

SAGA

Literary Journal

Volume Nine



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Foreword

To winning 'Best Club' and earning grants, to successfully publishing one of the longest volumes of *SAGA* to date, The English Majors and Minors Club has had a great success this year.

As with every volume of *SAGA* it is our hope that we evoke passion and a fiery desire to change the world with the help of writing, artistry, and reading. With our words and our stories, we can create a world where those without a voice speak louder than those attempting to silence them.

I'd like to extend my deepest gratitude to our editors and some of the most incredible group of club members one could only hope for. A special thanks to Chloe and Kennedy because without any of you, the club and consequently *SAGA*, would not have been able to thrive as it did.

In this, the ninth edition of *SAGA*, are some of the most incredible works of poetry, fiction, and art that students of Long Beach City College and the community have to offer.

Reader, please enjoy.

Areli Chavez

Editor-in-Chief and President
English Majors and Minors Club, 2023-2024

Providence

By Ron Riley

“Heads or tails?” Javier said. Then picked up another rock for his sling shot.

“I don’t want to play anymore.”

“Come-on Carlos. Heads or tails?”

“Leave the poor dog alone Javier.”

“Just one more time.”

Carlos turned to walk away. Then stopped. “I’m taking the dog with me”

“No, you’re not.”

“Then I’m telling my mom what you’re doing,” Carlos said.

“If you win, you take the dog,” Javier said, and flipped the coin, hiding the result.

“Ok. Heads.”

“You win. Take the stinking dog.”

Carlos ran to the fence and un-tied the dog. It’s hind quarter cut below the hip. The thick white coat; wet, sticky and red, down to it’s paw. The dog immediately limped away on three legs, trying to escape. Carlos gave chase.

Javier skipped home, satisfied that fate had played a role in the dog’s life. If not the sling shot, some other harm would have come to it. Providence happens this way. It wasn’t for us to question.

Mother had lunch waiting. “Did you put the tools away like your father asked?” she said. “I will. After lunch Mom,” and he sat down at the kitchen table to eat his sandwich. Toasted bread, thin slices of pork and pickled cucumber, his favorite. He smiled at his mother.

“Mom? What’s the most important thing you’ve ever lost?” he asked.

“Her virginity,” a deep voice said.

“Dad?” Javier said, standing up quickly, hoping to make it to his room.

“Where are you going young man?” his father said as he entered the kitchen. “You’ve barely touched your sandwich.”

“May I take it with me?” Javier squeaked. His head down.

“I don’t know. Do you think you’ve earned it?” His father said.

Javier realized what his father meant. “I was going to put the tools away after lunch Dad. Honest.”

His father reached into his pocket and pulled out a quarter. “Call it,” he said.

“It’s a Different World”

By Samuel Pflugrath

Sometimes, after work but before heading home, I like to spend an hour or two hanging out at the park: just sitting on a bench and watching people go about their lives. There’ll be children playing on the playground equipment under the moon and the stars and the fluorescent fairy- lights strung overhead, and couples eating romantic little picnic lunches out on the cool, mist-dampened gravel, and sweat-drenched joggers going out for their late pre-morning runs. It really is a wonderful time and place to be if you just want a calm, quiet moment to yourself, away from the nightly hustle and bustle of the modern world.

On every streetlamp in the park there’s a digital readout that shows a countdown to sunrise; and it also starts playing a warning at thirty minutes before, which is when the park officially closes to the public for the night. Sometimes I wonder just how many heat-deaths (and, more importantly, lawsuits resulting from heat-deaths) it took before the city finally decided to install and consistently maintain them. I don’t even need to bother looking it up to know that it must’ve been more than just one.

What I do know is that there’s an old expression, from about a century or two ago, that says “sunlight is the best disinfectant.” It is quite correct: for, as those sirens start to blare and the first refracted rays of sunlight bare down upon us from the east, the park is quickly disinfected of all us living human beings as we hurriedly make our many ways back to whatever sorts of shelter we may have.

I myself make it back to my apartment just as the outdoor temperature reaches 45 Celsius, which is about average for around here in the winter. Without looking back (lest I be turned to a pillar of ash), I lock the door behind me and shed what little clothing I’m still required to wear when out in public. Then I close the blinds and crawl into bed atop the blankets; so that I, like the rest of the world in these dark and desperate nights, can sleep all through the day and dream of our species’ diurnal past.



By Sam Villa

Concrete Flesh

By Robert Almaraz

Houses we went to for backyard shows are gone.
Cops raided them one last time, leaving
empty concrete lots with grass growing
in between the cracks. Barren parking lots we cut
through to downtown are vacant apartments everyone
sleeps in front of. All those unnamed liquor stores
that never checked our IDs when we got tall cans
and Mike bought his packs of American Spirits
are all 7 Elevens and boujee looking coffee houses
that gets closed down every month.

Cherry Beach is still the same with slimy rocks
and waves that crash hard against them. Those same
waves that crashed as Mike smoked his American Spirits
while you and I slowly sipped Pacifico tall cans.
You'd blast Love Songs for the Apocalypse
through scratchy phone speakers over the waves.
Johnny Hobo's voice, almost overpowered
Mike's, as they both ranted and yelled about the same politics.

Mike's not here anymore, and I didn't go
to his funeral. I wasn't invited. His girlfriend
didn't know I existed, but she told me
at a party where we met, how he stopped smoking.
You told me he died
through a Facebook post a month after.
The shift in our relationship happened
without city planning or warning signs ahead.

We try talking about it, but the dying conversations
between you and me make Mike's ghost more present.

I am a stranger in my hometown
as I move through it
without you.

Mizzle, My Muse

By Emma Boucher

When the rain is deep enough to slice bone,
I feel otherworldly.

The realms I crossed were once tumultuous,
but now they are at peace with the rain, as I am,
trickling into grooves in tin roof tiles,
settling like a breath exhaled.

The calming cadence carries—
through ticking time,
the pad of a cat's paws on the path home,
mellowing the mind's momentary madness—
and I savor this little life of mine
as it drips with the dew of dying gods.

Even as the rush quickens and the sky gapes,
pushing invisible fingers into an open wound
to make the clouds bleed,
I close my eyes and all I can think is
how alive I feel right now,
and how perfect a moment I have all to myself.

Mourning Coat

By Treacy Colbert

People don't dress their daughters in matching dresses the way they did when I was a kid. Maybe that's a good thing. I loved the matching dresses my grandmother bought for my sister and me: white piqué covered with a crop of tiny strawberries, a deep-blue shift with a cream-colored collar, a yellow organdy party frock with a skirt that puffed out like a bell.

Those dresses were reserved for Sunday Mass — Monday through Friday we wore the green-and-gray plaid Christ the King uniform jumper and disappointing, dun-colored socks. Mary and I squirmed in the pews on Sunday, me snorting and hiccupping when Mary pointed to the word "bosom" in the missal. She cracked the merest smile, but I earned my mother's glare for my irreverence and inattention.

Mary was the pretty one, the nice one. She hated matching dresses. She never said so, but I could feel that she didn't want to be like me, nearly three years younger, pesky, needy. If I came downstairs wearing a dress to match hers she'd roll her eyes, go back upstairs and put on a different one. Even at 10 or 11, Mary wanted to display her own style. She didn't want her dress or her hair or her shoes — anything for that matter — to look like me.

I would cry.

"Don't be a crybaby," she said, waving her hand to dismiss me.

"Why won't Mary wear her blue dress too?" I'd entreat my mother.

"Never mind," my mother would say. "You both look very nice."

Mary was the firstborn, and she and my mother were more alike. Throughout their lives, they wore stylish clothes like a type of armor, as if that could protect them somehow, as if the right accessories were some kind of shield against the sorrows that might lie ahead.

Mary was perennially fashionable. I look at a photo of her at what must have been an over-the-top New York wedding in the 80s. She's wearing an enormous white picture hat and a flapper-style dress with lace sleeves, standing by a wall with flocked gold wallpaper. Even though she's furtively puffing on a cigarette, she looks elegant and gorgeous.

When I see the photos of Mary as maid of honor at my first wedding, I hear the almost-shocked questions from my soon-to-be husband's friends who had never met her.

“That’s your sister?” I can also hear the unspoken, “Wow, you don’t look anything alike” and the barely suppressed wolf whistles.

Actually, we did. Anyone who looked closely could see that we were sisters. The same blonde hair, blue eyes, freckles. She outshined the bride in her bright blue dress, perfect makeup and gold jewelry, but it was OK. She wasn’t trying to upstage me any more than the sun competes with the moon — she was just a brighter presence, that’s all. And besides, I was used to falling short when it came to our appearance.

I had made an effort for my wedding day, with a flowered dress and a bit of lipstick.

Mary had offered to shop for wedding dresses with me months earlier.

“No, thanks. I’m going to wear the Alfred Nipon dress I bought to wear to Carol’s wedding. I only wore it that once and it cost a fortune. It’s fine.”

“Are you sure you don’t want a long white dress?”

“No. I don’t want to parade around in anything that looks like a bedspread.”

Mary sighed. “OK. But I think you might regret it later.”

The regret that would nearly crush me later had nothing to do with a missed opportunity for a fancy wedding dress.

There’s another photo of Mary taken at her Manhattan office when her coworkers surprised her with birthday cake and a spray of exotic flowers. It was to be her last birthday on earth, but no one knew it then of course. Her hands are clasped in front of her, nails perfectly manicured, a smile of delight on her face. No frizz or tangles in the blonde hair that brushes her shoulders. She’s wearing an emerald and teal silk blouse, a slim black skirt, and shoes that probably cost way more than she could afford, but she thought credit card debt was worth it as long as she looked just so. Even after all these years I can’t look at these photos without a certain stunned disbelief that she’s not here.

Six weeks after she was suddenly short of breath coming up the stairs at the 59th Street subway station, I was trembling in the vestibule of St. Thomas, holding my mother up, waiting for Mary’s memorial service to begin. There was no treatment then for the malignant fluid in her lungs and with dizzying, shocking speed, she was gone.

I don't think Mary's refusal to sport matching dresses when we were kids made me become a fashion disaster, but by the time I was 13 and Mary almost 16, I had given up any effort to imitate her style or to dress well. We'd grown to be complete opposites and I no longer tried to match her style; in fact, I went overboard in the other, completely slovenly direction. I wore overalls and boys' tennis shoes, and no makeup. I stayed in my room listening to Talking Heads while Mary made the cut, got past the velvet rope and was admitted into Studio 54.

My unruly hair made Mary flounce away from our linoleum kitchen table in disgust.

"God! I can't even sit here with you! Your hair is getting in my food!"

I smirked to try to hide my embarrassment but my face gave me away, crimson.

"Don't worry about it. Hair has protein."

"That's enough," my mother said absently. She was listening to the squawk of WABC all-news radio, the perpetual soundtrack in the kitchen.

"Mary, you haven't finished."

"I don't want any more," said Mary, her tone harsh.

By the time I was in college, I was always broke and thought I was clever and economical to buy pants at the thrift store for a dollar. This was before thrift store shopping was trendy — back then if you bought used clothes it meant you were down and out, a loser. The pants were gray, utilitarian. I loved them.

"They look like something a bus driver would wear," Mary said, shaking her head. I laughed.

"If only you would do something with yourself."

"What do you mean? I am doing something with myself. I'm going to graduate a semester early and get a job in New York."

"No, I mean with your hair. Or your outfits. It's like you're trying to make yourself look ugly."

"I don't care. I don't need to tart myself up for the patriarchy."

I fancied myself an ardent feminist then. Mary made a huffing noise when she spotted my button with the women's symbol encasing a raised fist on the collar of my secondhand pea coat.

"You'll never get a boyfriend wearing that." She pursed her glossy lips and appraised me.

"I have higher goals than getting a boyfriend, Mary."

My tone abrupt, my face burning with sudden anger, I stopped myself from saying something nasty about Mary's boyfriend, Sonny, who I thought was simple.

"Well, good for you. Because you'll never have one."

When Mary, my mother and I were in Paris in 1983, celebrating my mother's 61st birthday, I thought I'd lose my mind waiting for Mary as she scoured the elegant Parisian shops in the Marais and on the Grands Boulevards. She took forever deciding on just the right coat, dress, and shoes.

In one posh shop, as Mary held up a calf-colored pair of short boots in one hand and bright blue stilettos in the other, the madame who owned the boutique eyed her with greed and me with suspicion. Both pairs of shoes cost more than I'd made in the last month.

"I can't afford them both."

"Oh my God, Mary. Just get one of them and let's go!"

My mother interjected. "Get both of them — life is short!"

Madame placed both pairs of shoes in a sleek bag emblazoned with "Carel" and gave my cheap, scuffed shoes a final disparaging look and sniff.

In another shop on la rue de Varenne, Mary bought a stunning black coat of soft brushed wool that looked like something a film noir star from the 1930s would wear. She could carry off the look perfectly. The price tag appalled me, and I clucked my tongue impatiently as Mary wavered, credit card in hand.

Later that day I felt ashamed of myself for being so waspish. After all, Mary had waited patiently while I'd perused the booksellers' stalls along the Seine.

When we were in our twenties Mary and I saw each other only a couple of times a year when I'd visit my mother. I'd gone thousands of miles from home to California but Mary stayed in New York, near our mother. They loved shopping together. There were occasional long-distance phone calls and letters — that quaint tradition — Mary's written in elegant, curling script that matched her stylish persona. "Hi!!!" she would write, always with multiple exclamation marks, filling me in on what she and my mother were doing. "*Mom and I saw 'La Cage aux Folles' last week at the Palace Theater. We laughed so much!! Well, I hope you're doing fine.*"

"I was on the crosstown bus today and guess what?? A woman stopped me as I was getting off and asked me where I got my coat!!! It was so much fun to tell her I got it in Paris!!"

Mary and I never closed our phone calls or letters with “I love you,” or “I miss you.” The ache of these absent expressions burdens me now. I rationalized that I didn’t have to think about the infrequency of our visits at the time — I knew we’d see each other soon enough. I never contemplated whether we were close back then or thought about whether we loved each other. I always assumed there would be more time, that maybe we’d live near each other one day. Maybe the day would come when we both had kids, and the cousins could play together. I pictured girls hosting imaginary tea parties with China cups of sugar water like Mary and I used to, or leaping between twin beds. The cousins would have that special brand of friendship, unmarred by sibling rivalry or vying for attention or love.

I must have believed, somehow, that we’d always have that sisterly mix of affection and irritation. I couldn’t have known our time would run out, that my mother’s cheerful warning in Paris about life’s brevity carried such a heavy truth.

After Mary died, I cleared out her small apartment in Astoria by myself. My mother was too shattered and I didn’t want to ask any of Mary’s friends to help. Mary called it her illegal apartment, because it was the top floor of a house and had probably been the attic that wouldn’t be permitted to be a residence. It was cramped, but the rooftop had a glorious view of the Triborough Bridge.

I filled dozens of black Hefty bags with her bright, tailored clothes that still had the faint scent of her favorite Chanel perfume. A Christmas sweater, a cobalt-blue hat, a pleated summer dress in soft pink, a fur-lined pair of red leather gloves, high heels, mules and sandals — I folded all the clothes neatly and placed the accessories carefully in the bags, treating them in that moment like valuable belongings. I separated her jewelry into small plastic bags, pearl drop earrings, a ring with her aquamarine birthstone, a sapphire pendant that I’d mail later to her closest friends. I moved numbly, feeling as if I were under water, walking down the narrow staircase with the bags and boxes and loading them in the car for the drive later to the Salvation Army in Woodside.

On one of the trips down the stairs, I passed Mary’s landlady on the landing. Her name was Poppy, and she spoke little English. She stood there in a yellow housedress and reached for my hand. I put down the Hefty bags. Poppy’s brow was creased, and she shook her head.

“I sorry. I so sorry. She was a nice girl.”

“Thank you. Yes, she was.” My voice was thick.

I couldn’t say anything more and continued my trips to the car. Mary used to complain about how nosy Poppy was. “Every time I come in, she jumps out like a jack-in-the-box. She’s always watching me,” Mary complained more than once. Now Poppy was eyeing me as I erased the traces of Mary’s life.

I wanted to go through Mary’s things by myself because I thought I’d be sobbing in hysterics, and I didn’t want to reveal that much emotion around anyone. But no tears fell. It was as if I inhabited some dark place that was beyond tears. When I finished emptying her drawers and closets, and cleared out the cabinets, I cleaned the whole apartment carefully. I wiped out every cupboard and scrubbed the tiny kitchen where Mary had concocted impossibly complex desserts — touching a match to Bananas Foster or cherries jubilee while we laughed and drank too much cheap wine. I cleared the bathroom of her makeup and vacuumed the living room rug. I wanted to leave the place spotless. I wanted to believe Mary’s spirit might come back for one last look before moving on to the next realm.

I didn’t cry much at all after Mary’s death, but I remember feeling ill and anxious for nearly two years. I still expected to pluck a letter from her from the mailbox or to hear her voice on the phone. I preoccupied myself with trying to console my mother, who I feared would die of grief, and then I would have lost both of them. Even now, whenever I think or talk about my sister, I start to shake.

Later I was sorry I had gotten rid of so many of Mary’s things in that early haze of grief. But I kept the black coat Mary bought on that Paris trip for years. Maybe I’ll live somewhere cold sometime when I can use it, I thought. After decades of moving it from place to place with me I finally let the black coat go. It’s just hoarding to hold onto it any longer, I told myself. I couldn’t wear the black coat, any more than I could make up for the regret that tinged my every recollection of Mary. Too late, I understood that her love of fashion wasn’t self-indulgence. What I derided as vanity was just happiness and exuberance that comes with being young and pretty. She’d earned her extravagance in advance because her time to be alive was measured with such a cruel economy.

I posted a photo of the coat on BuyNothing.com, and wrote a careful description that it was a Paris original, with dolman sleeves and a rakish sash over one shoulder. I added that it belonged to my late sister.

I never saw the woman who picked it up from my porch, but she left me a note saying that she loved it, and that she would honor my sister by wearing it. The black coat was the last tangible evidence of Mary's fashionableness, but I kept two other remnants of her core self, the deep part of her made of kindness and faith.

The hospital chaplain gave Mary a one-decade rosary made of wood with a simple cross. "She said nothing bad can happen to me as long as I have this."

I took her hand, unable to speak. We were in Mary's hospital room in NYU Medical Center on the seventh floor. If Mary was afraid, she didn't say so.

I also have the last birthday card Mary gave me, a month before she died. She must have asked one of her friends to buy the card for her, because when I visited her at the hospital on my birthday, she handed me the card.

"I'm sorry I don't have a present," she said.

The card read, "For a special sister," and in it she had written, "*I would be lucky to have you as a friend. But to also have you as my sister, well, I really hit the jackpot!*"

Years later, I was sifting through boxes in the attic and came across that card again. I didn't deserve those words then, and the knowledge that I had missed every chance to earn them made my chest hurt so much that I had to stop my attic cleanup, a task I didn't resume for months. Still bereft, I keep the card tucked away in a box that I never dare to open, as if it will detonate.

Today my sartorial choices are slightly better than one-dollar thrift shop bus driver pants, but not much. I can't get Mary's fashion advice now but still, even so, years and years after she's been gone, I want to ask, "What should I wear?"

##

To bury a curious girl

By Amirah Al Wassif

When I was younger,
I stood on a mountain of pillows
With a brave decision to swallow a whole finger. My father insulted
me because I am curious.
All his life he wished to have a non-trouble baby whatever girl or boy.
My forefathers preferred to bury baby girls rather than put them
In carriages and sing them a lullaby.
I was born with a great motivation to scratch the sky upon my shoulders,
crazy monkeys and heavy weights, I used to bake my grief each night
And through the daylight, while they're trying to sell me,
I spend my time calculating the distance between my gender and my
awaited funeral.
When I took my first steps, my tribe circled around me like bees.
They approached figuring out that I have thighs and breasts. They
tucked me in the obedience pocket, they dwelled me in an iron cage.
They ate my wings, my ears. When I was younger,
I crawled towards my father's shoulders, I whispered, "how far does
the world extend?"
He frowned and replied "just, look at the space between your legs."

Hope

By Gabriela Galindo

Empty bellies, sun stroked faces
begging to be seen, pleading you
not to look away
Nothing lives here-not right now
only a dusty dirty trio
little faces peeking out from
under unkempt greasy locks
bare feet touching the earth
Wondering, “Where are the shoes?”

Endless wondrous, desolate skies
coated in black and white, sepia sadness
lush pregnant tree branches
like low hanging fruit
gently caressing this thirsty background
there is no abundance here—only the
never ending hunger

Everything seems opaque
then the slight smile appears
the hope that maybe kindness
will take physical form in
the likeness of a stranger
tattered clothes don't matter anymore
soon there'll be extravagant gowns
to cover these aching limbs
And plenty of milk and honey
to soothe the sting of lack.

Samothrace 3.5

By Forrest Wilson III

The tension in the room crackled, fueled by how stunning Joan undeniably was. Perpetually off the grid and inaccessible, her mystique seemed fine tuned to make the world and the internet go into a frenzy. She was dressed in all black; a simple short-sleeved shirt, dress pants, and Chuck Taylors, with a full set of coiled dreadlocks hanging casually on her shoulders. Effortless grace glowed from beneath her golden-brown skin. That was before one saw her signature set of teeth.

A diamond dust, trillion cut, grill was set on Joan's bottom teeth, the only thing that could be considered ornate or flashy on her. The slightly sharper cut canines and incisors teased at a savage inner self that knew the power of aesthetics.

She looked like the center of the world. Because of this, Clive Oakley knew the moment was now.

"Look Joan, nobody can deny that tonight was something special. Giving our viewers at home the chance to watch this exclusive interview, live, was an incredible decision." Clive casually strolled through the workshop; its vaulted ceiling, spacious main room, and lighting was designed just right to emphasize the installations scattered across the space without washing them out on camera.

Wearing a hungry, sharp grin, Clive knew it was time to get this show on the road. He needed Joan to unveil the centerpiece to her latest live exhibition *Samothrace 3.5*, despite how distracting the surroundings were or how compelling he knew the interview already was.

He stopped at a surrealist painting Joan had placed on the wall, admiring its vivid colors and morphing forms. He took it off the wall, feeling its weight in his hands. Smirking to himself, Clive projected his voice over his shoulder just enough for the microphones to pick up his tone.

"Art is all about progression and growth. Our audiences depend on that. I know when I go back to where I grew up and I see those kids, I can't help but think about what we restrict from their growth when we are not accessible to them."

He slowly placed the painting back on the wall. He walked over to the installation next to it, a pile of money bags on a stylized plinth. All the bags were sewn with dollar bills, with the faces on the bills distorted and swapped with famous CEOs who rose to prominence in the last decade. He grabbed one and bounced it around in his hand before

-tossing it across the room to Joan. She caught it in her hands, giving Clive a stare as still as her stance. She tossed it back on top of the pile.

“If we are getting into the need for philanthropy Clive, we all already know you got me beat there,” Joans teeth glinted in the light.

“So, what’s your point?”

A small crowd of 20 to 30 VIPs, sitting behind a stylized barricade designed by Joan – which itself was being bid on via text while the interview occurred – all nodded in agreement as they watched with rapt attention. Most of Clive’s endeavors were only possible because of his unflinching commitment to giving back, and the relationships he established that way. That was at least one thing the public could agree on about him, that he was the posterchild for the elite reaching back to help those less fortunate, especially through the arts. Half of the VIPs there for Joan’s art were a product of Clive’s networking and savvy.

“My point is that there are theories abound about what all this,” he waved his hand around as he circled the room, the smirk on his face now in his voice, “is about. Some people think you might be doing things up a bit to make up for a lack of finish.”

He turned around to look at her as the comment sank in, relishing it like a little boy fumbling with a lighter over a pile of leaves. Or worse, a little boy with a magnifying glass and a position angled toward a greater sun.

“Many argue you might have lost the pulse. You might have turned your back on your Avant Garde, subversive roots. You have to deliver at some point because we owe it to these youngsters watching.”

He pointed to the camera’s rolling, always present in the periphery as they captured this event.

“There’s less of an excuse now, because now you play with big money. Shit, you’re starting to look like me these days!” Clive said, raising his hands in faux incredulousness as the crowd laughed.

“Sweetheart, the world is waiting. What is this new centerpiece that you have been hinting at? Or is all this spectacle just here for you to taunt. Is this just a put on? Do you care?”

The crowd shuffled restlessly in their seats.

Clive knew this provocation would pay dividends in the long run. Straddling the tightrope of giving the people what they want required a balance of prodding and catharsis. Keeps things in check and it sells. Can’t allow artists like this to run the place, that’s his job.

Joan’s only reply was a soft chuckle and a roll of the eyes.

“It’s hilarious that you talk about put on’s Clive, seeing as you love bankrolling them so much.”

Cringe faced hisses and laughter spilled out of the crowd. Defiance blazed on her face, somewhere between allure and danger. Clive laughed with the crowd, its volume covering the hit to his pride. For reasons he couldn’t understand, the sting of the comment made his drive to get to the point of this hungrier.

“Somebody must fund the future. Why not celebrate in the process?” he replied. He then did a little twirl on the ball of his feet, arms outstretched. The crowd beamed.

Even Joan couldn’t deny he had a charm about him. Still, her smile carried a grave, somber understanding.

“Ah, Clive. We must stop meeting like this. Something might catch fire one day.”

He ignored her weird phrasing, used to these little games.

“You know I couldn’t turn down such an elegant invitation. In PERSON at that. This is special.”

He licked his lips as the cameras kept rolling. Smug and immobile, Joan’s fangs shimmered.

“For once you and me can agree on something.”

Genuine laughter and nods from the audience. Relief rippled through the room.

“Let’s dance then Mr. Oakley.”

The crowd gasped as Joan rushed to Clive with her right hand out, beckoning for a dance. With her whiskey in her left hand, she grabbed his arm before he had a chance to protest. Delicate and swift, she put him in a position to lead and slid her cup to his lips as they started to slowly dance back and forth.

He sipped, stared, and danced. He knew what she was doing. Just their little public tete a tete alone would have paid for the whole night. The party before this was already legendary just given who and what it attracted at the entrance. The protests and noisy flashes of paparazzi. The ostentatious red carpet. The extravagant parade turned California style Met Gala on steroids. The intimate and almost mystical feel of the interview. The board of Alexandria and the court of —

—public opinion would all be appeased by the spectacle, for a time.

So, he played along.

“You can’t fault me for wanting to support art. Any patron worth their salt would pay however pretty the penny for a chance to check out Joan’s newest work. Plus, we have such a good relationship thus far don’t we Joan?”

He took another sip from her cup a little bit aggressively, but not enough for the cameras to catch. Their eyes never lost contact.

“Look the contracts are sound and business booms, but let’s not get into any relationship vocab here. Save that for one of your assistants or something.” She said, the spite in her smile sugary and poisonous.

There it is. That signature Joan contempt. He let it slide even though it made the crowd visibly nervous and uncomfortable.

“And here we are! See? Capitalism does some good sometimes right?” he joked, playing up his friendliness loud enough for the cameras to catch this time. His whiskey breath was becoming punchier as he sipped more from her cup, not missing a beat in their waltz. Joan said nothing.

The handholding was now grating his nerves. He swallowed his frustration and channeled it into a whisper, clutching her closer just a bit more forcefully as he spoke in her ear.

“I’ve done a lot to make sure artists like you thrive, Joan. That includes helping all the kids that look up to me and you. Enough with the games. Whatever feelings you have about me, fine. But I’m a hero. These people love me. And I know you want to be influential. You already are! So what’s the hold up?”

She said nothing.

“I guess I have to light a fire under your ass huh?” he whispered, as he backed away enough for her to see his face. *She has forgotten who the boss is here.*

Joans eyes widened.

Letting him lead her under his arm, she spun away from him gracefully, leaving her cup on the ledge of a platform behind her that was holding up a mini version of one of her most famous pieces, Samothrace 3.0. It was a perfect marble replica of the famous Nike of Samothrace, just with some of Joans signature additions. She faced the statue with her back turned to Clive. A sigh escaped her mouth.

“Look Clive I get it. The truth is, you’re right.”

Finally, we can get somewhere, he thought. He played up his aloof interest.

“Oh, how so?”

“Don’t take my ability to professionally accept what I ethically find deplorable as having rose-colored glasses or anything like that. I’m elusive for safety not aesthetics.”

“Not sure of what you are getting at?” He looked around at the crowd, curious and skeptical.

“Please, enlighten us.”

“It’s obvious in all my work. It’s too much for me, and too much for them. The audience. They are excited by the spectacle. They just want to see the sparks fly. I’m trying to puncture. Trying to break. So, keeping a distance keeps everyone safe and in check.”

“The genius artist trying to protect us from ourselves, the masses. Never took you for a cliché Joan.”

Obnoxious hoots and laughs from the VIP’s again, obviously relishing the invisible drama.

“Why can’t y’all just get the product and I get the peace? Trying to take all this performative, brand aggrandizing, and decadence, and speak to the deeper meaning all this fervor is attempting to make up for can take a toll on those like me. In laymen’s terms, yeah, I’m elitist as fuck.”

More laughter from the crowd. This time less boisterous. Considerably so.

“I hope at some point we all taste ash in our mouth for what we’ve done. Art now lives in a whirlpool of trends and sharks. Everyone just keeps swimming, however badly. Everyone gets devoured in one way or another. The best one can ask for is to become so incredibly rich that you can set up an island faraway enough for you to watch the maelstrom from a distance.”

Joan’s words shook as they were spoken, yet her voice didn’t crack. Her truth could have been felt from miles away, even though she spoke barely above a whisper. Everyone, including Clive, gently leaned in to try to hear her.

“This art is my only true lover. I hate that I help us use it to sedate, when it’s the only thing that makes me feel alive.”

A somber stillness hit the room.

Clive loved it. Not only did vulnerability read well on camera, but here was an opportunity to catch her off guard.

“Wow. That’s incredibly poignant. That’s why your young fans love you so much because you give it to them honestly, and authentically. Down on the ground, what they are going through. I also hear you. I too can relate.”

She turned around to face him, armed with her raised eyebrows and indignant chortle.

“How many islands do you own? Don’t do that.” The few chuckles that did spill out from the VIP’s were strained. “Don’t try to leverage my spirit to cover up your intentions. We all know if I wasn’t so valuable as an artist, I would just be another girl for your little pleasure enclaves.”

The sudden silence was louder than all the laughter.

It was true. As beautiful and charming as he was, his enormous wealth couldn’t simply wave everything away. Even now he stood in an eye-wateringly expensive, tailor-made, light almond and chartreuse Brioni suit. Long-plaited cornrows with multicolored diamonds in them so sharply cut and hexagonal your conscience would wail and shrink if told how much blood was spilled to get those rocks into his hair. Even the natural glow of his dark skin screamed wealth.

“Everyone else may need a stick figure man in a shiny suit, but not me. You’re on their altar, not mine.” Joan said, squinting as she made eye contact with Clive.

He walked up to Joan, each furious step reverberating in the space. He was now inches away from her face.

“Oh yeah? That’s not what this event says.”

Every face in the crowd crumpled, aghast.

All eyes were on Clive now. The face of Alexandria, the biggest gallery on earth. CEO and world-famous musician. Philanthropist. Art patron. Even more infamous womanizer. Open secrets were only ever beneficial for someone like him.

Why can’t Joan just get with the fucking program? Who was she to see all this as nothing compared to her? He thought. Nobody ever spoke to him that way, especially not any female. That arrogant, uncontrollable look of defiance she always gave him. He could do something with that look if she wasn’t so persistent.

He didn’t have to take this from her. Especially when all this wealth these people clamored over was because of him.

Still, he was composed. Plus, the whiskey was really starting to kick in.

“Look its ok, I’m a polarizing figure. I pay the cost. This entire thing? All this spectacle you despise? It’s the culmination of so much work and time. To spearhead the new work of an artist that is helping us all trans—

—end our understandings of the world. To support you, Joan. Your art. Your vision. Yes, Alexandria as a contemporary gallery is fully equipped to support something of this magnitude. Yes, I live good because of it. I have no shame.” He said it louder than he would have liked, but it was fine. He wears the suit, not the other way around.

Is this why she only agreed to this whole party if I alone was the one to do this dumb interview? To pillory me? The hand that feeds everyone? He thought. She was always frustratingly careful with every clause in her contracts. She was smart and powerful.

But not as powerful as she could be if she would just give up the goods to him. She couldn’t be that smart if she turned down what he was presenting her, in public no less. *No. It’s for her own good, and for the good of our fans.*

He couldn’t let her get away with her pithy distractions and mind games.

“So please,” inhaling his scowl and exhaling a TV smile. He still got it. “show us all Samothrace 3.5!”

She stood there, blank faced. The tension in the room sat in everyone’s nerves like embers starving for air. For a moment Joan looked sad, deranged, relieved, and victorious all at once.

She pointed to the right of where Clive Oakley stood. From the outside it looked like a simple, rectangular marble platform. But from where Joan was standing you could see a small set of stairs leading to the top of the platform. At its top was nothing, it was as blank as can be. “It’s right up those stairs.”

Clive turned around. He couldn’t believe he hadn’t noticed the platform before. Slightly bewildered but amused, he looked back at Joan before he walked up the stairs, satisfied with himself. Standing on top of the platform he looked down at Joan a few feet away, impatient.

“Ok where is it?” he said, frustration simmering on his face, “What now?” She was already halfway up the steps before he could finish. Standing in front of him, her gleaming lower teeth flickered as his vision became hazier. “Just sit down like this.”

She sat him down in a cross-legged position, as if meditating unawares of the world around him. He tasted the whiskey on his lips and immediately understood why he suddenly could no longer move. He understood why his vision was starting to get smooth around the edges and fuzzy. A little too fuzzy.

It dawned on him not because of the paralysis, though that was frightening enough. It was the look in Joan's eyes. She glared and smiled directly into him as she slowly backed away down the stairs, playing with a remote in her right hand mischievously like a cat with its yarn. Or like a kid backing away from a trail of oil, lit match in hand.

She had drugged him.

There he sat immobile and terrified. Even in those final seconds he still struggled to reconcile. But he understood. And nothing, nothing, was as hideous as his understanding. *How dare she.*

"Fortunately, most things in this world are not about you."

Joan pressed the button.

The cameras rolled. The crowd held their breath. A spark of blue light jutted from the platform. There was a sudden, crisp flame. The scorch was almost immediate even though the screams were delayed.

"I told you we had to stop meeting like this."

That was the moment Joan's greatest centerpiece, *Samothrace 3.5* was unveiled to the world. The party preceding it was legendary. But that couldn't hold a lighter to its climax. Everyone watched as Joan set her lover free from the grips of commerce. Even if only for a night.

And though everyone who was anyone was there, nobody could quench the flames.

Aeterna

By Emma Boucher

If I thought it possible, I would bake immortality into bread
and crumble the pieces into your stew. Lovingly
poisoned, you'd remain blissfully unaware of the fairies
at work who stretch the hem of your mortal life and defy the light
that dims when death creeps close. Yes, if I thought it
possible, you'd be the first to live forever—easily.

Did you know your nose crinkles when you work, easily
swept in by the therapy of cooking for others? Bread
and pies often possess your weather eye, and I won't pretend it
doesn't sting. Just once, I wish you'd gaze that lovingly
upon me, but nevertheless you impart enough light
to fill this house with the twittering chatter of fairies,

and give rise to love half-buried in the earth. Those fairies
flit through my veins to rendezvous with my soul, and easily
I tie our hands, braid our muscles, and fuse our lips in kisses light
as seafoam. Tenderly we sway, stirred by candlelight, bread
and music, wholly possessing the ghosts of our pasts. Lovingly
I trace your form in the stars, a one-of-one constellation. It

tries my ashes to remain a laughing, breathing heathen; it
taxes me to stay on this singular road, yourself led by fairies
to Eden. So, do I burn what passion cradles me lovingly,
or do I let what is corporeal be consumed too easily?
With cherry wine for blood, body as fresh-baked bread,
you are forbidden to shrink from the call of resurrecting light.

In our effervescent affection, I gather the hallowed light
we foster between us and, playing on my hands, it
circles a golden ring around my finger. I will bread
the time we have left with hope and the lacy wings of fairies.
Would I sacrifice myself for your undying life so easily?
Yes, darling—but I could never part with you lovingly

Night-Blooming

By Aniyah White

I watched you,

 a trumpet shaped flower

 as you rested in the brown pot placed in the corner of my patio.

I sit curled up with a blanket, remembering

 the mid-summer when I nursed you as a small-seedling,

 no more than 20 centimeters small.

Now as you bathe in the moonlight,

I sit and watch with pride and joy

 as I wait for you to bloom while also realizing that you are no
longer a seedling.

You are now six inches long, an iridescent white moon flower

 whose cone-shape began to unravel in the moonlight.

I watched proudly

 as the moon shined down on you in your final state

 of tenacious heart shaped leaves.



By Sam Villa



By Nicholas Lamb

dress-up day

By Ron Riley

who is she in this candy flavored world
of pinks, yellows and blues
dancing to the beat
of jojo's "boomerang"

energy that makes her want to fly
bouncing
from sofa to table to chair

will she become a robot?
singing everyone's song
doing what's expected

it's hard to say
what this four year old will do
when her brain finds its rhythm
giving her control of a life that
is still not her own

if today is an indication
her checkered Chanel suit meeting
questioning looks from her peers
as she swims in their sea of
princesses and mermaids
rest assured, for now
her song is still her own

She who is free

By Kiana Khalili

The ceiling fan rotated at the same speed as the thoughts in my mind. Like the strings of her hair, they tugged at the strings of our marionettes, they tugged at our heartstrings. Mahsa Amini died in morality police custody today for not wearing her hijab according to the law. It felt as though the world had halted on its axis. The chief of police stated that she had a heart attack at the detention center where she was taken to undergo a “briefing class.” She died shortly after in the hospital, as a result of the coma. It certainly wasn’t the first time a young girl with no prior health conditions was mysteriously found dead after a dispute with the Iranian police, but it was the first time it unleashed rebellious resistance.

#

When the news came, I was sitting on our neighbor, Agha Asghar’s, mahogany piano stool practicing Chopin’s Valse No.17. His mother came in carrying a golden tray of black tea with Saffron rock candy and a plate of dates from her own garden. In Dibaji, if you didn’t grow date or fig trees in your backyard, you’d be as disgraceful as a Persian chandelier without a bulb.

Carrying the heavy tray, Khanum Zahra tripped over an uneven side of the hideously green Persian rug that decorated the wooden floors of her living room, leaving a few drops of tea to stain it. One date made its way to my socked feet. Goosebumps began to dance over the arms hiding beneath the linen of my black school uniform. She’d never trip. Especially not on a priceless rug handmade by the finest rug merchant in all of Iran. That meant that something had happened.

After finishing Chopin with numerous hand cramps I had to suffer through, and thanking Khanum Zahra for her hospitality, I rushed down the stairwell, struggling to read the notifications on my phone.

Upon opening the heavy metal door of the building complex, the aura immediately felt off. Except for the Afghan boy rummaging through the trash, the streets were devoid of life.

The Tehran I knew, despite its fast-paced plethora of life and lunacy, was usually vibrant at these hours. My eyes roamed the streets and alleyways for the blind man on the corner selling corn in cups. Where families and teenagers would habitually cue in front of Pizza Park to eat their unmatched vegetable pizza with ketchup.

There now was a group of pigeons fighting over leftover sunflower seeds chipped by old neighborhood men that would ritualistically perch on their folding stools, and act like godsends, policing the housewives who'd mindlessly stuff their bags with fresh mint, parsley and dried rose petals. The lanterns around which children would hide and seek now looked like lost stars flickering in the quiet embrace of the streets. Shops were closed, their blinds shut down like eyelids. The only sound reverberating through me was the flowing of contaminated water passing by in the ditches alongside the curbs, seeming to protect them like medieval moats. I heard the occasional birdsong but couldn't distinguish between actual bird and intrinsic resonance.

Every ten feet, luscious orange trees spread their roots into the sidewalk, all-knowing and transcending our existence. As a child, I made it a habit of counting the number of trees until I made it home. Eighty-four. Whereas today, there were only fifty-one left.

The atmosphere felt raw and apocalyptic. It was only me on the streets of Dibaji Junubi, passing the blocks of mute buildings that normally didn't seal their lips. The usual air pollution felt inferior to the ponderousness accompanying my every step toward home. Infinitesimally, I felt the urge to smile. I asked myself if this is what freedom might feel like. The lightness in the air compensating for the heaviness in my chest and the vacancy of the streets canceling out the density of cortisol in my arteries, I wondered if this is what children on the other half of the globe call their lives.

#

Haven't taken my eyes off the fans rotations, I heard a fly somewhere next to me. Years ago, my sister was diagnosed with arachnophobia, an intense fear of spiders, so since then, I have been stuck sleeping on the top bunk, never mind my claustrophobia. The only benefit of top-bunking was that our fan was so outrageously loud that it muted the tortuous prayers my father would blast every Fajr before sunrise.

When I heard that Mahsa had died, I felt something shift in my shift in my streets, in my family, and in myself, though I didn't know what exactly yet. All Social Media was shut down, and Iran was officially disconnected from the rest of the world, although I presumed that global media outlets had already spread the news. I wondered what people of other places in the world would think of the news. Had they even blinked twice or felt their heart sting slightly like I felt mine?

Obviously, I hadn't known Mahsa personally. She lived in the Kurdish part of Western Iran and had a life far away from mine. Regardless—

--it had been a daughter of Iran. It was a Persian sister, whether it be this Mahsa or a different one, a Mina, Setareh, Golineh, or Maryam. It could've been mine, too.

On cue, Leila walked through our thin wood door, stepped into our room and looked up to find me still in the same position I'd been in since coming home.

"Azadeh, dinner. Now," she said.

"Be there soon." I answered. "How was your day?"

"I got back two exams. I got 100% in Arabic and 98% in Trigonometry. So, as per usual."

That was the thing about her; she only cared about her academics and had never once asked me how I was doing. I still loved her, though. I have unforgettable memories of us, two inseparable young sisters who always had each others backs. One time, I used my father's favorite Quran to kill a cockroach that had been living in our room for weeks, having forgotten to clean the blood smears before putting it back on his bedside table. He went livid when he noticed, lecturing us on the importance of the Quran, especially this particular one, as it had been gifted to him by one of the Imams at our local mosque. It was her cheeks instead of mine that had felt the consequences of his backhand and my actions. Today, however, she resembled him more than she did the unassuming girl in our framed childhood pictures.

"Nice. Did tutoring with Khanum Roxana help?" I asked.

Not that she needed it. Oppositely, I could use it. The only subject I was interested in was the only one that wasn't taught in school. Over the years, I had cultivated a collection of American feminist literature that my pen pal from Chicago sent me.

"Yes, evidently," she answered.

"Did you-" I whispered.

"Huh? Begu," Leila said.

"Did you hear?" I tried, louder.

"Yes. I did."

"Leila, she died. Mahsa died."

"I know. What a shame to die from a heart attack at such a young age. She was—what—twenty-four—?"

"Twenty-two. Leila. Twenty-two"

"What's two years? Dead is dead."

I suppose she was right. Dead was dead.

"She didn't die from a heart attack," I said.

"Well, that's not the media's perspective," Leila argued.

“Right, so if the media doesn’t cover a story, it means it didn’t happen? If the media has one side, does it mean it’s true? Well, yes, in other countries, but not in Iran, in a country where the government and media are controlled by the same people, the same people who own everything,” I said.

“Azadeh, how do you know what or who killed Mahsa Amini?”

“Do you really think it was a coincidence that she died after being detained by those violent pigs? For apparently not covering her hair properly? I bet there was just a single strand showing.”

“Which ‘violent pigs’ are you referring to?” She asked me, burning holes into me from below.

“Gasht-e-Ershad, Leila, who else? The morality police,” I felt my pulse quicken.

“You mean the honorable men devoted to maintaining our Muslim values and our Persian heritage?” I hated her cynical tone. When she belittled me that way, she could easily be mistaken for our father. It made me wonder if she truly meant what she was saying.

“No, Leila. I am talking about the violent men who slap women in the face, beat them to the grounds with batons and push them into police vans to ‘re-educate’ them on our religious standards as if Allah declared this the only acceptable way of enforcing his norms. They disturb college classes, thereby making education for women inequitable. Why do women who appear in public without religious hijab get sentenced to whipping up to 74 lashes? Why is it that women’s lives are only half as valuable as their male counterparts? I am talking about the government that allows rape within marriage but no consequential divorce. I am referring to our theocratic, sexist, patriarch-”

“Enough, Azi! Come to dinner now. They are waiting. Maman made Kabab, your favorite,” she interrupted me and left our room.

When I joined my parents and three-year-old brother Kian at the table, I was instantaneously met with a beautiful synergy of dill, coriander, and chives evaporating in our dining room. I was also met with my fathers fierce gaze.

“Azi, what took you so long?”

“Sorry, Baba. I was caught up with schoolwork and lost track of time.” I felt Leila’s eyes on me.

#

It was September 16th, her death was still raw on our minds and her blood still fresh on their hands. Mahsa left an unrealizable void when they took her. This morning, the streets of Tehran were an emotionally enigmatic vacuum.

When I climbed down the stairs to open my window, I looked up at the fan that wasn't turning anymore. It reminded me of the life they had taken out of her. Yesterdays fly buzzed in my ear as I felt the first transient contact of coldness crash against my cheek. Leila's angelic snores sang a viridescent melody beside me. Her chest elevated rhythmically, and the wrinkle between her eyebrows was nowhere to be seen, leading me to wonder if the only time women in Iran were free was when they were asleep. Though I Hadn't had that freedom last night. During dinner, my father told me he didn't want me to attend university after graduating next year. In utter confusion, I looked from Baba to Maman to Leila and back to Baba again. My index and middle finger started tingling, and I felt the acid in my stomach bubble up, which were signs of distress.

"Azizam, listen to me. It is for the best. We don't want you to come back hurt from university one day. All they do is indoctrinate and manipulate. This Westernized ideology they preach will spoil you. Your mother and I thoroughly talked about this. Our decision is final. As long as you live under this roof and are provided by me, you will not attend university," he said as I searched for my mother's brown eyes hiding behind her knitted brows. She simply looked at her plate and lowered her gaze against the injustice that was destined for me.

"You mean provided by Maman," I whispered under my breath. At least, I intended to, but the echoing sting of my fathers hand on my cheek meant he had heard it.

#

I spent the night chatting with Samira, my oldest friend from two streets down. There was supposed to be a nationwide protest happening at noon, beginning at the hospital where Mahsa died all the way to Tehranpars, and it was estimated to become the most impactful uprising since the Persian Spring in 2009.

All night, I had laid there, imagining what the protest would look like. The only recollections I had from any events even remotely as similar as the ones that were inevitably on the rise are memories of television scenes of the Girls of Enghelab Protests in 2017, the stories my father told me about his childhood during the Islamic Revolution in 1979 or how my mother used to caress my curls at night, singing songs about emancipation and freedom. I could not grasp the reality of what would face me, but with every fiber of my being, I believed that my participation there was a necessity, a tribute to my sisters.

Samira called herself a “hacktivist”; she and her brother had participated in the search for Mahsa Amini’s medical records and autopsy to investigate the truth behind her death.

I knew they would find something that could prove the opposite of the government’s claim. What I didn’t know was how to take part in a protest that was strictly prohibited by my parents. But if I didn’t figure out how to join the solidarity parade, I’d be as guilty as our dictators.

“But you had piano lessons yesterday,” Baba looked at me questioningly.

“Agha Asghar called this morning and said he wanted me to come back to step in for another one of his students who can’t make the concert next week,” I hated lying.

Even more, I hated how good I was at it.

“Bashe, Azadeh. Fine. You may go, but be home for dinner,” he closed the door on his way to the mosque without looking at me.

I packed my bag with a makeshift Freedom is Female cardboard sign I created under my sheets yesterday, a face mask, pepper spray, and a razor instead of books, pens, and water. When Samira texted me that she was only a few houses away, I ran into my room and glanced at Leila’s back. Her face was staring at the window over her desk. She looked at me in its reflection.

“I just wanted to say bye. Leila.” I said.

“Ok. See you later, Azi.” She said.

Just as I turned around and was about to close the door behind her. I heard her whisper *be careful, Azi*.

“Be the voice for those who can’t afford to use their own,” she said as I looked back at the reflection that transgressed herself and became who I remembered her to be as a young girl. A fiercely opiniated, clever yet timid human, not the role of the obedient and dutiful eldest daughter she was subject to.

“Why don’t you come with me, Leila?”

“You know I can’t,” she sighed.

“Azi, come with me. We will go together. You and me. We can fight for each other, our sisterhood, and the other Persian sisters,” I said.

“Azadeh means freedom. Leila means daughter of the night. I have always been in your shadows, I have always been a coward. When you spoke up, I stayed silent. You have always been a virago. Someone who is brave and warlike, heroic. Like I said, go use your voice for those of us who cannot,” she said.

“There is a difference between not being able to and choosing not to, Leila.”

When I thought something had shifted inside her, she turned her back on me once again.

#

As Samira arrived, I opened the door to my backyard, and we let our hair down. In other places, this was meant figuratively, whereas, in my country, it meant to let our hair breathe after suffocating hours under a black piece of silk. We held hands, looked at each other knowingly, and did something illegal: we started dancing around the fig and pomegranate trees my grandfather planted as a young boy. The smell of citrus leaves and sour cherries merged into one, dominating the air and forming a symbiosis with the scent of freedom. In our minds, we screamed Woman, Life, Freedom with all our might.

When I looked up at my bedroom, I caught Leila shutting the window.

#

While yesterdays streets were dystopian and evoked a striking resemblance to Armageddon, today's air held all kinds of fruit: sweet fruits, dried fruits, salted fruits, and fruits of hope. Still, I noticed security cameras with face recognition on all traffic lights and more guidance patrollers surveilling the subway stations. Suddenly, I observed a beautiful juxtaposition of escalating espionage and liberating insouciance.

It was three minutes to noon in the center of Tehran. Millions of people gathered around a red-colored fountains, signifying the blood-bath of millions of dead Iranian civilians erupted by our ruthless government.

In the crowd, I recognized some of my old friends, some of whom were Jewish-Iranians. I encountered Baháís, Kurds, and Azerbaijanis, ethnically marginalized minorities of Iran.

The uproar unfolding before my eyes parallel to the unfolding of veils affirmed the forecast that this could genuinely become Iran's most unprecedented upheaval yet. The quintessential difference between today's and past movements was the alliance of men.

When Mahsa Amini's death was announced, I presumed that the men of Iran, alas, acknowledged the premise that as long as our women were not free, no one could be. The hijab as a weapon used to subjugate femininity was now transformed into a symbol of resistance. The veil was no longer supposed to be a method of intimidation but rather an allegory for revolution. Women and men alike formed crowds on the streets of Kurdistan's province and spread all the way to here, mere feet in front of Samira, my backpack, and me.

The masses strolled along for hours, waving Iranian flags in the air, two fingers held up high, symbolizing peace, seeming to reach for it in the sky. Next to me, two completely naked women, save for their red headscarves, held their fists in their hands and shouted the parole "*Baraye zan, zendegi, azadi*" while thick trees viciously embedded red roots into their necks. For women, for life, for freedom.

Police motorbikes were set on fire, water cannons pressuring demonstrators to leave the streets, hair was let down and let free and let be, and it was pulled. Chants like kill the dictator, we will kill those who killed our sister, and Mahsa, your name will become a code became the slogans swimming against the global tide. Despite what we, artists, intellectuals, activists, minorities, fathers, sons, and daughters, shouted, we all had the same motive in mind: to make this house of oppressive cards crumble with all that we had to give, for we had nothing to lose.

When the first gunshots were fired, I had already blossomed four blisters on the soles with which I trampled on the mullah's torn propaganda posters falling on the cement like autumn leaves, missed seven calls from my father, and swerved endless batons aimed our way. Military vehicles cornered protest masses, ammunition rained down on us, and clouds of misty tear gas blocked our sight.

Twenty minutes had already passed since I last saw Samira. But it felt like a minute and an eternity at the same time. In a circle around a raging bonfire, we burned our headscarves and chanted death to Khamenei. Together, she and I ripped off our scarves - it had a harsh finality to it- and threw them into the yellow and orange symphony of stories. Girls and women stepped forward to dance and sing around the flames, rejoicing in the victorious. That was the last time I saw her.

I was scared, so very scared, alone in this disarray of guns and fists, alone in the void between dignity and death. When the first gunshot echoed into the night of Tehran, the chaos culminated. It was mayhem. People were bleeding out of their eyes, limbs were scattered around the streets, decorating the curbs like ingrown weeds, and young children frantically searched for their families. It smelled like a morgue.

Between ripped vocal cords and Iranian flags waving invitingly toward the horizon of the revolution, there appeared to be a mutual understanding between people of all religious, ethnic, and socioeconomic affiliations. The veil became a seismograph for the disappointment and exasperation of the Iranian people who, for decades under the authoritarian, repressive, and exploitative dictatorship, desired to breathe in the odor of freedom again. Why was our hair political? Why was the hair of women a weapon with which our government reigned our people? As soon as we realized that the Islamic Republic couldn't exist without the pillar of the systematic subjugation of women, we recognized what we needed to demolish.

Even though there were millions of unfamiliar faces around me, and Samira was nowhere to be seen, I came across someone repeatedly. The face of Mahsa Amini was plastered on every sign soaring above me. Her inescapable face was a blunt reminder to our opposition that, although she might've not been here, we were. We were united to fight for her and for us.

Mahsa's first name was Jina, which meant life, but because it was Kurdish, it was deemed unorthodox and was forbidden. Yet, we would keep her in our memory as Jina because she was the taken life that unleashed our rage, allowing us to explode tonight.

After hiding in an inconspicuous alleyway behind a dumpster and having tried Samira's cell four times to no avail, I raised my head to see a familiarly slender figure from behind.

Leila.

When we locked eyes, I ran toward her, bumping into civilians and jumping over curbside fires, and embraced her in a warm hug.

After letting go, we screamed at the top of our lungs, our only fear being that we were not loud enough.

"Daughter of the night," I looked at her.

"Freedom," she said.

I took out the razor from my backpack and in turns, we buzzed off our curls and let them drop to the ground.

Her Majesty

By Lindsey Jay

How lovely she is,
the queen with the barbed wire crown,
residing within a castle of chaos.
Left behind by subjects
claiming to be loyal —
betrayal to the throne.
But she does not drown
in the crimson tears she cries;
instead, they fill her cup
and she sips them
through lips of fortitude.
Where trails of blood
from heartbreak once followed,
she has grown solemn and steadfast —
no longer plagued
by fear of the unknown
and abandonment woes.
She places her hands
upon walls of stone
which she refused to let crumble,
ready to fiercely reign
over a kingdom of one.

11 Negative Thoughts A Day

By Marie Evangeline Lao

I was watching the news and
a report said that the average person has
up to 11 negative thoughts a day.
Honestly, I was surprised by that and thought
it would have been a higher statistic
which says a lot about me or society,
but either way, 11 doesn't sound too bad?
Unless they're treating it like half-A presses—
You know, like the ones used in Mario 64
A-press runs. Have you seen *Watch for Rolling Ro*— I'm getting ahead
of myself.

What I'm trying to say is that maybe they're counting
negative thoughts based on whether or not it's continuous, as in,
is that thought interrupted by a positive or neutral one?
Like if I was breaking down over failing three assignments
and tripping down the stairs of the library but
then think of the new game I was excited to play
before going back to agonizing over my potential head trauma,
are those counted as two negative thoughts?
Or if the stray cat my family has watched over for years disappeared,
leaving me devastated, but
then I think "I'm hungry"
before returning to my internal wallowing—does that count?

What's the criteria for negative thoughts anyway?
It sounds simple enough but I feel that
a variable like that is way too vague.
The me who graduated from a math and science high school
seethes at it because the annoying process of performing an experi-
ment or study requires having
controlled varia—Ahem—

Anyway,
I can see people arguing over the specifics of the word 'negative'. As
in, if inconveniences count or be considered neutral.
The paper for the study probably has a set definition, as it should, but

– why would that be included on a news headline?

Looking back on it, 11 is starting to sound like a lot.
Even under the A-press mindset, it sounds like it just piles up.
Admittedly, I don't remember what the reporter said about it in the
first place

so maybe I should have listened or remembered.
If I did, I'd know what they did or how they did it
and also probably why, though the answer to that is pretty clear. Is it
too much or too little? I
don't think I'll really know nor
will I bother to look it up and you'd probably
ask why I bothered to write this much about it but all
I can say is that 11 negative thoughts a day
was just too funny to me.



By Jose Lopez

The Elevator

By Aurelle Garner

She was hurrying from the parking garage to the elevator. Her heels stomping noisily and rapidly on the cement. A few more yards and she would be there. The day had been long. Her court hearings had been a succession of embarrassing stutters and hesitations, her nerves taking over. Every time, she could see and hear the defense snickering beside her. She should have gone straight home, but instead was called back into the office to debrief with her supervising attorney. She could already hear his over-articulated words of critique, in his low, monotonous, condescending voice. His meeting requests were never good news; the whole firm knew it. It was her fourth one this month.

Throughout her whole life, Jessica fought for others' acceptance as she forged her career path. She remembered growing up watching Ally McBeal and immediately deciding she would be a lawyer one day. Ally was cool and unapologetic. She had boyfriends, money, and her peers' respect. Everything Jessica longed for. Both Jessica's parents worked at their local elementary school. Her mother was a cafeteria lady her dad a janitor. They always made sure food was on the table. Daily necessities were always met. However, planning on sending Jessica to a four-year college and then law school had never been part of the equation.

But Jessica aimed for a different path. She worked hard. She applied for all possible scholarships. And little by little, she made it. She was a brilliant student whose hunger for knowledge had been noticed by her professors.

"Ah, Jessica, A+ again. I always keep the grading of your work for last. It's always such a delight to read your research and argumentative." She recalls one of them saying.

"If only more students in this class showed only half your enthusiasm, this course would be that much more intellectually challenging." Another liked to state for all to hear.

She regularly finished top of her class. Unfortunately, this was not enough for her to be accepted by her classmates. The cultural and social gaps were too deep. She preferred to keep it to herself, her loneliness and sadness was regularly misinterpreted for arrogance and false pride.

Most of the other students had known each other their entire lives. With their parents all members of the local Country Clubs, they shared a past, events, attitudes and even a vocabulary at times she failed to understand. In the rare occasions she was invited to a family dinner, or a celebration, Jessica couldn't help but feel out of place, not knowing how to act, how to talk even with these people. She would always end up in a corner, forgotten by her hosts, and generally, never invited again. She remembered the last one she attended. She had just gone to the buffet, got another drink (with a glass up your lips, no need to talk). On her way back to the main salon, she recognized two of her supposed friends. As she approached them, she realized they were talking about her.

“Why do you have to invite Jessica next week?” One was asking.

“You know my Mother...” hissed the other one. “She’s always looking for that one Cinderella... student she can claim as her work in progress and get her Christian philanthropic nature praised on...” Both started laughing all-heartedly. They only stopped when the crash of broken glass startled them. Jessica had dropped her drink, her breathing was fast and loud, almost to a grunt, as she tried to hold back her tears. They smirked and walked away. Thinking about it now, she was, somewhat, feeling thankful for the rude awakening she received that day.

She could stop pretending to enjoy those gatherings. She could just go back to finding some intellectual stimulation through her conversations with her professors. Jessica felt as if she could speak with them as an equal, without having to worry about any outdated protocol.

In despite of it all, Jessica made it. But her awkwardness and shyness kept seeping through during her interactions with her colleagues. Back in law school, she didn't realize the same kind of individuals she struggled with would become her coworkers. This time, the stakes were different. They were all hungry for money and power. All fighting for the same thing; moving from Interns to Associates to Partners. They knew the game; they had spent their whole lives practicing. They had been groomed by their parents since they could walk.

Jessica's upbringing, on the other end, taught her to help others, always be nice and compassionate towards people, even strangers. As her mother used to say: “When you meet people, you never know the type of day they are having. Might be a great day; might be the worst day of their life.”

Jessica never fit in her new role, however much she tried. She realized, way too late, that she was not cut for it. She was constantly ig—

—nored. She would not have cared as much if her job was not eating up all of her time. With no time to socialize, the isolation was overbearing. Her inadequacy had started to be noticed by her supervisors, and she was now only offered matters which were simple, a guaranteed positive outcome for the firm. That made her hate her profession even more. No personal rewards with those. The lump of discouragement in her throat was suffocating. She felt empty.

“Take a deep breath...” she muttered; eyes half closed.

She mechanically pushed the elevator button, slowly opening her eyes. She jumped back, looking straight ahead. On the metal doors, a reflection. Not hers. A dark figure, long and thin, behind her. Jessica could tell it was a man but could hardly define any of his features. Apart from his chiseled chin and his “*perfectly defined lips*” she surprised herself whispering. She was reminded of the David by Michelangelo picture she used to gawk at in middle school with her pubescent friends. The first naked guy she ever saw.

The rest of that man’s face was buried in his black hoodie. His hands were concealed in the pockets of his black cargo pants; his feet slightly apart, military style, showing the sturdiness of his black boots. For a moment, she thought those were working clothes, but they were too immaculate to have ever been on a construction site. She could tell he was staring at her. Strangely so, she felt she knew that stare; the feeling it brought her. Her mind was weary but comforting at the same time. Could Jessica have met him before? Her thoughts were racing, trying to remember where that sensation came from. Jessica felt the cold of his stare, tingling her skin. The sweat, exacerbated by her uneasiness, which had pearly on her forehead, felt like multitudes of icicles on her skin, sending shivers down her spine. The hair on the back of her neck alerted her to the danger.

“Where is the elevator?” As she asked herself the question, she hit the call button, again, and again, in the unreasonable hope the lift would make it downstairs faster. In a perfect moment of salvation, the doors would open. She would certainly bump into an acquaintance she could strike up a conversation with and follow back to their car under some pretext she’d have come up with by then. Jessica got dragged out from her reverie by the distant Dings marking each elevator’s stop, on each floor. Sometimes sounding closer, sometimes sounding farther. But they never seemed to try and reach her.

DING. Twentieth floor. Her body reacted more violently to his unwanted presence: her jaw clenched; her fists so tight her nails were digging deep inside her hands; her knees shaking, her legs commanding she ran far, but her mind ordered her to stay put. *“Could it be...”*

#

DING. Eighteenth floor. Darcy could see her body tensing up. He was still; silent; observing. He wondered how her life would have been, had she made it to a Senior Level. He thought of her as classy. From her stance, from the way she was dressed: nothing extravagant but the craftsmanship quality was noticeable on every piece of her outfit. She wore a burgundy tea length pencil skirt reminiscent of 80s collections from Jean-Paul Gauthier. It might not have been an original, after all, it would not have survived the test of time, but the way it swayed lightly, with every one of her movements, dictated the wool used could have only come from Merinos sheep. The narrowness of her white silk blouse was emphasized by a black leather corseted belt. He appreciated how it lifted her breasts. Her suit’s blazer, a match to the skirt, was resting on her shoulders, empty sleeves hanging purposelessly. The way she swayed her hips in the office, ever so delicately; the way she walked, more of a glide. Darcy was the only one to really see her physical perfection. If only she would stop playing victim. He enjoyed seeing the anguish in her deer’s eyes each time he summoned her to his office.

DING. Fourteenth floor. Growing up, Darcy had spent so many hours in office buildings similar to this one. His mother insisted he would be dropped off at her Law practice after school. She liked to keep control of his whereabouts, preferably never authorizing any. He would sit there, in a corner of Iliana’s office, displayed like any other art piece in the room, pretending to do his homework.

“Just stay there and shut up” She would mutter between clenched teeth. “If I hear one sound coming out of you, I will make you regret being born.”

“Mom, I need to go to the bathroom. I’m tired. I want to go home” Darcy would whimper.

“I said shut up.” She hissed. “If I have to stare at your ugly face every day, you can deal with staring at mine for a couple of hours.”

Iliana had been raised the same way after all. She had, in turn, been displayed for strangers to gawk at. She was gorgeous. Always had been. Even as a child, her parents stood unashamed, selling her presence in exchange for contracts. Clients would ask if she would attend the following weekend’s party prior to signing any engagement, in the hope—

--of drooling over her beauty. Who knows maybe even over her body. Literally. Iliana would be left wandering in the middle of the adults' debauchery. She found herself witness to acts no child should be exposed to. Sometimes, even dogs were involved. Sometimes, once her parents were dead drunk, half naked on the living room floor, Iliana was claimed as well. Ever so young, she realized then how powerful she was over those miserable human rejects.

DING. Eleventh floor. When in his mother's office, Darcy would study everyone going by or coming in, analyze their outfit. He would try figuring out where they lived, and who they were outside of here. He would observe their stature and posture, paying extreme attention to the way they talked. It made up for his mother belittling him in front of visitors. "It" was an impediment to her career. "It" being him. She never wanted him and made sure all were aware of it. "It" included. "It" hated her.

DING. Ninth floor. "I could be a Supreme Court Justice by now, if "It" didn't happen!" Iliana liked to claim. She liked to remind everyone willing to listen; or unwilling, like her husband, who she loathed with all her being, for this life she never wanted. They had a fling. One moment of weakness and she ended up pregnant. In their circle, you always had to do the right thing. At least, right by the circle. If she had had a say in "It", "It" would have been aborted. Iliana didn't need her husband's money; Her family descended from the Mayflower; anecdote they had milked for generations to enrich themselves through trading. Iliana would have married the first pretty face, for decorum, and worked her way to Washington. Instead, she "raised" "It". Well, now, she didn't have to worry about "It" anymore. "It" made sure of that.

"Darce... Is that you?"

His focus went back to Jessica. *"Look at you, Bitch... You're so lame trying to be a big girl but you don't have the guts."*

DING. Third floor. The smell of fear she exuded was enveloping him in a comforting daze. It gave him that same high he felt the first time he smoked weed behind the community center. Darcy became a regular when he found out he could get all the weed he wanted courtesy of a counselor, if he was nice to him. And Darcy had been "Darce." No one had called him such since back then:

"Hey Darce!" JT would call out.

"Stop calling me Darce" He would reply, in a tired, slow exasperated tone "it rhymes with arse."

“Nothing wrong with that Darce. When yours is more plum, tighter and sweeter than tits. I’d be proud if I were you!” JT would then break into a guttural laughter that would creep Darcy to his bones.

It lasted a while, until Darcy realized he couldn’t feel that same high from the first few times. Came to find out, the weed was laced with ketamine. Used to be. Now it was just weed, and instead of being exacerbated, his thoughts and feelings were sedated.

At least, since he started his hunts, Darcy felt the familiar high anew. He could keep the high going for as long as he wished. He was the one to decide when he was done with his victims. Not Iliana. Not JT. The leverage he held against his groomer came out handy later when Darcy needed to find a place to conduct his own little experiments. JT had inherited a property outside of town, in an unincorporated zone. It had been easy for Darcy to get JT to sign the title over. Not much convincing is needed when you are threatened with charges for lewd acts with a minor. When JT stopped showing up, and this new guy started hanging there, everyone just thought the place had been sold. After all, no one cared. Those who lived in the area lived there to be left alone. And out of respect, left others in the community alone as well. All they knew of him, was his showing up for a weekend every month, stopping to the drugstore for jerky and beer. They would see smoke on Sunday afternoon, then nothing for a couple of hours, until they heard the sound of a diesel pickup truck hitting the road so fast out of that private access road, as if the devil was after him. Or the devil fleeing his deeds.

DING. First floor. Darcy stared at her spine, her lower back, the perfect straight line of her stockings. He could feel the excitement growing in him. He needed to calm down; he could not make himself obvious or revealed. “*Soon...*”

“- Take a deep breath...” he thought; eyes half opened.

#

DING. Parking Pt. She jumped back. This time more out of fear than surprise.

“Darcy, please, stop it, you’re scaring me.”

The doors slowly opened, revealing an empty space. He lifted his chin up, partially revealing more of his face; eyes still buried in his hoodie. She could now see the tension in his jaws, teeth grinding, cheeks pulsing. His smirky smile sending chills down her spine. Jessica could feel his determination. Her thoughts were getting entangled. Her eyes widened, her pulse accelerating. She felt trapped.

His body between her and the only access back to the parking garage. She could hear, in the distance, cars screeching their tires with every curve taken a little too fast. Too far.

Jessica realized how Darcy had positioned himself on this little landing, not leaving room for any escape. Whichever direction she would try to run, he could be on her within a second. She shook as she tried to slow her breathing; she understood this was not random. She had not been called in for a review. She gasped. As if he could read her thoughts, Darcy smiled wider; his enjoyment more pronounced. After all, he had studied Jessica every day for the last two years. She always looked like the saddest, weakest precious little girl on the floor. She was useless. And needed to go before she became bitter and heartless. Like Iliana.

No access back to her car; no access away from the lift. His heart started beating faster.

His senses sharpened at the thought of catching his prey.

She was trapped.

He knew. And soon his.

He could feel the high starting to build in his guts, in his brain. He held back a moan of delight.

Tears started rolling warm on Jessica's cheeks as she moved forward inside the metal cage, her eyes slowly looking down. Her blazer fell to the ground.

"I must fight or it's all over." Jessica became conscious in an instant of how insignificant her life felt. She held back a moan of terror. He took a step forward, following close, his eyes focused on his prize. Darcy picked up the blazer, buried his nose in it. She turned around to face him, in a last defying gesture. DING. She was his. DING.



By Sam Villa



By Maxwell Casem

The fall without you

By Selena Rose Edge

What does it mean to be the last person you loved
Does it live on in me while i move on and give myself to others
I doubt that very much
Your devotion never left for me alone, shared intrinsically with something else something I could never compete with
Incomprehensible joy
If I love you like a seesaw to rise you up above then drop you down to the mud
The shooting pain that engulfs with each hard fall
Gravity's joke
would you have chosen to stay with me then
Or is it true that I did love you much like that?
You might've said so
In your most honest moments
The moments where it was just you and me and the small breathes we shared
Where you'd open up that my love was a fearsome thing
That it'd swallow you so wholly there's no longer any light present Did it mean anything
Now that half our most private times are dwelling down in the earth rotting beside you
Where your heart pumped poisons
Long before the embalming
And I go on ; a veil being dropped leaving me on one side and everything we shared on the other

The Tea Party

By Vickie Wippel

The florist asked in a whisper if she was bringing the bouquet to the cemetery. Martha answered, "No." Of course not, she thought to herself. Harold hated pink. Martha delicately carried a small pink vase, brimming with soft-hued roses, white daisies, and baby's breath, from the flower shop to the car. They were beautiful. It was going to be such a lovely party for her girls. Her babies. The morning was slipping away - already 10:30, and Martha still needed to stop by the bakery on her way home.

"Good morning, Mrs. Mullins," the shop keep called from behind the counter, a colorful, cheery display of macarons, mini fruit tarts, and eclairs. "I have your lady fingers and shortbread cookies ready to go." She placed a pink box, tied with a sheer white ribbon into a perfect bow, on the counter by the register. The bakery sat between a long-closed record shop and the florist on Main Street in Oakmont, an agreeable, movie set-quiet town.

"These will be wonderful for the tea party." Martha said, reaching into her purse. The flowers and treats were a luxury, but Martha stashed a few dollars away each week in her panty drawer to pay for today. The Lunch Bunch, friends since PTA days, surely wouldn't miss her each Wednesday, and, besides, she could make the same sandwich at home. Harold's pension was better spent here.

"A tea party! How fun!" The shop keep rang up the sale. "Is your daughter in town? These days, we only see her when she picks up your Christmas stollen."

"No! They're from someone else," Martha snapped. She hadn't meant to sound angry, but the old woman accidentally shared too much. The shop keep looked up from the register and arched her eyebrows; her lips scrolled downward like the croissants in the case below as Martha unrolled one-dollar bills from a silk sock in her purse.

Martha shut her eyes for a moment, her forgiveness offering. "Mandy won't be home until the holidays." She reached for the box. "Until then," Martha shrugged and inhaled, "it's just me."

"Ah, well. Good to see you again, Mrs. Mullins. Take care, now." The cash register rang as it closed. "See you at Christmas."

Martha flicked a goodbye wave as she turned towards the door. She told herself she didn't have time to explain who the cookies were for, who the girls were. Not that it mattered. It was nobody's business.

With a single determined nod to herself, she walked back to the car, if she could only remember where she parked the damn thing. Her eyes darted up and down Main Street, keys clenched, praying to Anthony, patron saint of lost items. These days, she prayed more to him than Mary.

Martha should not have needed to buy flowers. She used to have such a beautiful home garden, blooming each summer with Duchers, Pink Nitty Gritty, and Sprit of Freedom, her favorite varietals. "A rose for a rose," Harold would always say with a cheek peck, handing her a hand-pruned bouquet each time he came back through the kitchen from their plot on the sunny side of the house.

Martha meant to replant the garden, acquiescing when her daughter chided her for allowing weeds to take over. But she never expected Amanda to pay a landscaper to pull the rosebushes Harold planted before her daughter was even born. "It's not Astroturf, Mom. It's artificial grass. And it will help with the upkeep." Mandy gave her mom a side hug, the kind teachers bestow young children.

"One less thing to remember."

"It looks like a putt-putt course, Mandy." Martha had never asked her daughter for help. Never asked anyone. The widow grimaced when the landscaper left and each time she came up her front steps. Nevertheless, today's roses were storebought. No Spirit of Freedom in sight.

"Oh, for Pete's sake," Martha said, fiddling with the door key. A six pack of Ensure protein shake sat on the porch. "Stop asking Bill to deliver the damn drinks, Mandy," she muttered to herself, sidestepping them as she entered the house. "Doesn't she know they taste like talcum powder," she said to nobody. Thinking of talcum powder reminded Martha of drawing with sidewalk chalk on that same front porch a lifetime ago. In pasty, muted pastels, she and Mandy would outline butterflies, practice cursive, and play hopscotch on the cement. The memory made Martha miss the sound of laughter.

Martha went to the dining room to make sure everything was ready, taking her time to check and recheck every detail. She also rechecked the chain lock on the front door, not wanting her daughter to surprise her with a pop-in visit today, not recalling, for just a moment, that Mandy moved too far away for unannounced visits quite some time ago. Still, it was better to be safe than sorry, as Harold used to say. Martha ran her fingers down the length of the table, set with a yellowed lace tablecloth she received as a wedding gift almost half a century ago.

Six settings were arranged with teacup, saucer, and dessert plate, all crafted of matching bone porcelain China in a rose pattern with gold luster trim. A two-tiered, pink depression glass pastry plate- ready for the cookies- took center stage, with a crystal bowl full of Jordan almonds next to it. The almonds were Brenda's favorite. Martha, in a panic, worried she had forgotten the cookies, and rushed back to the kitchen to make sure, making a sign of the cross when she saw the pink box on the counter. She returned to the living room and saw the Jordan almonds. The almonds were Brenda's favorite.

Matching red vinyl booster seats waited in four chairs. The sixth chair, Harold's, remained empty- a framed grainy black and white portrait sat atop his place setting. He would have just loved the festivity of the afternoon. Martha, too, was pleased to host a party. It had been ages.

Martha tiptoed into the guest room, where, on one of the twin beds with identical mint green fitted quilts-- a color that ran throughout the house--- four porcelain dolls laid. They were lined up like matchsticks, asleep in identical pink pajama dresses. The room, made pungent by camphor and mothballs, felt lonely and cold in the way that historical museums do, with furniture and belongings that are decorated and dusted often but never used. After so long, however, the solitude was a comfort to Martha. It's not that Martha didn't see people. She made a point to watch for the mail carrier every afternoon, sitting in the easy chair by the window until he passed, ready to receive his friendly wave. Lawrence always asked if she was getting on alright and let her know each time she left her car door open. "Martha, what am I going to do with you? Lawrence would tsk, wagging his finger as he returned her key ring before handing her the mail. His wink told Martha that he wouldn't report the infraction to her daughter. Last week, she nearly slipped and told him about the tea party.

Martha sang a little wake up song as she pulled open the guest room drapes, the same song she sang to Amanda, her Mandy, so many years ago. Sometimes Martha had trouble keeping the girls apart, the memories of Amanda feeling further away. In a blink or two, her only daughter was grown and gone. "Mandy is just too busy to call home much, and I don't blame her," Martha explained to The Lunch Bunch one afternoon. Her friends nodded in commiseration as they sipped on the soup du'jour, knowing all too well that one of the heart-breaks of motherhood was a vacancy in the heart with nobody left at home to love.

“Could be worse,” her friend, Connie offered. “Jake’s moving to Japan.” Connie handed Martha half her dinner roll as a conciliation.

Martha’s recollections of Mandy, however, felt more and more like make-believe as time strode forward; if it weren’t for all the photographs Harold took, Martha wondered what she would remember at all. These babies, on the other hand, gently waking from their morning nap by Martha’s tender touch, would never ever leave her. “Rise and shine, my darlings,” Martha cooed, pinching each one on their inflexible noses, then cradling their porcelain heads, taking her time to change each one into the party dresses laid out on the opposite twin bed. As Martha carefully tugged nightgowns off their small cloth frames, their plastic eyelids clicked up and down, like a ticking clock. “Open. Shut. Open. Shut,” Martha would chirp as they mechanically blinked. She took care with each one, caressing their irresistible painted cheeks as she exclaimed, “you will all look so darling today!” Martha picked up and spun the doll closest to her. When the girls awoke from their naps, the house felt alive again.

Martha loved each of the dolls: Libby, the redhead with the yellow bow, Hannah, with her long, blonde ringlets, and Sweet Caroline, the baby with a wisp of hair pulled together in a small barrette. The most special, however, was the birthday girl, Brenda, who wore her hair in brunette bob, with bangs nearly reaching her eyebrows, just like her Mandy used to do.

Martha held up two party dresses to Brenda’s limp frame. “Tell Mommy, do you want to wear the pink lace or the blue checks to your party today?” She leaned into the doll’s face, putting her ear up to its sterile, rose-colored lips. “Oh, the pink!” Martha leaned in and gave a quick kiss to the doll’s cold forehead. “Mommy knew that’s what you would pick!” The old woman tickled the tummies of the other dolls, not wanting to play favorites.

Martha herself looked like a doll playing dress up, diminutive in the pleated blue polka dot dress she had stored away for three decades. Something that once fit so smartly now clung to her, as if her aged frame were a bent wire hanger no longer able to support the dress’s weight. Martha didn’t notice. “I haven’t worn this since Mandy’s Confirmation,” she said aloud as she removed the dress from the storage container, holding it into the light. She hadn’t much need to dress up after the Confirmation. Amanda left for St. Mary’s Teaching College two summers later, and she lost Harold to a heart attack the year after that—nothing left to celebrate, she decided. The dress was in fine shape,

outside of some brown weathering from age. Martha looked down at her own wilted hands, comparing them to the old dress, tickled at the similarity. She made a mental note to start planning the girls' First Communion, but first, today's party.

Martha straightened out her dress one last time before turning back to the twin bed. She collected Libby, the oldest girl first, and brought them out, one by one, in order of age, to the set table.

"Now, I know you girls must be very excited for Brenda's birthday, but let's remember our best manners at the tea party today, especially you, Hannah." She held a stare with the blonde-haired doll—the trouble-maker of the group. Hanna's beady eyes stared vacantly ahead. Soon, Brenda was positioned at her seat of honor in the booster chair at the head of the table, next to Harold, in a perfect 90-degree angle, her body bent into the unnatural shape of an upper-case *L*.

Martha turned to the gramophone, the teak Philips model Harold purchased as a surprise following his first promotion, and began to play Brenda's favorite Doris Day record. Martha admired the album jacket, seeming to recall the same record also being Amanda's favorite before her daughter's tastes turned to rock and roll. A note Harold had written on the album receipt fell from the sleeve. "With you, it's always Tea Time, babe." Harold, of course, was gone. And the record shop, long gone, too. Martha felt a chill at the reminder that she was all that remained of her old life. She bent down to collect and return the receipt before placing the needle on the record.

"With tea for two, and two for tea," Martha sang along, giggling, as she poured Darjeeling into each porcelain cup. She took a sip and waited a moment for the girls to do the same. "Would anyone like a cookie?" The hostess of the house took the cookie plate and placed a lady finger and shortbread in front of each doll's place. "Ah, ah, ah, Libby. Only two cookies." Martha pulled the plate back. "Remember what I taught you about a moment on the lips?" Then she placed cookies out for Harold. "Now, the lights, Maestro," she said as she flipped the switch. Harold always used to say that.

Though still the early afternoon, the room was kept dark by pinched drapes, drawn together. There was enough light for Martha to find the Eastman Kodak carousel projector set up on the buffet behind the table. Martha had scolded Harold for spending so much money on the extravagance, not to mention the arm and leg to convert film into slides, but now, she felt very glad to have it.

Boxes of photo slides, labeled with milestones events, like “Beach Day 1955,” “Yellowstone 1957” and “15th anniversary,” filled the cabinet under the staircase, where the old card table was also stored.

With a flip of the switch, the projector’s motor began to whirl. The slides, displayed on a white wall on the far side of the living room, began to tell a story, with Doris Day’s big band the perfect soundtrack. Every moment or so, the next photo slide would drop into the carousel with a clunk, and a new image would project onto the wall. Four girls sat smiling around a set table, and a woman, dressed to the nines in blue polka dots, stood beside them. In the image, the middle-aged woman passed a tray of cookies while the girls took sips of tea from beautiful bone China cups. The photos were of a birthday party, and a girl with cute bob cut and long bangs was being celebrated. She wore a party hat. Everybody mugged cheery, birthday smiles for the camera.

Martha felt carried away by the faded memories flashing against the living room wall. Harold took most of the photos, but he was smiling in the frame where they brought out the birthday cake.

“Oh, that reminds me!” Martha stood up to pause the slide show. Then, she hurried, as best she could, to the kitchen, bringing back a small white birthday cake, placing it in front of Brenda and lighting a candle before starting the slides up again. When the little girl in the projector blew out her candles, Martha helped Brenda blow out her candle, too. The old woman smiled, clapped, and looked back and forth at the other dolls after the candle had been extinguished. She thought she heard Harold singing along.

A phone call interrupted the revelry. “Now, who could that be!” Martha slapped her napkin on the table, turned off the projector, and answered with a short, “Hello.”

“Hi Mother, am I interrupting?”

“Brenda?”

“Who? Mom, it’s me.”

“I’m sorry. I was watching my program.” She looked over at Brenda, who seemed antsy. “Hi Mandy, how are things?”

“Things are fine. Busy. Is the weather nice today?”

“Really lovely. The Lunch Bunch was able to eat outside.” Martha tapped her foot and fidgeted with the phone cord. She really needed to get back to the party. “Honey, Caroline’s starting to fuss. I need to be going.”

“Who’s Caroline?”

Martha remained silent, her eyes darting across the room. *Who is Caroline?* She closed her eyes to concentrate.

“Mom, have you eaten today?”

“Eaten? Why on Earth would you ask?” She looked down at the plate of cookies. “I’m eating right now.”

“Who’s Caroline?”

“You mean the baby?”

“You have a baby at the house?”

Of course, I have a baby, she thought to herself. She couldn’t just gab all day like single women could. The baby needed her. All the girls did. After the party, they would still need to wash up and get ready for bed.

“Mom, Who’s baby is it? Are you feeling ok?”

“Better than I’ve felt in ages, dear.”

“Listen, should I ask Mr. Granger to come by again?” The last thing Martha wanted was the neighbor coming by to pester her. “Mom, he said he doesn’t mind at all.” She just wanted to enjoy the party. *Why couldn’t she just be left alone?*

The record finished playing, and the needle scratched to a halt. Her mind felt fuzzy, like when the grocery clerks talked too quickly, or when the doctor asked her who was president. *Did she have babies,* she wondered. *Was Mandy still a baby?* Her mind was confusing her again.

“Mom, who is the baby?”

Martha saw the photo of Harold on the plate next to hers. Her mind slipped back into place, like the gramophone needle finding its groove. She just couldn’t be rushed. “What? What? Did I say baby? It’s a puppy.” Martha forced a small laugh. “Caroline is just a friend’s puppy. A sweet little terrier. No need to worry.” She smoothed out her napkin on the table. “But I do need to get going, or the puppy will have an accident on the rug.”

“I will call you tomorrow, Mom, and thanks again for the birthday card.” Martha couldn’t hang the receiver up fast enough, pushing aside her irritation as she reset the slides in the carousel to return to the images of the birthday party. The projector clicked to Harold at the table, laughing, and little Amanda, her sweet Mandy, blowing out the candles. Before Martha pressed start, she re-lit the candle on the table. As the projector played, Martha led the dolls in singing “Happy Birthday” to Brenda with a twinkle and a tear in her eye.

Martha made her own birthday wish that, this time around, the moment would last forever. She wished she could wrap Mandy's birthday party back in cellophane, like the party dresses, for safe keeping, unlike the smoke from the birthday candle, that lingered for a just a moment before dissipating. The last slide clicked over, and the screen projected a bright white light. At the same time, Caroline, the babydoll, fell from her booster chair onto the table with a thud. The show was over. With a long exhale, Martha stood up. "You are a fool, Martha Mullins," she muttered, dragging the doll by her dangling arm back to the guest bedroom.

"They are just dolls. Fun little playthings to pass the time," Martha would tell herself later, cleaning up the party dishes, before she tucked her girls into their storage boxes underneath the twin beds. "Sleep tight my angels." She blew a kiss into the empty room, turning on a night light before closing the door behind her.

Though the gramophone was turned off, Martha continued singing Doris Day as she tidied up.

Picture you upon my knee

Tea for two and two for tea

Just me and you and you for me

Nobody near us to see us or hear us

No friends or relations on weekend vacations.

Her song trailed off to a hum as she retrieved the electric sweeper from the pantry with a twirl.

Harold would be so pleased that she was dancing again. She threw her head back and laughed, pulling the sweeper down with her into a slight dip. He was such a lovely dancer, she recalled as she and the sweeper promenaded down the hall. They kept perfect form moving together in lockstep-- outside right, outside left, then step together before falling into a two-hand hold just as easily as they used to, smooth as Jello. Harold spun her through the hallway to the living room, the skirt of her dress, now spinning, its white dots floating in the air like butterflies just above her knees. As they turned, she saw their friends and family. So many people gathered around the table to celebrate Amanda's Confirmation. In the whirl, Martha saw her older sister, Betsy in the living room by the credenza. "I can't believe you came in all the way from Michigan," she shouted over Harold's shoulder as they danced. Another turn, and she spied her new neighbor, Bill Granger, an appliance salesman. Before he left, she wanted to ask him about replacing the old Kenmore.

Martha loved the feel of Harold's broad shoulders, his hands, so strong and warm against the small of her back, leading her as they danced. If she could, Martha would dance with him forever. She hoped he would take her to the Tower Ball Room over the weekend, but for now, the living room, surrounded by all their friends and family, suited Martha fine. As the music played on, she spied Mandy, standing in the kitchen doorway. Beautiful Amanda, in the swan song of her youth, nearly a woman. How proud Martha was of the bright and beautiful young lady she was becoming. All she could do was close her eyes and smile in gratitude. One more spin through Harold's arms, and she saw her parents, standing shoulder to shoulder next to Mandy in near the kitchen. That can't be right, Martha thought. "My parents aren't at this party," she said aloud. They both had died before Amanda finished grade school.

"Harold, I feel unwell." She let go and held her hand to her forehead, finding a seat at the dining room table. "I hope I didn't spoil Mandy's party," Martha said, asking Harold to fetch her a glass of water. The room spun around her. Where was Harold? Martha just needed another moment to compose herself, catch her breath. She must be getting too old for dancing. How old is Amanda? She opened her eyes and noticed four red booster seats stacked on a nearby chair. She couldn't have had four children, could she? It was something she and Harold had long prayed for, but, no, certainly she would remember if there were more. Martha looked down at the table and saw the six place settings, cookie crumbs spread across the old linen. Once again, she saw the black and white photo at Harold's place setting- the company shot she used for his obituary because she loved his crooked smile. "Mrs. Martha Mullins, you truly are a fool!" Martha screamed and threw a crystal candle stick she had set out earlier for the party. Glass shattered across the table and into the piled carpet. Martha held her head, ashamed of the outburst. She never used to be like this, and now she had another mess to clean up. The old woman took a long exhale when she saw the electric sweeper resting on the table ledge. The room was so quiet, it buzzed.

Vegvisir

By Scott Anders Hassler

The sailor found himself alone on the ice floe, hundreds of nautical miles away from his home in Iceland. His ship shattered and broken after being caught in the ravenous grinding jaws of the glacial walls; his crew swallowed under the sheets of thick blue ice. He felt the need to scream, to curse the sky and sea for what they stole from him on the misty plain. Instead, he gulped down his sorrow, not letting himself waste precious water and exhaust himself. His breath created frost that stung his nose and froze to his beard as he surveyed the lonely floating desert.

He fumbled with gloved hands and reached for the small wooden pendant on his neck, a token made for him by his wife to guarantee his safety home. Home, where his daughter and son waited for his return to the cabin he built with bare and blistered hands, their arms wide as they embraced him warmly and chattered excitedly, asking him about his recent journey. The man clutched the token firmly and whispered to the lonesome night, "The Vegvisir shall guide me home."

The sailor gathered what meager supplies were left and hauled them on a makeshift sled across the snowcapped icebergs with only a compass and a star chart to guide him. He set to make a fire to warm himself and plan his next move. The sailor crunched on frozen jerky and frigid hardtack that sank in his stomach like lead weights, bidding farewell to the crew he spent so much time with under the gloomy and star-filled night. He resolved himself, ensuring that he would live to tell their story to their families and give them a proper burial; that was the sailor's burdensome promise. He put out the fire without a word and traveled through the frozen wasteland in the dark. There was no sun on the days of the solstice.

He held the token in one hand and chanted, "The Vegvisir shall guide me home."

Many days later, when he found his supplies dwindling, the sailor, numbed by frost and cold, slipped and tumbled down the icy slopes. His compass bounced from his hand and fell between cracks in the ice into the chasms below.

The sailor panicked, desperately searching for the compass, but to no avail. It was lost to the Arctic just as his ship and crew. He began to sob, missing the warm crackling of the hearth at home where he drank fresh golden mead to redden his cheeks, ate dark and hot mutton stew-

-to warm his gullet and soul, and feasted on silken goat cheese that melted in the mouth like butter. He yearned for the love of his family, where his son and daughter would sit on the bed eagerly awaiting his stories of Lief Erikson, Bluetooth, and Erik the Red, and for a moment, he felt as though he would never see them again. Firmly held in trembling frostbitten hands, the Vegvisír was his last lifeline home, and, for what seemed like hours as hoarfrost crept over his body in the snow, he chanted, “The Vegvisír shall guide me home.”

The howling winds ceased, and snowfall fizzled away. The sailor opened his eyes, fearing the worst had come—that death had severed him from his mortal coil—and looked at the skies illuminated like a summer’s day. Ribbons of emerald light danced in the night, beckoning him to follow suit. He obeyed, clinging to what little hope he had. The Northern Lights were said to guide the lost, and he was certainly that. He stumbled through the snow, unable to feel his toes and feet as he crunched on the snow, but he no longer cared. With every footstep, he grew faster; his breath quickened with bitter, sharp frigid air that pierced his lungs, but he was not guided by panic but with excitement as hope swelled in his chest, forcing his withered body to continue. At the edge of the glaciers, he saw through frozen eyes in the distance an orange light. It grew closer and closer as the ship, tall and proud, came into view.

With only resolve and hope burning inside, the sailor doused his sled, the only companion on these glacial lands, with oil and used his trembling hands, barely warding off the cold, to set it ablaze. A great fire on the ice rose high into the night, and the sailor whooped and hollered at the vessel to get its attention. It banked and approached the frozen island as it lowered a rowboat, and men pushed out to rescue the lonesome sailor.

The sailor smiled triumphantly, having conquered what would be his icy tomb, and gently caressed the token in a closed fist. “The Vegvisír shall guide me home.”

Diego Rivera: Al Entrar en la Mina, 1923

By Cris Hernandez

Dirt darkens the brownness of the skin on his back
and the white cotton pants protecting his legs.
With a lantern in hand and a brace on his shoulder,
the miner enters Coatlicue's mouth, following the unseen obreros gone
before him. If he is lucky

he will return alive to Coyolxauqui, her carved body
and sibling stars illumine the sky with their souls aflame, knowing
Huitzilopotchli will return soon, his light guiding them back to the
dark chasm—the entrance to the rhythm of death and life.

Terry Funk's Second "Retirement" Match

By Robert Almaraz

As he steps through the curtain, the fans embrace him. He doesn't think much of their reaction, but thinks of Atsushi Onita, who didn't show up. Terry thinks of their exploding barbed wire death match, how they embraced each other after the match as the ring detonated around them. Onita, holding his head in his lap caressing the blood and hair out of his face.

His focus should be on one last match with Bret Hart, but Onita has made a home in his mind, the way they leaned on each other as they walked out of that ring, the fans cheering for the story they told. The possibility of never telling a story like that again gnaws at the back of his skull.

His wife, Vickie Funk, is in the front row, and he hasn't looked her way. She's eager for the last bell to ring signifying the end of late nights tending to wounds, blood covered bed sheets, and seizures caused by concussions.

She dreams of their ranch in the heartland of Texas. The life of peace, raising horses, birthing foals, the laughter of her grandchildren as Terry raises them high into the air to sit on top of a trainer pony. Calm days that will end with long rides into the sunset on top of thoroughbreds with her lone star ranger by her side finally at rest.

Terry steps into the ring as their eyes meet. They both realize that this isn't the end.

*Inspired by Beyond the Mat, Terry Funk vs Bret Hart at Wrestle fest 1997, and Terry Funk Vs Atsushi Onita FMW 1993

Bergamasque

By Samuel Pflugrath

It shines in bright through the green-tinted window, the lovely light of the moon. Soft and pale it fills the little room, and wisps of steam from the bathtub ripple upward through it. A lantern made of blue-tinted glass hangs from the plain white ceiling above, but its own light is faint and flickering in the still-humid air; and so it proves to be no match for the somber light of the moon.

*

He lies in the bathtub, with the green curtain drawn part-way. His typewriter sits on a little stool at its side, so that he can work all through the night. Most of him now sits concealed beneath milky white waters made to smell of tropical fruits and flowers. Through the green-tinted window, the light of the moon shines down upon his face, as small and sad and pale as its own.

*

The pages of his typewriter sit there blank, and the wastepaper basket in the corner lies empty. The water, which once was warm, now grows steadily colder as the steam in the air dissipates—condensing itself upon the dark-blue tiles of the walls and then flowing downward in tiny rivers, all emptying onto a floor of patterned linoleum, green as the summer sea. At last, the dying lamp that hangs above goes out; and yet still the room remains illumined, if dimly, by the soft and simple light of the moon.

*

He is not asleep, though his eyes are shut: for it is only from behind closed eyelids that he can see the ghostly forms he wishes to summon forth upon his paper. In that darkness he sees peasants, in dreamy masks and costumes and carrying lutes and lanterns, all gathered in the green countryside far, far beyond the slumbering cities, dancing together amid fountains and trees and statues and birds, and singing of all the joys of life and of love that he has never known, and which he fears he will never know, all beneath that same light of the moon that now shines in through the window, upon the small and silent room where he lies as if dead; upon the cold and cloudy waters into which he has submerged himself; upon the blank white pages that he fears he will only ever mar in his attempts to enchant; and upon his own face, small and sad and pale.

Milk Tooth

By Max Noble

When I was ten years old, I watched my sister kill a cat. It had gotten caught in the raccoon traps Dad used to set out during the spring in the woods behind our house, the kind with the bait packed down a metal pipe. Sometimes, after he'd gotten into a bad fight with Mom, he would take me out to set them, anchoring them at the bases of the trees with a spike and some steel cable and then burying the pipe in the dirt and leaves until just the rim poked out. Then at night the raccoons would come, and they'd reach down to get at the cat food, or whatever he had decided to use, and the coil spring would release, pinning their arm in the tube with a metal bar. They were meant to be safe for dogs and cats, because they don't go around using their paws to reach into pipes unless they're desperate.

She was a tabby cat, with eyes the color of sea glass and a nick in her right ear. Her fur was matted through and patchy, her tail just barely more impressive than a rat's. There was a fresh scab on her back, yellow around the edges and crimson in the middle, encrusted with dirt. I looked like a dog, or maybe a coyote, had bitten her.

"We should tell Dad," I said. Alex was kneeling in the leaves, her back to me, reaching out to the cat with an oven mitt over her left hand. She didn't respond.

The ground around the base of the tree had been partially swept clean, and the dirt had been furrowed by the steel cable that the cat had dragged around during the night. She had managed to wrap the cable around the base of the tree, and didn't have much slack left, so she stayed crouched, pressed up against the bark as Alex inched her way forward.

"Here, kitty kitty." The cat's tail twitched and she bared her teeth, whiskers bristling.

"It's okay, I'm not gonna hurt you."

Alex took another shuffling step forwards and the cat lashed out at her mittened hand. There was a rush of movement in the dirt, and then she had the cat pinned to the ground at the base of the tree, her oven mitt heavy on its shoulder blades.

"Alex, don't hurt her!" I shouted, or at least I think I did.

“It’s okay, I got you.” Her voice was soft, soothing. The cat lay in the dust, her sides heaving, her eyes glassy. Alex grabbed the trap with her other hand, and squeezed the release on the outside of the pipe, her knuckles white against the dark green metal as she pulled it away.

The cat’s paw was a twisted mess, and the fur up to her wrist was thick and wet. I could see a sliver of pinkish white shining in the sun, and a trail of crimson strung through the air, connecting where her dew claw used to be to the trap itself.

Bile rose in my throat, and my head felt like it was full of air. From where I stood, I could see Alex’s face, the straight line of her mouth, the far away look in her eyes. It was the same look I saw on her face when Dad would come home late with a slur in his words and violence in his hands. I’d learned to stay quiet when that happened, to not move or run. Alex didn’t run either, but she never stayed still or quiet.

“Sam, don’t cry.” I couldn’t tear my eyes away.

She fished in her pocket with her free hand and pulled out a small folding knife. At that moment, I became aware of the pulsing rush in my ears. It was a cold spring day, but there was sweat prickling on my back and collecting on my upper lip.

She made a quick, sudden motion and the blade slotted into the cat with a wet snapping sound. It yowled and contorted, twisting its body under her hand, the untrapped paw tracing a red line along her forearm above the oven mitt. Alex pushed down, and my eyes lost focus when heard another snap. I felt my stomach seize as the smell, sharp and mineral, hit the back of my throat, and all I could see was the sunlight, cold and bright and wet.

###

There’s an old sycamore tree down by the dried up river bed at the edge of the woods that Alex and I used to climb when we were kids. At some point before I was born, our neighbors put up a barbed wire fence next to that tree, and by the time I was old enough to walk, the tree had pressed itself up against the wire. Over the years it grew, ring by ring, until the wire, stretched to its limit, cut through the bark. The wood split and flowed like honey, enveloping the barbs in a tight embrace.

Five years later, the details of that afternoon were lodged somewhere beneath my skin, nestled in between the rings of my growth. I didn’t think about it much, but every once in a while I’d get a bloody nose or hear a pair of stray cats fighting, and I’d feel a familiar sharpness in my chest as my heart began to speed up.

At seventeen, Alex stood a head taller than me. She kept her dark hair short, and her hazel eyes had an amber ring around the pupil. She was quick to smile, but it was all teeth and didn't reach her eyes like it used to. After Dad left, she had dropped out of school and gotten a job to help pay rent, and she didn't spend much time at the house anymore. In some ways, that was nice; when she and Mom were in the house together there was a looming sensation of dread, like clouds building on the horizon, threatening violence.

That fall, we'd gone to an annual pumpkin patch that always filled a vacant lot in town with garish orange and purple tents, complete with hay bales, apple cider donuts, and plastic skeletons.

"You guys used to *love* carving pumpkins." Mom was in a rare good mood today; she didn't usually talk about the past. "Remember when we used to put up fake cobwebs and you would make spiders out of pipe cleaners?"

"Yeah, and that one time Sam ate so much candy he threw up all over the kitchen floor,"

Alex laughed as Mom shook her head.

"No, that was definitely you." Walking next to each other in the early evening light, the resemblance between them was uncanny. The same hair, the same eyes, the same round cheeks and pointy chin. The years hadn't gone easy though, and Mom's hair was starting to gray, her eyes were watery, and gravity had begun to draw her skin back to the ground.

"You wouldn't even remember," Alex said, her smile fading. "Dad was somewhere else and you made me clean it up because your back hurt too much." For as long as I can recall, Mom had struggled with chronic back pain. The sound of her opening the orange plastic pill bottles that cluttered the bathroom cabinet had only grown more frequent.

"You guys looking for some pumpkins?" The man sitting behind the cashier's stand smiled at us, his blue eyes perched above a face full of acne scars and patchy facial hair, like a rock encrusted with lichen. He gestured towards a nearby tent, under which were wagons and barrels overflowing with pumpkins, their satin skin soft under the orange string lights. Mom surveyed the display, but I could tell Alex's comment had gotten to her. She flashed a smile, all teeth.

“Actually, you wouldn’t happen to know if the farm is hiring? My daughter is growing older by the day and needs a real job.”

“I have a real job,” Alex said, her voice flat. Mom turned to her, the smile growing.

“Really? Last I recall you were letting men ogle at you at a dive bar and pulling your skirt up a little higher for tips.” A gleam of triumph lit in her eyes; she always enjoyed having an audience. In the background, the cashier’s face had twisted into a frozen rictus, perfectly mirroring the grinning scarecrow standing by the pumpkins, straw stuffed and mute.

Alex’s eyes were flint, hard and sharp. “Maybe if you weren’t such a shitty mom I wouldn’t have to support our entire fucking family.” My fingernails dug crescent shaped divots into my palms as Alex turned and stalked off.

Sometimes it was easy to blame Mom for everything. She had Alex when she was seventeen, and me at nineteen. She and Dad had been high school sweethearts, and in photos from back then they both look happy enough to last a lifetime. I can’t pinpoint exactly when things started to change, but I know it had already begun before I was old enough to notice the bruises on Mom’s arms. After Dad left, things quieted down, but a bitter seed had taken root. Her anger was less violent, less heat and motion, but Alex and I had already developed our rhythm. Just like Dad, Mom would gravitate towards Alex, knowing she’d fight back while I faded away, becoming more and more transparent. Often I’d think to myself that she should’ve never been a mother, and sometimes I’d feel guilty about it.

The walk home had been silent, and as soon as we got back Mom went to the bathroom. I heard the pop rattle of the bottle, but I was used to that by now. I wasn’t used to the quiet gasping breaths of her crying. When she came back out I was still untying my shoes, and she looked over her shoulder at me. Her eyes were red, her brow furrowed, her lips drawn and pale. She hesitated for just a moment, and I thought she might say something. The silence was thick and heavy, and I could see the exhaustion and guilt written in the lines on her face. Then she turned and walked into her room, closing the door behind her.

When I was seven, a scrub jay flew into one of our windows. I was the only one who had noticed, so I went outside and brought it in, a bundle of blue and gray feathers warm in my hands. It had just been-

stunned by the impact, and it came to as I carried it down the hall to the room Alex and I shared. It flew out of my hands and into our room, where it spiraled back and forth, pooping on the bed sheets and the carpet and eventually punching a hole through the window screen. Mom had been asleep, although in hindsight she had most likely taken her pills, and she didn't wake up until Dad got home. We'd been doing our best to clean up, but the poop had stained the fabric and the carpet, and the hole in the window screen couldn't be fixed. I had never seen him so furious. His shouting woke Mom up, and when she came out of her room, he turned towards her and hit her in the face hard enough to knock her down. Then he turned to us and grabbed Alex by the arm. She was holding a glass cup in her hand and swung it at his jaw. I stood perfectly still and watched as he hit her.

Our whole lives, she had always fought back. It was a part of her, just like it was a part of me to freeze. She had taken the brunt of the storm, and I had taken shelter behind her.

I woke up to the sound of the train whistle, dissonant and hollow. I listened to it shuttle by, the rumble softened by the distance. In my head I could see it from far above, a moonlit river of metal through the woods, black as the night sky.

The creaking of the floorboards outside my bedroom brought me fully awake, and I saw a shadow pass through the hallway. As quietly as I could, I slipped out of bed and peered out the door. Alex was standing in the living room, wearing jeans and a green hoodie, with a backpack slung over her shoulders.

Alex was standing in the living room, wearing jeans and a green hoodie, with a backpack slung over her shoulders.

"Alex," I whispered. Her head whipped towards me, her eyes wide and shining in the moonlight slanting down from the window. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing," she whispered back. "Go back to bed." She walked to the front door and knelt to put her shoes on. I heard a soft rattling coming from inside her backpack.

"Where are you going?" I asked. She finished tying her shoes before standing up and turning to face me. She was in the shadows now, but I heard a tremble in her voice.

"I'm leaving for a few days." She paused for a long time, and we stood there in the living room together, listening to the win blow through the autumn leaves in the night.

“You’re not coming back.”

“Would you come with me?”

I didn’t know how to respond, but we both knew the answer.

“Be safe, Sam. I’ll see you around.”

She took the keys to the car off the hook by the door, and gently opened it. Her sleeve pushed up, revealing a thin scar on her left forearm. She looked small, silhouetted against the night by the sulfur glow of a street lamp. She closed the door without looking back, and I felt a sharp pain somewhere under my heart.

###

They showed up on our doorstep at six the next morning. Mom was already at the door when I came out of my room, and she turned to look at me before pulling it open. I could see in her eyes that she already knew.

There were two of them, a man and a woman, standing side by side, their navy blue uniforms dusted in white; the first snow of the year.

“Are you Mrs. Ward?” The woman asked. Her hands were clasped tightly in front of her.

“Yes, is there something wrong? Did something happen to Alex?” Her voice was shaking, and the words were coming out too quick, each one stumbling over the next.

“My name is Officer Janelle, I’m here on behalf of the Warren County Sheriff’s Department. Is it okay if my partner and I step inside?” She looked over Mom’s shoulder, and I looked back at her.

“Is there something wrong?” She repeated herself, her voice taking on a frantic tone.

“If you could take a seat—”

“Tell me what happened to my daughter!”

In the long silence after her shout, I saw a flock of black shadows take to the sky from the woods behind the officers, and heard the distant rustle of their wings as they pinwheeled under the pale blue.

“Ma’am, your daughter got in a car accident this morning. I’m very sorry to tell you this, but she died.”

I think she continued talking after that, but none of it reached me. I stood perfectly still and felt the world move very quickly.

###

It's winter now, and the sycamore trees are pale and bare under the January sun. I'm walking into the woods behind our house with a can of cat food, a fork, and a small plate. The snow crunches under my shoes and my breath solidifies in the morning sun. It's the coldest winter in years.

I still have trouble remembering the days following that morning. It's only been three months and everything feels smeared together, a muddled canvas of grays and blues. Sometimes I wake up crying, but it's worse when I wake up and don't feel anything at all. Some days it feels like it happened years ago, other days it feels like it hasn't even happened yet.

I think about you every day, Alex. Mom does too. I hear her crying most nights, but I haven't heard her open any of her bottles. I'm working on forgiving her, which is sometimes difficult, but I know she's having a harder time of it. I'm also working on forgiving myself. I have a lot of regrets, but most of all I wish I could've done for you what you did for me all those years.

There's a stray cat I've seen a few times padding around the woods behind our house. He's gray, a little skinny, with a few scars, and his eyes are the color of sea glass. I've been feeding him breakfast and dinner for the past two weeks, and the other day he came close enough to sniff my hand. I hope one day he decides to come inside.

DEATH DOOKIE & DISEASE

By Gabriela Galindo

I hate it here. The yellowing multi layered walls
painted on top of each other over and over again
melting into gravity - holding hostages

Yo! You know how people always want you to be respectful
or solemn or serious about heavy serious things?
well I can't do that shit, especially when you've had to spend time
in this hot ass mess of a place

I understand that there are going to be unpleasant smells
given that people are dying or their diapers are being changed

And of course, the body creates certain odors
after it's been lying down in the same position for a long time
but, damn, I don't see how there's any dignity in a place like this
And isn't that when we start being stripped of our humanity-
the minute our dignity begins to be chipped away?

And you have no privacy when this is your home
And you have to get used to witnessing death take people away
And you watch others struggle, trying to come back to life
And others losing hope and self-autonomy all together
And one bodily function after another
And there's a smell to all of this -
And - Does it make me an asshole if I don't want to go?
And, I mean - it ain't like I don't love her, my grandma-
no one should ever have to come to one of these places -
let alone live in one of them

And ain't life a fucking tease? You're born into the world with your
first brisk inhale

And with movement, people -sounds, talking, screaming -
And by the time you take your exit, not cuz you're ready to leave
but because they're taking you.

You face that alone. You die alone.
with nothing except stillness. That's it.

End of sentence. Period. No commas or semicolons.
No sound. No light. Just a dark vacuum devoid of existence.

(That's all folks! Elvis has left the building!)
I hate it here.
I loathe this place,
The wavering fluorescent lights
Hovering over bodies - covering them in silence.
I don't see how there's any dignity in a place like this
but it's the only way
I can come and see you.

It's Clobberin' Time

By Ron Riley

It's two-thirty in the afternoon and it's raining, light and steady. You like walking in the rain. You like jumping into the puddles, with both feet, to see how high you can splash. You're going to the comic bookstore, after school, with your friend Jesus. The comic bookstore is a much longer way home, but you know your mother won't notice if you're late. She's accustomed to you being late. Your teacher told her that boys, especially nine-year-olds, are frequently distracted. Your mother is also frequently distracted by your two younger brothers, one is five and the other three, so she thinks less about the time it takes you to get home.

The clouds darken as you approach the store. Iron bars cross the windows. The exterior is an oatmeal colored plaster, flaked and crumbly. You walk in. The stale, pungent smell of old paper rushes to greet you. You wander the un-swept aisles of neatly stacked comic books. Negotiating around the adults. Beads of rain dripping from their coats. Their soggy shoes leave wet trails on the concrete floor. You shuffle through the aisles, searching through the books and magazines. Some are new, with bright crisp shiny artwork on their covers. Others are old, covered in plastic. You know everyone has their favorite, as do you, and keep looking. Not 'Ghost Rider,' not 'Green Arrow.' You pass the latest issue of 'Chainsaw Man,' Jesus's favorite, and you see Jesus bend down to pick up a copy. You watch as he drops his backpack on the floor and looks down each side of the aisle. You see him slip a comic into his backpack, then you turn and keep looking.

Finally, you find the old issues of 'Fantastic Four,' sealed in plastic. The same comics your father keeps, hidden in a trunk. The ones he takes out sparingly, when you beg him. You ask if you can read one, but he says that would ruin the value. These issues are old, they're sealed in plastic. He shows you the cover. "Mint condition," he says. Just the cover, which is so tantalizing, you make plans. For when he goes to work. Plans to open the trunk, which he locks, after teasing you with that cover. He doesn't expect you to follow him. To watch and see where he hides the key. You think about how you'll open the comic's plastic seal, after opening his trunk. Your boy scout knife is sharp enough to make a clean cut.

You polish the edge of the knife with a stone, just like the scout master showed you, to make sure.

The clerk at the comic bookstore looks your way from behind the counter. You think he stares at you longer than is natural and this makes you uncomfortable. Rather than shy away, you approach him at the counter. He smiles at you and asks, "what are you looking for?" You smell the dope he's been smoking. The smell surrounds him. It moves when he moves, like a disgusting forcefield.

But you know he didn't see Jesus slip the comic into his backpack. "Why did they stop making Fantastic Four?" you ask.

"Man, they got old," he tells you. You smile, nod, then sidestep away from the counter. He asks, "weren't you in here last week?" You nod your head. He smiles and his eyes follow you he flips his long greasy hair back, away from his un-shaven face, like a girl you know at school, like Lidia. You notice the red in his eyes. His eyes remind you of Mr. Sinister's eyes. You look over your shoulder for Jesus, but don't see him. Only his backpack lying on the floor, next to the 'Chainsaw Man' comics.

"What is Fantastic Four #46 worth?" you ask.

"More than you got," he says. "Bout \$600 in great condition."

"Do you have one?" You ask.

"Yeah, wanna see it?" He says. "It's in back." His eyes seem to glow. You shuffle your feet, side to side, and sneak glances back to the aisle for Jesus.

He waits for a response, then says, "There's spin-offs, you know."

"Like what," you ask.

"The Thing has his own comic now. It's Clobberin' Time," he says mimicking the deep voice of the hero.

"I didn't see it on the shelves," you say, and take another look over your shoulder for Jesus.

"It's in the back too," he says, and smiles again, inching closer to you. He begins walking toward the door leading to the back of the store. You feel his hand on your back propelling you forward.

"Come on," he says turning towards you. His yellow teeth prominently displayed in a wide toothy grin.

You continue, but your legs are shaking. Your heart is beating so hard, you can feel it pounding in your ears.

He stops, holding the door open. “Go ahead,” he says and presses his hand against your back. He wants you to go first.

You stop next to him, so close, you are inside the disgusting cloud that surrounds him.

“Could you get it for me,” you ask. And you see the smile on his face change to something hideous.

“Let’s go,” Jesus calls.

“I’ve got to go,” you say. And spin away from him. You follow Jesus towards the door.

You can feel him following behind you.

You push through the front door and turn right. Both you and Jesus are running now. Your backpacks bouncing. The clerk stops at the door, as if he can’t go any further, as if afraid to leave his lair. He stares at the both of you until you turn the corner and disappear from his view.

The rain has stopped. The clouds are giving way to a pale sky.

Breathing hard, you shout to Jesus, without slowing down, “Did you get it?”

“Fantastic Four #252. It’s a good one. Your dad is never going to know you carved the other one up,” Jesus says.



By E Craft



By Jose Lopez

Through the Meadow

By Kristine Alvarez

In the early afternoon, we go along through the meadow.

Our bare feet touch the soft, lush grass with each step we take, as the wind blows gently through our hair and dresses. We dance throughout the vibrant colored flowers sprouting from the Earth; yellow, blue, orange, purple, and red wildflowers sway with the wind. The sky, blue as my cotton gingham dress, is filled with the fluffiest white clouds,

floating playfully around each other. We lie down, staring intently up at the sky, picturing what we see in each cloud. We are focused. I see a majestic lion, ready to roar at me from afar, while she sees a pretty poodle with tight curls and bows in place; her giggles fill my heart with distant memories. I could lie here all day with her, lost in the clouds, but by the time I know it, she has faded away. She is here with me in one moment,

and suddenly gone in the next. I saw her little face, her sweet doe eyes and slanted smile, though now, her memory is growing faint. I can only recall how her dress was as pink as a fresh ballerina slipper, glittering in the bright rays of sunshine, and how her long, chestnut brown hair cascaded down her back, blowing gently with the wind as she pranced around without any care. Perhaps I dreamt the whole thing, but I still smell wildflowers each time I wake.

Latasha

By Aniyah White

“A bottle of juice is no excuse, the truth hurts” - Tupac Shakur, “I Wonder If Heaven Got a Ghetto”

I was fifteen,
but that didn't matter.
Only the color of my skin did.
If she would have taken fifteen seconds,
she would have realized that I was only fifteen.
If she would have taken fifteen seconds
out of her day
she would've known my name.

Latasha.

Not many people know my name anymore.
They don't know what happened to me.

Latasha Harlins.

The money was in my hand,
but I never stood a chance.

If she would have taken fifteen seconds
before grabbing my sweater
she would have realized that as a little black girl
I would never risk my life for
a bottle of orange juice.

A bottle of orange juice, that was turned into
A can of Arizona Iced Tea and a bag of Skittles.

They said his name.
Trayvon Martin.

No one says my name.
Latasha Harlins.
I am Eric Garner and George Floyd yelling
“I can’t breathe”
while laying on the ground with my hands behind my back
helplessly.

I am, Latasha Harlins
and I didn’t get a chance to yell.

Witness reports say
that she didn’t even give me a chance before a stool was thrown at me
and my sweater was pulled.

Because of my skin color
I didn’t have a chance
before I was instantly killed by
a gunshot fired one meter away
while my back was turned.

I died instantly
and it took her fifteen seconds to faint
and her husband to report an attempted hold up.
All while I lay on the floor,
with my money in one hand and a bottle of orange juice in the other.

It would have only taken her fifteen seconds
to know that I was more than just my skin color.

That I was Latasha.

Not Faust, Technically

By Samuel Pflugrath

So, the damndest thing just happened the other night.

It was a bit past eleven-thirty, and I was sitting by myself on a couch at the lounge downtown: nothing better to do, nowhere better to go. The place was slowly emptying out for the night when I noticed an older man, maybe about thirty-five or forty, also sitting on the couch who seemed to be inching his way toward me. I figured he was gonna try and hit on me, and I decided I'd let him; because, again, nothing better to do, nowhere better to go.

Anyway, he finally gets up close, and without any preamble he says, "I'm going to show you something that'll change your life forever." Then he reaches straight into his pants and pulls out—his phone, and shows it to me. On the screen there's just a looping monochrome animation of an ugly little demon-looking thing inside a bottle, that hooks its pinky fingers into the corners of its mouth and then sticks its tongue out at the viewer while rolling its eyes.

"I need you to buy this from me, now," he said, smiling. I was silent a moment before answering:

"You're just selling me your phone? You mean, that's all you wanted to—"

"No, no, no, I'm not selling you my phone—I'm selling you my Imp!"

"Your 'imp'?"

"Don't tell me you've never heard of the Bottle Imp Legionnaires Klub, with a 'K'?"

Before I could answer "The fuck is that?" he continued his pitch:

"What I'm offering you is a once-in-a-lifetime investment opportunity—but the clock is running out fast. You need to buy this thing from me before midnight, or else!"

"Or else what?"

"Or else—never mind what else, just look at it!"

"Do I have to?" It looked like it was drawn by someone whose childhood sexual awakening happened while they were watching *Rick and Morty*. "Just to be clear, you're *not* selling me the phone, you're just selling me... a gif?"

"I'm selling you an Imp!" he replied, "And besides, it's pronounced 'gif'."

“Okay: you’re selling me a *gif* of an imp? Is that correct?”

“For expediency’s sake, yes.”

“Okay. How much?”

“Five hundred thousand and one dollars.”

“Eat shit.” I got up to leave, but he followed.

“Look, just because you’re the smartest, funniest, most sexually desirable person I’ve ever met, I’ll let you have it at a special discount: five hundred thousand dollars, and ninety-nine cents!”

“Eat five hundred thousand dollars and ninety-nine cents worth of shit.”

“You don’t understand: I *need* to sell this bottle imp to somebody else at a profit or—”

“That’s not even how bottle imps are supposed to work! You gotta sell them at a loss, not a profit: didn’t your English teacher ever make you read Stevenson?”

He scoffed—he *actually scoffed!* “I was too busy reading the financial section.”

“Yeah, well, read this,” I answered, giving him the finger. By this point we were both out on the sidewalk. It was a Saturday night; and yet, somehow, we were the only people out there, and there were no cars on the street.

Finally, I tried to push past him, but he just dropped to his knees in front of me. “Please, I’m begging you,” he blubbered, tears running down his face, “You have to buy this goddamn thing from me before the stroke of midnight, or else I’m—”

Suddenly the sound of a clocktower’s bell rang out twelve—which, in hindsight, is odd, because I’m pretty sure there were no clocktowers anywhere near us. “Oh no, please—!” he exclaimed as a flame-red Lambo pulled up beside us from out of nowhere, and a grinning man in a red suit with slicked-back hair, sunglasses, and high heels stepped out. (At least, I *think* he was wearing heels—he must’ve been, or else he was just walking around on tiptoes with his knees bent for some reason.)

“Buddy!” the stranger said, approaching him with outstretched arms, “It’s been a while, hasn’t it? How’s my favorite BILK member? How’ve you been—ooh, is that Imp No. 44 out of 666, *still in your possession?* Oh, buddy, buddy! I had faith in you! You know, I always said you were the smartest, funniest, most sexually desirable person I’ve ever met—and I’m met ‘em all, you know—but now: oh, buddy, you’ve disappointed me!”

“Pleased master you gotta give me some more time,” he stuttered, but the stranger cut him off with a wave of his hand.

“Sorry, buddy: a smart contract’s a smart contract. Just because I’m the one who makes and breaks all the rules doesn’t mean I’m not bound to ‘em.”

“But I almost had this deal clinched!” he said, pointing at me.

“Like hell you did,” I replied, and the stranger threw his head back and laughed like a hyena, before stopping suddenly and snapping his fingers.

“Mammon! Belphegor! How ‘bout we take our pal here for a ride?”

Two huge dudes in suits and with shaved heads stepped out of the back of the Lambo.

“*You hoid deh boss,*” the first one said, grabbing him by his upper arm, while the other hoarsely whispered into his ear, “*Get in.*” With him struggling between them, they got back in just as the stranger returned to the driver’s seat. His arm out the window, he turned toward the back.

“You really thought you were gonna buy your way into Club Paradise investing in Imps? Buddy: all crypto buys *ya is the crypt!*”

With an echoing laugh he floored it, and the Lambo roared away with the man screaming in the back. It turned a sharp corner and then zoomed down a dead end, out of my sight.

Suddenly there was a flash, and a flaming, smoking explosion; but when I ran down to look, there was no wreckage to be found. The man from the lounge, and all his Imps? Gone.

The Pacific

By Clare Dickerson

They don't tell you this part
how nighttime creates
a kind of abyss that stretches on
forever. If I'm not careful, it may
hypnotize me, staring out into the
black expanse of never-ending dark,
ocean meeting sky.

I often have dreams of drowning
of my mouth filling with salt
and my lungs screaming
for oxygen. But I plummet and
I vanish, and I allow it to swallow me
welcoming the crushing chaos of
stark, deafening silence.

Standing on the shore, a familiar
calm always rushes over me, eerie and
deep, as the waves slosh against
my ankles, kicking sand and
droplets up onto my thighs and
dampening the bottom hem of my
favorite denim skirt.

The tide breaks, builds, barrels, and crashes
and I sink a little deeper each time.
Centimeter by centimeter,
I wonder what depths the ocean
holds. Does it wonder the same about me?



By Maxwell Casem

What's in a poem?

By Alina Acedo

What's in a poem?

Is it about being happy,

Or being depressed?

Does it make you want to cry,

Or does it make you want to go out and lay in the grass?

Is it about someone you love,

Or someone you loathe?

Was it written by colonists,

Or by a modern person born thirty years ago?

Is it written by someone inspirational,

Or just a teen in poetry class?

Has it been analyzed over and over,

Or is the meaning everywhere?

Is it three sentences long,

Or have fifty-two stanzas?

Is it about a specific animal,

Or a specific plant?

Was it written with soul,

Or written for a grade?

Does it have dozens of rhymes,

Or not a single rhyming word?

Is it free verse again,

Or an organized sonnet?

And the biggest question of all,

Was it even good?





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