open. The Chief steps out. Douglas waits. The officer with the shotgun keeps a flashlight pointed at Douglas. Douglas tries not to let this annoy him, but it is annoying. He squints and tries to look the officer in the face. He knows this is dumb. The officer isn't going to want to be seen by Douglas, to be recognizable by him. But Douglas is drawn to the illumination, the other man's face framed by the police truck's spotlights like a halo. I don't know this man, thinks Douglas. He could kill me. He could help me. And I don't know him. And I never will.

They get to the border. The American border guards do not detain the tractor trailer. Douglas talks to a customs officer, who is looking over their paperwork.

The customs officer says: California, huh? So how 'bout them Dodgers?

Douglas says: Shit. Kershaw's a boss, am I right?

The officer says: More like a choke artist.

Douglas laughs. The officer waves at the Chief to get rolling.

The Chief keeps his eyes straight ahead. He drives the tractor trailer off the scales and through the inspection corridor and back onto the highway. From the cargo comes the steady whirl and hum of the H-VAC equipment. They drive for the next two hours. Douglas is

anxious. Douglas's head hurts. Douglas does not feel sleepy again. He tells himself not to worry. He tells himself it's the cocaine. He sits and watches as the sun rises to his right. Long, orange rays stretch across the desert sky and backlight the shadows of the jagged shiprock. As he watches, Douglas thinks he'll have a cup of hot coffee when he gets to Los Lunas. He'll read the morning paper, and maybe there'll be a dog there. He'll pet the dog. He'll pour an extra cup for Yiming, and the two will sit and chat about world events, a friendly argument over the sovereignty of Taiwan. He rolls his window down. The cold comes in. He holds his hands to his mouth and breathes into them, warming them.

When they arrive in Los Lunas, there's no one there to greet them. Douglas gets out of the cabin and unlocks the gates. He stays out of the tractor trailer and waves to the Chief to drive in. The Chief pulls the truck through the gates and forward past the cargo bay. He backs the truck into a delivery door. Douglas stands up on the bay. He doesn't bother to guide the Chief. The Chief doesn't seem to need it. Douglas opens the container. The Chief uses a forklift to take the tomato pallets out. He does this one pallet out at a time. Each pallet has 15 rows of packaged tomatoes stacked on top of it. The tomatoes look perfect. They are red and round. They look like they'd be delicious to bite into.

Douglas watches as the Chief works to unload the pallets. The Chief takes each pallet into the storage area. He arranges them against a wall. As he watches the Chief, the anxious feeling continues to bother Douglas. The container is too quiet. He tells himself it's supposed to be quiet. That's the whole point. But wouldn't there be some noise, something? Knocking, shouting, something? But except for the H-VAC, there is nothing. Douglas bangs his fist on the side of the forklift.

Douglas says: Hurry it up. We gotta get this shit open.

The Chief says: Something wrong, boss?

Douglas says: Yeah. Just hurry the fuck up. Come on.

The Chief works faster. He unloads the pallets without arranging them. Douglas goes into the shipping container. The hatch is slightly ajar. Douglas grabs at its edge but he can't open it. It's still blocked. Douglas shouts through the hatch opening.

Douglas says: You guys okay? Yiming? You okay?

There is no response. The Chief gets the last obstructing pallet out. It's still quiet. Douglas grabs the hatch edge. It catches against the

recessed opening. The Chief jumps off the forklift and comes beside Douglas. Together they drag the hatch up and away. They drop the hatch. It lands crooked, half in the container and half out. Underneath, the coolies are motionless, piled as if they were tossed about like dolls in a toy chest. The coolies are blue, mostly eyes closed, some eyes open and bloodshot. Many of them have their arms positioned over their chests, their hands clasped over their hearts.

The Chief says: Dang, boss. This is bad.

In the pile, Douglas sees Yiming. Yiming looks worse than the other coolies. He is pale blue like the others. But he is also mangled. His face is beaten, his eyes swollen shut, blood streaked across from his mouth and nose, from his ears even.

Douglas says: Fucking shit, Yiming.

Yiming lays still. Douglas squats down next to him. He reaches in and touches Yiming's hand. Yiming's hand moves slightly. His hand opens a bit and closes a bit. Douglas grabs hold of the hand.

Douglas says: Goddamn it. He's not dead. Help me get him out.

The Chief says: No, fuck this guy. Fuck him. This is on him. He was supposed to fix that shit. This is on him, boss.

Douglas says: It's not his fault.

The Chief says: Don't be stupid. Don't make this worse than it already is. Douglas ignores the Chief. He holds on to Yiming's hand and pulls. Yiming groans. He's alive, but barely. Douglas looks into Yiming's broken face. Yiming whispers, *Wo yao wei jah. Wo yao wei jah. Bang mang wo. Bang mang. I want to go home. I want to go home. Help me. Help.*

The 2018 Alicia Cass Personal Essay Contest
First Place Award Winning Essay

Fighting Battles

by Emily La

Who are you? What do you want to become in life? How will you get there? These are the questions many people ask me when they see me calmly struggling through life. Each day is a different day, just like a flower sprouting for the very first time. Every battle I am fighting deals with determination, perseverance, and strength. I face my problems head on. I win some, and I lose some. However, I learn that is just part of life; we are meant to make mistakes and don't have to succeed the first try. I keep trying and trying because I am not the person who gives up easily. I fight my battles like I'm fighting for my life. I live to learn and strive for success.

I love to write even though I am not very good at it, to be honest, but I can develop a decent paper. I can go on and on expressing my thoughts. People say actions speak louder than words, but for me, I feel as if words on paper speak louder. Through my personal experiences, I learn to put my words on paper in order to express what I am really trying to say. It's not easy for me to speak what I want to say out loud. Sometimes I feel some things shouldn't be said. However, why not write about it?

There are times when I just don't know what to do as I battle my way through life. Everyone has struggles, but what matters is how we get through them and do we try to find a solution to ease our struggles.

When I was a kid, I went through a dramatic change. It was one of my major battles I had faced. I learned what was behind fake smiles and fake laughs. My family wasn't happy. I lost a part of me the day when my parents fought; they would fight a lot, but I just saw it as a "kiss and make up." Although this time was different, I blamed myself for days, and I started making unwise decisions.

Soon I found myself writing. I had so many questions. Why? What did I do? How did it get this way? What can I do to change it? The answers that passed through my mind found no solution. I didn't know why. I didn't do anything. I didn't know how it got that way, and I certainly couldn't change what was done. I just sat on my bed in tears.

After that day, I wanted to find a way to talk about what happened. I wrote down in a journal some of the feelings that were built up inside me. I expressed how I felt in detail, describing my emotions, but not specifically what was going on. You can say that I was still in denial to what happened, just reliving the day in my mind. I felt fear, shame, and guilt. However, in reality, it was just me putting negative thoughts in my head.

As I got older, I grew out of that state of mind. I looked for help from a therapist. He made me see that I can't always determine what happens; the fact that my family fell apart wasn't because of me. I couldn't control the minds of my family. My family was already broken, but I just didn't know it because I was too young to understand what was going on. I talked to my mom, and she explained to me the times she would have to deal with violence, and I watched tears roll down her face. She made me see the other side of people close to me and how they affected our family. I didn't know this about my dad; I didn't know my mom was in so much pain. She was looking for a way out. We all somehow found a way out.

I kept people who I cared about close to me, and wrote down my feelings on paper. When I can't find a way to express how I feel, I write it down. If no one is there to listen to me, I'll write it down. I transformed my experiences to better myself mentally and physically.

I think about the morality of my actions, the people around me, the life I'm living and providing for. I think of unselfish ways to be a strong person just like my mom. She helped me grow. Now, I am ambitious, determined, full of perseverance, and motivated. Those around me help me achieve my goals, as I work to be a better person. My writing expresses and demonstrates the learning that grows within me. The more I write, the more it helps me think clearer. I see life as a long drive toward brighter better days. Fighting battles day by day and finding peace in my past.

Alicia Cass started college by taking English 105 her freshman year. During her educational journey at LBCC and as a USC transfer student, she discovered the power of writing to understand herself, her family, and her community. She learned that she could inspire others with her story of transformation from being in the foster care system, a high school dropout, homeless teenage mother, and gang member, to Long Beach City College student and USC graduate. A social worker and founder of the **Metamorphosis Experience**, Alicia is the author of the memoir *Metamorphosis: The Butterfly Experience* and a motivational speaker for women, girls, and youth who are at risk of exposure to violence-related trauma stemming from gangs, sexual assault, physical abuse, and domestic violence.

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