

SAGA Literary Journal

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Foreword

This year marked a return to campus for the students and staff of Long Beach City College, and a return to editing the SAGA Literary Journal in person. Volume VII of SAGA, one of the few student-run journals by a community college in the country, is a collection of reckonings, of longings, of meditations on both grief and on joy.

Thank you to the editorial staff of Vol. VII, in particular to managing editor Jesus Ulloa and art director Heidie Saenz, for all of their hard work and dedication. The privilege of creating Vol. VII in person with this team has been one of the highlights of my time at LBCC as we strive to connect and rebuild the creative writing community on campus after this prolonged period of isolation and uncertainty. Thank you especially to our incredible faculty advisor Professor Jason Casem, whose unflagging support and guidance provided us ballast during this transition.

We hope you enjoy this volume of SAGA as much as we enjoyed making it. May you savor these small moments the way one may savor a blueberry on the tongue, and may you find your community of weirdos and kin the same way we did through the power of the page.

Madeleine Wojack
Editor-in-Chief and President
English Majors & Minors Club, 2021-22

THOMAS A.E. HESKETH

Ode to the Blueberry

O,

blue orb indigo

crowned cerulean delight, mistress

of cream, first frost fruit single

spectrum sphere, blue-gray globe, blue

vitamin, baby's wet supple thumb,

plump planet's blue blood

berry ribbon blue,

oh!

MARIE CARTIER

The Griller

It is late at night—past ten and there he is; I call him “The Griller” because he is grilling at night by himself, the smoke rising in front of him and then the flames and his bicycle is behind him, and on the table in front of the grill are the bags of what I think must be raw meat because I smell meat grilling, and so does my dog who I am walking because we walk at night because it is a pandemic and I want to be socially distant and stay alive, so I started walking at night, late at night, when no one else was around, or hardly anyone else, and I didn’t have to worry about someone accidentally breathing on me but still there are people out here—there is a woman swinging for instance, an adult woman, not a kid, and she swings the entire time I walk around the park which is an hour and a half, and she swings, swings, swings so high she is level with the crossbars, high, high, so high I wonder if she will flip over the back of it but she doesn’t drop back, she swings as far in front as in the back, her hair streaming back and then forward and she is shadowed by the griller some nights, in another corner of the park, his smoke clearing just enough for me to see her silhouetted against the sky swinging and the smell of grilled meat everywhere and at some point he packs up his grilled meat and he must put it on his bike and he must ride away with the grilled meat warm in his bags on the back of his bike because he doesn’t stay like the woman swinging, he grills his meat and packs it up and leaves with it packed up on his bike, like I said, and I keep walking with my dog around and around the park, around and around, and I sometimes pass a whole family, a dad and mom and two kids each in their own go-cart, one a fire engine and one a pink Cadillac, kid-sized, and they go around and around the griller and the woman swinging and the older kids smoking pot at the back of the park and the occasional late night jogger, and I see them all, and above us is the moon which shines on us as a silver crescent or a half moon or a full moon and on my way home from the park I pass a woman I become friendly with, and she tells me

she's Samoan, and it's important to dance under a full moon, to show our love for the full moon, for all things, and to ask for what I want, for what we want and I say OK, I will do that, I will ask the moon, the full moon, and I am howling with all I want, with desire for all of us to keep breathing and to stay alive, for the smoke rising, for the swinging, swinging, and for the moon shining and us, all of us, howling into its light.

THOMAS A. E. HESKETH

Chrome Bumper: Rivera

Between heat-cracked, white crosswalk lines,
 under silent, blinking streetlights
Beneath low cloud, light-gray Pacific fall sky,
 on dark gray, oil mottled Long Beach surface street,
Red lights flashing; ambulance's heart pulsing

Not a film or live television; here, drama unfolds in an instant
 Cannot be a boy at center of such commotion?
No movie screen. No popcorn. No previews
 We did not own a color television.
He stood dazed, between a vehicle, and my wrecked bicycle.

No screams, no commercials; no director's cues
 Confusion spun in slow motion.
Witnesses wondered, "What had happened?"
 "Is that the kid?" "Where is the driver?"
"No one died, right?" "It's over now, right?"

"Sit down!" orders the officer to the kid,
"I've seen people walk on broken legs."

His parents said he was a brave young man,
 Ignoring my smooth ten-year-old upper lip.
They said he was not hurt. There would be no fuss, no lawsuit.
 He would get a new bicycle, any bike he wanted.
A black Schwinn came in time, with a buzzer, colored streamers.

An uncle with white neck brace supporting his fused neck advised,
"Spit on where it hurts; don't cry like a girl"

Days flown from calendars, following time's echoes
 tides turned bluffs to beach sand,
Memory of the dark, rusting chrome bumper
 looming inches from his head simmer,
A shadow covering an open metal casket, an open mental sore

A car approaches white line of any street crossing, still
- his red line – (im)pulse rushes, rising rage,
A hand goes to keys in his pocket, ready to “key”
the offending vehicle, looking for a driver’s eyes
Oblivious to pedestrian’s past; trespassing on a raw memory

This incident happened about the time when he had received
his first hardback book, a history of the Civil War
illustrated with period etchings of battlefields and generals,
when he still played with plastic soldiers, organizing
campaigns in the dirt by the tree.

That day, it has a date and the report he has since read; he does
not give it an anniversary. Each cross walk violated or
screeching car collapses time – now is then – again he is ten.

SHOUP SHOUP

A Call From Cala

I crossed the Callum Tree bridge, took a sharp right turn, and quickly slammed my body against the sturdy damp wood, hoping I was no longer being followed. Hands trembling, I held my cane against my body and prayed that I would have enough time to catch my breath. Pieces of the wood were bouncing a glowing green hue off my bare skin, and though it was deeply strange, I had more important things to worry about now. I heard the jangling of the shrouded figure's fetters and the whispered word it had been repeating for the last hour of this horrifying game of hide-and-seek: "*Cala*," it said again. The figure could not possibly be close enough for me to hear it speak so softly, but I could; it was clear over the wind and rustling of nature, over the powerful Ea's turbulent rapids, and over my deep and ragged breathing. My exhausted body was not ready to run further, so I peeled myself off the shimmering bark, planted my cane, and prepared to face my pursuer.

As I stepped away from the mighty Callum Tree's shelter, the crisp autumn wind animated the dried dead leaves and tousled my hair. Though I was terrified, I took in the moment as if it was my last. My deep and focused breath picked out the earthy smell of soil and the charred scent of freshly lit hearth fires that would stay burning throughout the evening. I couldn't control what was about to happen, but I could choose to take in Alsatawn's beauty before it did.

The figure slowly approached from across the bridge. "*Iara*," it hummed. I shivered and wondered how this thing knew my name. The figure's crackly voice cut through my thoughts with another "*Iara*." I felt the tips of fingers meet my goose-pimpled flesh.

"*Iara!*" I opened my eyes, expecting to meet the doom that had chased me down but instead, something much worse woke me.

"*Iara*, how was your nap?" Ms. Eastly asked as she gently shook my arm. The classroom erupted in laughter.

"Lovely... not quite long enough apparently," I said. I wiped the drool from the side of my mouth and pushed my chestnut-colored bangs behind my pointed ears.

"Perhaps a day's suspension will allow you to catch up on all the sleep you need. Don't come back until you're able to go a full class

period without needing a nap,” she said while handing me a tattered piece of paper.

The slip said “Suspended” in bold blackberry ink and nothing else. The paper was old and tattered and had turned an off-white color from many years of use. Thinking only of all the other hands that had held this filthy old thing, I made an unpleasant face as I grasped the suspension notice. She huffed in disapproval and returned to the front of the class, continuing her lecture that seemed to be about acid-base titration.

Joke’s on her, I don’t wanna be here anyway, I told myself on the verge of tears. I hated being humiliated, and I hated chemistry. I grabbed my cane and put on my beaten-up denim jacket over my translucent wings as I walked out of the sun-lit classroom in my best impression of unfazed that I could muster.

I stopped at the bathroom to splash water on my face in an attempt to relieve myself from the nightmare and the day that just seemed to be getting worse. I patted my face dry with my jacket’s crumpled sleeve and glanced into the hazy warped mirror covered in vines. I straightened the vertical silver bars that cut through my eyebrows and brought attention to my heterochromia. Though having a blue eye and a brown eye wasn’t entirely rare among the Nyphae, I liked the way the piercings highlighted my eyes’ different hues.

I left the bathroom and walked towards the exit of Callum High feeling entirely better. As I pushed through the doors of the school’s southernmost exit, the sun immediately warmed my body. During this time of year, the air was always so damp and heavy that the afternoon sun seemed to be the only time I could truly warm up. The high school had been built in a natural clearing in the mixed-conifer forest of Alsatawn and it was our village’s only high school. Even though I did not enjoy the campus, this was the best glade in town to get undisrupted rays, so I often sat on the grass and read.

On my way home, I thought about my nightmare and our town’s most important landmark: the giant Callum Tree. I could get home without crossing the bridge and directly passing the tree, but I decided seeing it in the daylight while not being chased down by some anonymous pursuer might be helpful for my psyche.

Arriving at the bridge, I secured my glittery pink cane between my backpack and my back and tied my heavy jacket around my waist as best I could. I found myself looking over my shoulder ever so slightly as the bridge oscillated in the wind. To quell my anxiety, I

honed in on the noises of the roaring Ea, our village's widest and longest river. This practice was a gift my mother Inalae taught me the day before my eighth birthday when I was still a nyphling.

*

"Quickly now!" my mother shouted. She looked back at me, and her smile made me feel as though I were worrying for no reason. She had a hemp net filled to the top with foraged mushrooms that we had spent the day plucking. The bright orange morsels found at the base of giant Creare trees were my favorite, so this was a birthday tradition we never missed. We were about to cross the Callum Tree bridge on our way back home, and though I had crossed it with her many times, this day I noticed just how high up the bridge was.

"I'm scared, Momma. When was the last time anyone actually checked the ropes of the bridge?" eight-year-old me asked.

"That's a great question, little one! I'm not entirely sure," she said with a puzzled look as she braced herself by holding the braided ropes that stretched for what seemed like forever to a child. "But the first Nyphae made this bridge to work with nature, not against it. Don't be frightened by the swaying or the crackling noise of the wood. It is doing what is intended." She smiled and reached out her hand to me. I trusted her with every fiber of my being, so I took a few steps forward and clasped her hand.

"I could tell you a trick to calm your worries if you'd like. Your grandmother taught me when I was a nyphling, and she learned it from her research on the Dae." She added that last part quietly as she checked to see if anyone was passing us on the bridge. The Higher Court of Nyphae disapproved of tales of the Dae, and, because of that, everyone in Alsatawn made sure to only speak of such matters in private.

"Oh! The Dae?" I gasped. My mother knew that tidbit would hold my attention as I had been reading books and asking questions about the ancient order for as long as I could do so.

"Yes, indeed!" she said, smirking. "If the movement of the bridge is what frightens you most, focus on another part of nature that you can hear, see, smell, or touch. I focus on the Ea during crossings. She brings us life, and she is constantly moving and finding equilibrium."

I closed my eyes and listened to the water's constant hissing and finally was able to take a deep breath. I smiled up at my mother.

“That trick really does work! Thank you, Momma, Gramma, and the Dae.”

*

Eight years had passed since that moment, but my mother’s warmth and wisdom still guided me. I continued across the bridge clumsily, trying to plant my feet in a way that made sense while the bridge shifted slightly back and forth. Walking without my cane was tough, but I took my time. I made way for other Nyphae to cross along the way, but I had the bridge to myself for the most part. That, coupled with the sun’s warmth, gave me hope that the rest of the day was salvageable.

I finally arrived back on solid land. I quietly thanked the Ea, grabbed my cane from my back, and turned to the right off the path that would have taken me home. I was not in a hurry to get back and explain to my mothers why I had been suspended, but more importantly, I wanted to inspect the Callum Tree.

Twice the height and circumference of any tree in Alsatawn, the Callum Tree is living history. It has survived fires, wars, and even the greedy trimming of wood from our forest. Nyphae build our houses inside of trees, but no one marked or bored within this one. As I approached the tree, nothing looked unusual: no glowing green patterns, no shrouded creep, and no weird mind communication. I sighed in relief; my dream was just a dream.

I reached my hand out and touched its craggy bark. I thought about all it had seen. I imagined The Dae meeting here in ceremony, my mother as a child playing beneath its plentiful shade, and my earliest childhood memories of climbing its gnarled roots. As I stood there reaching out to the tree, I began to hear a sound I didn’t recognize. It started as too quiet to place, but as it began to crescendo into a whisper, my eyes widened in understanding: *cala*.

Ripping my hand from the Callum Tree, I took off as fast as I could. The sun was still out, but darkness choked the light underneath the forest’s canopy. I ran in a direction opposite the path and traveled parallel to the Ea in my initial terror. All my focus was down as I evaded rocks, vines, and debris. If I tripped, it would all be over. Something hard whacked my face and reminded me to look ahead, but it was too late. I began to plummet down the side of a cliff.

During the rainy season in the forest, landslides occur in the steep Ea-carved valley, and I was currently falling in the same path that rock had not long ago. Because the movement of earth had

cleared all the foliage that would have grown here, I found nothing to grab or cling to as I tumbled. Dirt covered my body, and suddenly, my stomach churned the way it did during a stormy day on the bridge—like I was free falling. I could not tell which direction was up or down. I just knew pain.

Filtered rays danced on my eyes, and the smell of early evening dew woke me. I was on my side against the tree that had both stopped my fall and knocked me unconscious. Sticking my hands into the dirt beneath me, I pushed my arms to try to lift my body into a sitting position and assess the damage. My favorite pair of blue jeans was ripped in multiple places, and the sole on my left boot was dangling where it once was solid. Since my arms were bare during my fall, shiny red gashes that stung and pulsed covered my arms. I was relatively okay aside from my battered arms and some bruises that I didn't need to see to know existed.

I giggled in relief as I used the tree to help my body up from the moist ground. Something sparkly in my peripherals caught my attention. It was my cane! I made a mental note to tell my mother that all the hours I spent drying, dyeing, and then attaching sap drops all over my companion was not “a waste of time” but instead, a survival tactic. Like my body, its exterior was looking quite rough, but the overall structure seemed perfectly fine.

In all the excitement of finding out that my cane and I had miraculously survived the fall, I did not notice the little woodland pond on the opposite end of the depression. It was encircled by a different kind of Creare tree than what I was used to seeing. Instead of long thick branches, short pine needles, and giant pinecones, these trees had long draped branches that radially dispersed from the top of the tree's massive trunk. Thousands of tiny fuzzy round leaves covered each drooping branch. I had seen similar trees once on a class field trip when I was a nyphling, and I vaguely remembered them as Curtain Creares. They grew directly in the water, and the flowers that fell from their branches bloomed on the edge of the calm water's surface. Each flower had a pearly white center and five perfectly pleated pink petals.

The pool's glowing blue color was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen, and the swirling motion of the water was almost hypnotizing. There was no inlet and no wind, yet the water was moving; it should have been stagnant like the other ponds in our forest. Though I could have probably used my last remaining bit of energy to fly high

enough to escape this place, I didn't want to. I was weirdly and completely content.

The crunching of leaves broke my trance. I swung around, raising my cane above my head to strike whatever had come up behind me. A small elderly being with long fingernails caught my swing mid-air and displayed a rather genuine and toothy smile. The woman in front of me was seemingly Nyphae; she had slightly pointed ears and tiny translucent wings. She also had that irritating ability to sneak around soft-footedly, a trait I always lacked.

"Iara! You've finally made it!" she said, releasing my cane and turning to walk back towards the pool.

"Um, I did?" I said.

"Oopsy, daisy! I always forget introductions. I'm Aucaraya. Defender of the Blulimen. Always have been! My father said the Dae would never appoint a woman, but he was wrong, wrong, wrong. Always was!" she said, grinning ear to ear as she continued walking around the pool's perimeter as if inspecting it for intruders. No one else was there but us.

"I'm sorry, the blue lemon? And did you say the Dae?"

"Goodness gracious! Keep up, Iara! I said the B-l-u-l-i-m-e-n! The Blulimen," she said, pointing to the pool.

Irritated at her condescending tone, I rolled my eyes and nodded, "Ok, got it. The pool has a name. Not sure why I'd be expected to know that. Could you just back up a little bit and slow down?" I didn't mean to lose my temper, but I was confused, and she was hurrying around the pool as if she had somewhere important to go.

I sat down on a rock, placed my head in my hands, and took a few deep breaths. Since the Ea was not around, I focused on the swirling of the pond and the chirping of birds for a moment. When I looked up, Aucaraya was sitting a couple of inches away from me on a tree root. Her big bright eyes looked empathetic, and she put out her hands. Gesturing for me to place my hands in hers, she said, "Let me explain."

Nope. Hell no.

But before I could react, my shaky hands had somehow found their way into hers. Her eyes softened, became glassy, and she seemed as if she was looking directly past me.

"They called us ruin incarnate," she said. "They said we would topple faith and crush governments. They said we would only bring chaos and terror to Alsatawn. They told the other Nyphae that we

should be feared, and they weren't completely wrong." Aucaraya's grip loosened, and her shoulders slumped in as her body relaxed slightly.

"Long ago, before the Higher Court of Nyphae ruled our land, the Dae took care of Alsatawn and all the creatures that made this beautiful forest home. The Callum Tree and the Blulimen functioned as portals. Anyone, or anything for that matter, could travel from the tree to the pond and vice versa, but a third option remained for only the Dae: we could remain between the portals in what we called The Creare. The Dae initially had no use for this space; however, as the Higher Court's malice spread, more of our kind chose to stay in the Creare permanently. Sadly, many of us never found the chance to retreat. The Dae were imprisoned simply for existing and creating outside the confines of what the newly appointed court ruled natural. Over time, the Dae hiding in the Creare faded, the ones imprisoned never were seen again, and the Higher Court slowly taught new generations of Nyphae that we were a group of rebellious and selfish criminals. Nothing more."

Aucaraya lightly removed her hands from mine and her eyes reanimated as she jumped up from the root that had been supporting her while she spoke.

"Back to work!"

"Back to work? You can't possibly be serious?" I said.

"You know what they say, my little plum. If I don't do it, no one will!"

"But I have more questions, Aucaraya."

"I know you do, and I know you'll always have more, but for now, I need to remove those brambles and balms from the flowers," she said as she whisked away towards the spot where I had initially entered. I picked up my cane and jacket to leave, assuming she had no other answers for me now, but, when I turned around, there she was standing directly in front of me.

"Iara? Tell me, does your family possess a cala?" I shivered at the word. Aucaraya stepped back slightly and looked at me confused.

"Please, Aucaraya. That word has been following me around all day. First in my nightmare, and then when I touched the Callum Tree. I need to know what it means."

She placed her hands inside her greyed hair in a messy bun on the very top of her head. After a few seconds of digging around and pulling out a few other objects, most of which seemed to be snacks,

she produced a small wooden tool. It was about the same size and shape as a writing quill. It had no tip to dip into fruit ink, and, instead of feathers on the end, this one had a circular symbol carved into the wood.

“This is a cala,” she said, holding up the instrument. “It is the only one that I know of in Alsatawn. But perhaps a few families have held onto them over the past millennium despite not knowing their true purpose. At least that is my hope.”

“So that isn’t just a wooden quill or some sort of writing tool?”

“It is so much more, Iara. A cala allows the Dae to create. With this tool, you will be able to create again. You will be able to restore what should have always been and what will be.”

She handed me the cala. I studied the intricate twists and turns that had been carved into the wood. A small cursive inscription along the side read, “Between the Callum Tree and the Blulimen is Where We are Always Free.”

“This inscription. It’s talking about the Creare, right? And what do you mean I will be able to create? I’m not a Dae,” I asked, but Aucaraya did not answer. I looked around the pond, under the Curtain Creares, and behind every boulder. She was nowhere. In a final scan of the area, I noticed a slight ripple growing as it moved out from the center of the luminescent water.

I needed more answers. So, I did the only thing that had made sense since the moment I had awoken from my nightmare this afternoon. With my cane in one hand and the cala in my other, I entered the Blulimen.

THE END



EVE MARKS

Mysterious Snake

Mixed Media on Paper, 2022

MIKI KAYAMA

Augury
After "Starlings" by Gary Soto

A sheet of silver sky reflects the
silhouettes of thousand speckles. Spectacle of starlings
synchronizing in spectacular dance. A masterpiece Seurat would
envy. The rumbles and claps percussioned not
by Jove but by little pairs of iridescent wings. The phantoms come and go
above heads and way down south.

Soothing susurrations sounds but
turbulent when they undulate closer, causing shiver,
stopping the breath. Stillness and hold on,
in the sinking pit of the
deafening silence. Like layers of pixelation pleated
as a celestial escalator over the glass lake.
One last reading for good omen before they settle in their
setting in front of many surprised eyes.
The black shadows spread and narrowed,
dauntingly surging on
divining prophesies with the
fate of the ominous wind.

CRIS HERNANDEZ

No Longer

I will no longer choke
the power
in my hands
by closing them off
into fists.

I will no longer choke
the power
of my voice
by shouting into
the miasmic cacophony.

I will no longer choke
the power
of my words
with ill chosen slurs
each a knife plunged into your heart..

I will no longer choke
the power
of my vision
by flailing blades and blame
into the space between us.

I will no longer choke
my power.
I will simply
claim it.

KAMERON RILEY

A Woman's Choice

A Woman's Choice clinic is a dingy, non-descript, one-story building. A sign out front says "Allergy Clinic" in plain black lettering, like a sort of sad, half-baked Halloween costume. The thick floor-to-ceiling Plexiglas windows are covered with white poster board so that you can't see in. The lawn out front is patchy and stretches from the front door to the poorly maintained sidewalk which is cracked and sloppily filled in. You would probably drive straight past it. That is, if it wasn't for the crowd of people on the sidewalk shouting scripture through bullhorns and carrying large cardboard signs depicting images of dead babies. That's what gave it away for me. That it wasn't an allergy clinic, that is.

The first day I volunteered there, another escort named Aaron handed me a rainbow-colored, construction-type vest and told me to stand near the gravel driveway. It led to a small, pothole ridden parking lot behind the clinic.

"They can't block the driveway," Aaron told me. "And the veterans over there," he gestured to a crowd on the sidewalk, "they know that. But occasionally there's a newbie or a tourist who will wander into the driveway thinking they can talk to the patients in their cars."

"But the Fair Access to Clinic Entrances Act is Federal law and they can't block the driveways. Like this guy," Aaron gestured to a college kid in a thin blue t-shirt who had drifted onto the loose gravel, a worn, brown leather Bible in his hand.

"Hey, man," Aaron said. "You gotta back up. Out of the driveway."

College Boy turned to Aaron. "This is a public space. I have a right to be here."

"You have a right to be there," Aaron pointed at the sidewalk. "Not here."

"I'm saving lives," College Boy said. And I noticed the boy's arms were tensed at his side. A vein on the side of his neck bulged.

"Fine. Hey, Allen," Aaron yelled. "You gonna get your boy over here, or what?"

"He's not in the driveway," a gruff voice called back.

“Ya sure, Allen? ‘Cause we can always call Springfield’s finest out to make that call.”

An older man shook his head and walked toward College Boy. He put a hand on the boy’s shoulder and gestured to the shaggy grass border demarcating the lawn from the loose rock driveway.

Over time, we all learn the protestors by name. Or nickname, in some cases. There’s Allen, a former Evangelical preacher, and the group’s unofficial leader. He sets up a rusted metal ladder on the yellowing grass every Wednesday. There really is no need for the ladder. Everyone walking in and out does so in plain view, but Allen still hauls himself up and down the ladder once a week just so he can look down as he calls our patients murderers and whores.

Then there’s Carol, a woman in her early 60s, who carries a sign that erroneously states “Abortion Increases Your Chance of Breast Cancer.” She wears a plain wooden cross on a brown leather string around her neck, her salt and pepper hair is pulled back in a long braid. Carol is abrasive, but mostly harmless. So on occasion, I engage her in conversation. I ask where she got her information, which is virtually all incorrect. And I ask why she comes to the clinic week after week. Usually, she simply says, “*you know why.*” One day, Carol, with tears in her eyes, tells me that she doesn’t want to look down from heaven and see me burning in hell. I don’t approach Carol again after that.

Then, there are the other protestors who come and go, but lack the week-to-week dedication of an Allen or a Carol. There’s a woman I call the Rice-Baby Lady, and another that Aaron and I call Mrs. J. Crew.

I have the hardest time with the little kids, though. They come with their parents during summer and school breaks. Sometimes they stand next to the adults like tiny soldiers and shout in their high-pitched voices, “*Please don’t kill your baby, lady! Please!*” Sometimes they stand at the sides of their mothers and fathers, pulling on their parents’ hands, desperate to run on the uneven grass.

“Gross,” Aaron says. But I can remember my mother taking me to a clinic like this when I was a little girl. I had hidden behind her long denim skirts as the murderers walked right past me on the sidewalk. I remembered how they had come close enough to touch me. To kill me. But I had nothing to fear, my mother had said. The monsters only killed tiny babies, still in their mothers’ wombs.

I can't remember how old I was when I realized the monsters were mostly scared little girls. Many were just barely older than I was.

One day, a few months or maybe a year after I started volunteering at the clinic, a lady shot herself on its patchy front lawn. Maybe she was a tourist, or maybe she was a townie who had thought that yelling at the patients entering A Woman's Choice sounded like a good way to spend a Thursday.

I still don't know, to be honest.

And I didn't see it, I only heard it. The blast from the gun. Bang! Like a car backfire. Or a 4th of July firework. Later, someone told me that the woman had reached into her large black handbag looking for a cross, or a Bible, or a pamphlet for the crisis pregnancy center down the street, and the gun went off, blowing a hole through her purse and a portion of her right thigh in the process. As she was lying on the ground, little pieces of scripture fell around her like snow and mixed with the blood on the grass creating a tiny Biblical blizzard.

I turned to see Carol standing in the crowd that circled around the woman. Tiny red droplets arced across Carol's long denim skirt forming a small, crimson rainbow. Her face was frozen in horror. As the sound of the approaching sirens grew louder, I crossed over to her, taking her hand. Carol looked toward me, but not at me, blinking her eyes slowly.

"Mom," I said. "Are you okay?"

MATTHEW JACOBS

Sonnet for Stac (My Beefy Little Cheeser)

You're my beefy little cheeser
and you're growing up so fast.
So much time has passed,
now I feel like a geezer.
I'm glad that you still talk with me
when things are getting loose,
when something's cooked your goose,
when your head is in a noose;
even if our romance wasn't meant to be.

I was worried when I heard the news,
you seemed so scared and panicked.
For a while you seemed so confused,
you were crying, you were manic.
But, you'll exercise your right to choose,
and next time you can plan it.

BRENDA L. GERTMAN

I Kissed the Firmament
Inspired by YaHoVaH

I asked Him to hold me.

He couldn't.

So I kissed the firmament.

I asked Him to take it slow.

He couldn't.

So, I kissed the firmament.

I asked him,

“Why, He couldn't?”

With my right hand,

I kissed the firmament.

He replied with a lie.

With my left hand,

I kissed the firmament.

I told him “No.”

With both hands,

I kissed the firmament.

VICKIE WIPPEL

Senior Special

Eldon Belafonte's blue eyes could get him anything. They sparkled like Sinatra's. At least they used to. In high school, they made him homecoming king and got his girlfriend knocked up all in the same year. Now, he winked, and the server brought coffee. "She must think I'm cute," he smiled slyly to his daughter, Pearl, sitting across the booth from him. Eldon and Pearl had a Thursday morning ritual. At 8:10am, after she dropped the kids off at school, the father and daughter would meet at the Denny's on Bellflower Avenue. For seven years, since his last wife went packing, taking her pension and their shared Cadillac with her, Eldon and Pearl met for breakfast.

Roxanne, the server, guessed their order without handing them the menu. "Let's see—Senior

Grand Slam for you, sir, and ma'am, the fruit salad and red skin potatoes." Eldon beamed. Roxanne, a Filipina immigrant, with the names of her babies tattooed in cursive on her forearms, sure was sweet to folks who left mostly dimes for a tip. Though Eldon tipped well. Because Eldon saw himself as the man he used to be, back when he slicked his hair and wore sports coats to steak dinners and race-tracks.

Roxanne smiled back at him like a social worker listening to a client. He felt so important.

"Tell me, Roxy, have you been staying out of trouble?" Eldon leaned over to her as he talked,

like they were on a date, showing a bit of gunk in his dentures in his smile. His hair, thin but still combed, looked yellow; his nails looked yellow; his eyes looked yellow. Like the walls in homes owned by smokers, his body was stained by fifty years of nicotine build up. A habit he never intended to break.

Roxane said what she always said, "Always, I stay out of trouble," while she surveyed her other

tables. Pearl told her dad to knock it off. This conversation, like the senior special, was served on repeat. And, like the food, it never got any better and never got any worse. At Denny's, you knew exactly what you were going to get.

Pearl had her first sip of Denny's dark roast. After seven years, there was almost nothing left on the menu she could stomach,

but they made a great cup of coffee. Piping hot. She breathed it in and smiled. Her dad smiled, too, enjoying his own world—his stare as vacant as the adjacent Kmart parking

lot.

Pearl returned to the script and asked about his weekend plans. The doctors weren't concerned about his fading memory and the daily declines she had been taking note of. When she insisted that they administer a cognitive test, Eldon aced it. Later, she learned the test focused on days of the week and weather patterns—his two favorite subjects. His doctors should come join them for breakfast.

“Not doing much, Pearl Girl.” Eldon really had the sweetest smile. There was a reason he had married so many times. “There’s a hockey game on. Have I told you, I really like watching ice hockey?”

“Yep, you’ve taught me all about the Dallas Stars.” His eyes lit up like a kid’s when he talked about hockey. But his eyes had also been yellowing over the last few weeks. More than the nicotine. WebMD told her it was either macular degeneration, liver disease, or kidney cancer.

“Hey, Dad, what happened at your doctor appointment this week?” She took a bite of fruit salad. The grapes had been frozen then defrosted.

“I dunno, honey. I think they want to suck my blood.” Eldon always said this in a voice like a vampire after he had bloodwork done.

Those mornings, Pearl watched the other patrons-- families, seniors, and solitary diners. More people ate alone than she ever imagined. Like Eldon and her, these folks would slide in and out of red vinyl booths—toddlers smashing eggs and dropping crayons from dingy grey highchairs, older folks holding the menu into the light to read it better. She watched old ladies wrap meat scraps in greasy used paper napkins to take home to their shih tzus. Pearl could write a dissertation on geriatric populations based on what she had noticed. But she never considered herself part of the case study.

Their food arrived. Roxanne always remembered extra margarine for Eldon’s toast. It looked like a heart attack to Pearl but rounded out Eldon’s diet of Marlboros and Mars Bars. He got a kick out the fact that his favorites things sounded likes Mars. “I must be an alien, Pearl Girl,” he said. By her math, she’d heard this line more than three hundred times. He cut his food up and moved it around the plate, not eating much.

Roxanne returned to refill their coffee. Eldon always played Shave and a Hair Cut on the side of his mug with his spoon when he was done adding creamer. *Dunt, dunt, duh, dunt, dunt, dunt dunt.* Then he pushed his food away. There's no way he would remember that he also pushed his food away last week because he had just asked Pearl for the second time that morning if she liked hockey.

Pearl also lost her appetite. She knew what was happening to Eldon, what was happening to her, because she had watched it happen to others so many times before. Tables of seniors would show up for breakfast at the same day, same time. Just like them. The older couples didn't talk much—what could there be left to say? But friends held lively conversations about grandchildren and pickle ball. They shared internet scams so deftly avoided. *I knew better than to send a MoneyGram to Nigeria—ha!* As predictable as a sunset, the groups would slowly dwindle. A table for four became a table for three. A table for two became a table for one. Sometimes, the change happened slowly: a diner would start wearing leg braces before moving to a walker. Then she'd be wheeled in by a health aide. On their final visit, the aide would spoon a few bites of oatmeal into paper-thin lips. A sad, sad swan song. Pearl had never seen a diner come in for a second bowl of oatmeal. Then again, sometimes, folks just stopped showing up.

“Dad, Conner has a t-ball game this weekend.” Pearl rubbed her hand across her forehead, pinching her eyebrows together; she knew it was pointless to even try—her dad said no to everything but breakfast. But Pearl did not know what else to say.

“No, thanks, honey.” His dentures clinked a little when he talked this early in the morning. Eldon told her before that it happens when the glue's still drying. “I appreciate the offer, but I'm saving my Saturdays in case I get a date.” Although the ratio of guys to dolls at Regency Palms was like seashells to sand particles, his daughter winced at the thought of him trying to dust off his old dating moves. Eldon hadn't changed his jeans since Pearl did his laundry the week before.

“Just don't go break anyone's heart.” She leaned across the table towards him. “Hey, Dad, aren't you hungry?” If he ate, everything would be okay. If he ate, then it was just macular degeneration, and she wouldn't have to worry about losing the first love of her life. If he just had a few bites, she wouldn't have to worry about what to do next. She would see him back at the restaurant next Thursday.

A group of regulars stopped by to say hello as Eldon flagged another employee down for a to go container. Pearl smiled but couldn't make any words come out. *Was her dad dying?* She took a long sip of water. Condensation spilled on her chin and back on the table. She decided to tweak the script. "Dad, what are you doing this weekend?" She hoped her voiced sounded light.

"Oh, nothing much."

"I was thinking, maybe we could watch the hockey game together at your place. I think there's a

Stars game Saturday." She felt hopeful, and a bit rascally. "The boys would come."

"How about that. You like hockey, too?" His eyes lit up again. "There's this thing called a penalty box." *Did his doctor know he was dying?*

"I tell you what, you never want your player to end up in the penalty box." *Did her siblings now?*

Eldon scraped his ham and eggs into the container. *Did Dad know?*

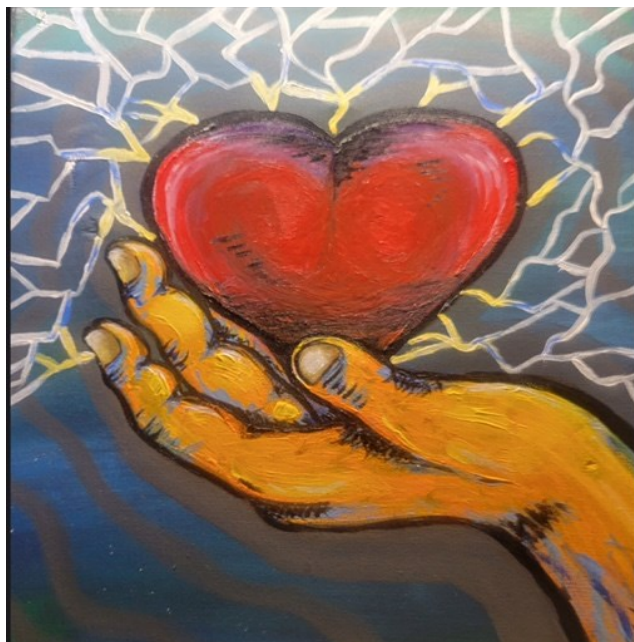
"It's a date. I'll pick up lunch." Pearl stacked their plates on the table.

"Of course, if I get a girlfriend by then, I'm going to invite her as my real date." Eldon made himself chuckle as he fumbled with the container. His hands trembled, making the Styrofoam shake. "Can you help, honey? I'm all thumbs." Pearl reached over to close the container, then collected her things. It was time to go.

Eldon braced his weight on the table to stand, but his legs tripped on the pedestal leg. He fell back into the booth. It was a small fall. Nobody else noticed. But Pearl noticed. He tried again and fell back down again. "Dad, grab my hands." Pearl pulled him up and gently guided him out of the booth. They kept holding hands as they walked towards the exit, Pearl bracing the small of his back. She struggled to hold the door open for the two of them, like a new mother getting used to maneuvering a stroller.

Roxane saw them as they headed out. "See you next week," she said.

Eldon looked up back, smiled at Roxanne and told her to be good.



ELIZABETH HERNANDEZ

Power of the Heart

Acrylic on Canvas, 2022

SAMUEL PFLUGRATH

Now Where Did You Get That Idea?

Thursday night under a cloudy sky lit fiery orange by the city, Lyle was standing in his usual place by the elevator on the fourth story of a deserted downtown parking garage. He wore a black duster and fedora, with tinted goggles and a black medical-grade face mask, and a dark green scarf wrapped tightly around his neck. It was an outfit deliberately designed to make him appear as menacing and as suspicious-looking as possible, and he preferred it greatly to his daywork uniform.

He pulled out his phone so he could check the clock: five minutes to midnight, and still no sign of him. *Is he gonna be here on time?* Lyle wondered. *I've never actually had one of them come in late before.*

He walked to the nearest balcony to look out over the downtown skyline. On the roof of the building just opposite he saw a billboard for the newest generation of memory implant chips:

MEMORIES PRESERVED.

MEMORIES DELETED.

MEMORIES CREATED.

ALL WITH A TAP OF ANY MOBILE DEVICE.

Any mobile device, he thought, putting an especial emphasis on the word “any.” Lyle had never had one installed in his own head—of course *he* wouldn’t—but, as an orderly at one of the more expensive local hospitals, he was intimately familiar with the devices, both how they were implanted and how they were operated.

His scarf and his duster waved as a cool breeze blew in from the night—he turned to gaze at his dramatic reflection in a parked car’s hubcap. In the daytime he would have had to wear hideous scrubs, put up with the demands and abuses of doctors and nurses and patients, all in the name of both making the rent and paying off all his student loans; but when the nighttime came, and the satellites and stars were drowned out by the light of the nocturnal city, he went out and dressed the way he wanted to dress and made money the way he wanted to make it. He smiled beneath his mask: a detail it hid even from his reflection.

Lyle turned back to the balcony, and down on the street he saw him: a man in his late forties, dressed casually and inconspicuously,

walking fast and alert through a neighborhood he clearly had no familiarity with. He wore no hat, and even from four stories up Lyle could see the little bald patch, still in the process of filling itself in, which he himself had shaved on the back of the man's head. After a few moments of looking in all directions to be sure that no one was watching him, the man entered the parking structure.

Lyle returned to his position by the elevator, standing under a pale white fluorescent light with his back propped up against a concrete column. He placed a voice changer module under his mask to complete the effect. After only a few more minutes of waiting, the elevator door opened, and he was once again face-to-face with the other man.

“Good to see you again, Principal,” Lyle said in a buzzing robotic baritone that only barely carried through his words’ intended facetiousness. “I do hope you had no trouble finding your way back here?”

“My bus got stuck in traffic,” the older man said in a soft, fearful voice, “and then I walked the last mile, as you told me to.” He looked down at the ground as he spoke, avoiding eye contact. “I’m not too late, am I?”

Lyle quickly pulled out his phone, causing the other man to flinch. “No, Principal, one minute before midnight. You just made it. Barely. Any later, you know, and I would’ve had to fulfill my promise to call the cops.” He heard a faint, involuntary gasp or sigh escape the other man’s lips. “Now then,” he continued, putting the phone back in his pocket, “Do you have the money?”

The other man pulled three large wads of bills out of his pockets: “Fifteen hundred dollars, in twenty-dollar bills, just like you asked.” Lyle thumbed through each one to make sure he wasn’t being shorted – not that he thought he needed to worry about it.

“Everything seems to be in order here,” Lyle said with an audible smile. He pulled his phone out again, ostensibly to check the time. “It was great doing business with you, Principal.”

“That’s it?” the other man asked, finally looking up, a look of relief washing over his face. “I can go now? You’re never gonna threaten me with this again?”

“Well actually,” Lyle began as he tapped a button on his phone screen. Immediately a blank, expressionless look flashed over the man’s deathly face. This lasted a couple seconds before he pressed his hand to his head and began swaying on his feet like a drunk. After a

few moments of this he appeared to return to his senses, suddenly panicking.

“Who are you! Where am I! What’s going on!”

“Don’t you remember, Principal?” Lyle asked smoothly.

“Remember what? I was... I was in the hospital—”

“Good, good, but do you remember the missing children?” Lyle asked, tapping a different button on his phone.

“What missing – *AH!*” the man screamed, clutching his head as the chip set to work again. “I don’t... No... Oh God, no!”

“Yeah, you wouldn’t happen to know anything about, say, two dozen missing middle schoolers, would you, Principal?”

“No... No, I couldn’t’ve—”

“Boys and girls alike, Principal, you really are a sick fuck, aren’t ya?”

“No, that didn’t happen! It didn’t happen!”

“And yet now you somehow remember it happening—remember *making it happen.*” Lyle stepped forward, while the other man sank to his knees. Outside, the lights on the billboard burned out.

“I couldn’t have... That’s not the person I am!”

“You have no idea how many others have said that to me.” Lyle grinned beneath his mask.

“Now, unless you want me to tell the police exactly where you hid the bodies, I expect you back here in exactly one week—Thursday night, no later than midnight—with fifteen hundred dollars in twenty-dollar bills. You can take Bus Line 101, but I expect you to walk the last mile on your own to ensure no one follows you. Deal?”

He held out his black-gloved hand, both to shake and to help the man up, but he only kept crying on his knees. “Well,” he finally continued, “I trust you’ll do as I’ve instructed. It’s not like you have much of a choice, unless you *want* a lethal injection.” With that, Lyle briskly made his way back to the elevator. “Be seein’ ya, Principal!” he said, waving, as the doors closed on the now weeping man alone in the empty concrete cavern.

Of course he’ll keep his end of the bargain, Lyle thought; *after all, it’s not like this is the first time I’ve done this with him.* He pulled out his phone to check the time again. *I wonder if he’ll be late again next week—he’s usually a lot more punctual.*

TONY GODINO

Ignominy

I awoke, dropped in a dream choking on smoke no one to warn as I
sprint to the street to watch an orange ocean absorb a sable sky. I bawl
as it all burns down.

but the ladder men don't come
for scum like me.

cinders sizzle as I step through the rubble all that lasts is flat in my
pain neighbors betrayers don't gather for prayers I'm deposed by those
who once dozed near as I persist I'm pursued paranoia imbued aghast
in fear they cast me clear blamed and arraigned as I bled more than
rain from glass that collapsed while I searched the terrain I stand a
man remanded damned in a charred garden

and on the cusp of contempt
like a flower from a cactus
I recognize my reflection through dew on a shard

now, standing twice amongst what was once my life,

together, we begin to examine this mess.

MIKI KAYAMA

Passage

It withstood the faults
of tectonic plates.
But it's
the epicenter
which cradles
our 7-year-old fingers and toes
turning white
from pressing
too hard
into the glossy foundation
—immaculate
with a little sweat—
as we climbed
to the top
simply carrying
our own weight
with our lanky arms and legs
and getting a reaction
out of the adults.
It measured us
—the graphite squiggles
of growth spurts—
last one marked
o6 dash 13 dash 99.
Today, it's just
passed through.
Tip toe
and fingers
slide
easily
to the
top.

SAMUEL PFLUGRATH

Testing the Powers

The rain poured down from the gray skies above, while the bus roared cautiously down the semi-flooded street. Oswald sat by a window in the back, trying to make out any landmarks he could through the downpour. The last time he had been in a house of worship was when he was still a child, so he was understandably nervous about not knowing all the proper protocol when he got there.

His phone began beeping, so Oswald pulled it out to check. Sure enough, the little hammer icon in the corner was flashing at less than ten percent, so he turned it off to save power. He wasn't expecting the repair shop to call, anyway.

The bus finally stopped, and he stepped out into the pouring rain. Before him stood a large, unpainted wood building with stained glass windows and a tall steeple with a lightning rod at the top. Like a crown, a long golden chain was suspended by short narrow poles placed around the roof's perimeter. Over the wide double doors there hung a large decoration in the shape of the hammer. After taking a deep breath, he stepped under it.

Inside the hall there was a little reception area, where a young woman in a high-collared white priestly gown sat seated behind a little desk. She had black skin and reddish-black hair, which she wore styled in a large beehive. Dark brown eyes sat behind a pair of round, wire-rimmed spectacles, and she wore a silver hammer pendant around her neck.

"Hi, I'm Aelfwynn," she said, rising to shake his hand, "I'm the hof's assistant godi. And what brings you here on this Thor-blessed day?"

"Well, I'm Oswald," he began, hanging up his jacket and umbrella, "and the short answer is that my computer died. It'd been giving me trouble for a while, and then finally the hard drive went. So, I took it to the repair shop the other day, and I was just on my way there to pick it up when I thought, 'Hey, I pass by this place all the time anyway, maybe I should come here and formally ask the gods for help.' You know, improve my chances."

"Makes perfect sense to me."

“That being said, while my parents did bring me here a few times when I was really little, they didn’t exactly raise me that religious otherwise, so I’m not too certain on the, uh, mechanics of how this works. So, if you please, could you tell me what to do?”

Aelfwynn thought for a moment. “If it’s help with electronics that you’re after, I guess Thor would be a good god to start with. Lightning, electricity, you see the connection. Oh, but then again, there’s also Odin: as the Ás of magic and wisdom, science and technology would probably be up his alley. You might want to consider invoking Wayland the Smith, as well, since repair work is kinda like smithing if you think about it. And then on top of all that, there’s Loki: I’d probably advise offering him something too just to appease him, so he doesn’t go and work any more of his mischief on you.”

“That’s a lot of gods to keep track of.”

“Why do you think it’s called ‘polytheism?’ I mean, if that’s too much for you, there are plenty of monotheist faiths you could convert to. You know, Zarathustrianism, Judaism, Mithraism –”

“Nah,” Oswald replied, “It’d be easier to just stick with what I know. Mostly. What do I do then?” Aelfwynn reached under her desk and produced a silver tray with several small, sealed bottles of mead, each just a little bigger than a shot glass.

“You go into that room behind me, which is where all the shrines and altars are, and you offer one of these to each Ás you seek the aid of. They’re five bucks each.”

“Five bucks!? Robbery!”

“What would you prefer we do? Pass a collection plate around?”

“I guess that would be silly,” Oswald grumbled, fishing out his wallet. “I’ll just buy one: Thor’s probably the only one I need help from.”

“It’s your computer,” she replied, handing

The transaction now completed, he stepped through the door into the main hall. For reasons beyond his understanding, Oswald felt like nailing a long list of complaints to the door of the hof; but that project, of course, would have to wait until he had a computer to write them on again.

The hall was dimly lit by electric chandeliers swaying from upon high. At the front of the room stood the main altar, which featured a large statue of Odin and Frigg together on their throne. Small-

er wooden statues of every other major Ás and Asynja lined the walls, each placed on its own pedestal with a small porcelain sink ringed with candles in front of it.

After a few minutes' searching for it, Oswald approached Thor's altar. The god was depicted sitting on a little throne with both hands wrapped around the handle of his hammer, which sat between his thighs. Oswald snickered at what it looked like he was doing, but then got back to business. He spoke a brief, impromptu prayer, and then poured the mead down the drain, in the Thunderer's honor. He looked into the statue's eyes to see if anything would change – seemingly nothing did.

He left the hall of shrines, grabbed his coat and umbrella, and opened the door again. Outside the sky was finally clearing, and a rainbow was visible on the far horizon.

“Hey, they must've heard you! The gods are on their way,” he heard Aelfwynn exclaim as the door shut behind him. He returned to the bus stop, five dollars poorer, and waited for the bus. It soon arrived, and less than an hour later he was back in his apartment, setting up his newly repaired computer.

With bated breath, he turned it on.

And, as soon as he had turned it on, the hard drive exploded, and black smoke began billowing from out of its case.

“Guess I should've offered something to Loki after all,” he sighed.



ELIZABETH HERNANDEZ

Serenity Under the Fog

Photography, 2022

MATTHEW JACOBS

Lonely Weekend Movie Party

I.

I am lonely,
but I'm surrounded
by the dark silhouettes
of obese people
and greasy haired
aimless twenty-somethings.

I find comfort in the chaos,
in the smell of popcorn and hotdogs.

I feel the frosty chill of death
when skeletal women with racoon eyes
in leather jackets with pins
walk by me
at the snack bar.

The scene is decorated
with the faces of familiar strangers,
denim jackets and comb-overs,
heavy winter coats
over super hero tee-shirts.

II.

I am lonely and lost
in an empty
and seemingly endless desert.

Holy shit
that motorcycle has rocket launchers
attached to the wheels.

Life has become an endless crescendo,
a permanent nervous peak
of fear and noise.

Pam Grier is firing a machine gun
from a hang glider
at rebels
in a makeshift, nightmare
Los Angeles.

I am lonely,
and I am so afraid
that the gulf between you and I
is so wide
and so real
it would be impossible
to ever bridge.

A man in a rubber monster costume
is stomping a cardboard city
to the ground.

THOMAS A. E. HESKETH

Ode to Country

Horsehairs on cat gut cut night's silence
with wailin' plaints from country
ballads of lost loves runaway dogs
risin' rivers rapids and comin'
death one tomorrow's day

Alchemy of light and sound mix with trains
a-leavin' along struts of banjo necks strummin' chords
to toes tappin' cheatin' lies broken hearts
beaten one last swig of whisky quatrain twang
not a day to be alone this dark night

Violin pullin' tears from yesterday's laughter
piano keys liftin' liltin' tones from talkin' tongues
rhythms pluckin' breath across hills of hope
strung out like a noose drawn tight in harmony
with patient moon floatin' 'tween lightn' clouds

Pedal steel wall of songs sung in single syllables
rhymin' like river rapids pickin' at open wounds
scars cut deep by unseen hands achin' still
heavin' under life's heavy load lookin' to heaven
faith of hollows and deep-set eyes seein'

Howlin' 'gainst echoes inside empty box cars fast
movin' across horizons comin' like new love's promise
heartbeats skippin' in shadows of loss and temptation
raw emotions movin' over the country as an eclipse
warnin', warmin' souls searchin' for home.

LANA ZUCCALA

Predetermined Preferences & Problematic Pronouns

The clothes she wears are oft' in shades of pink,
But his are not, he's all adorned in blue.
I wonder what these babies all will think
When they first see this color'd point of view.
Why must her crib be fill'd with twee pink sheets?
Should his head rest on only clouds and sky?
I doubt her mood will be all sugary sweets,
And he may be not bold but coy and shy.
As she grows up she'll want the most sought toys,
But what if they are cars and trains and pails?
He may not want the aisle that's just for boys,
But will his *band of brothers* think he fails.
Let the children choose what they prefer.
They need not be confined by *him* and *her*.

VICKIE WIPPEL

Still Life

Outside her shutters, Lila saw more shutters. Matching rows of windows lined both sides of a cobblestone street in a French village outside of Marseilles, whose name she couldn't pronounce, a town unchanged since the Medieval Ages. Well, of course, the people come and go. The shutters across the street were summery yellow, like 1960's Formica countertops, or, perhaps, corn. She should think of better descriptions, Lila thought; after all, she was visiting the home of an artist. A starving artist. Literally, a dying, starving artist. Tumors growing inside the artist pushed his organs together, making it impossible to eat. That starving artist happened to be her only uncle, Charles Mattani. He ended up in France a lifetime ago, when the world was more interesting, and people bought one-way tickets. Charles's paintings, impressionist style, made him well known in Parisian art galleries, even if they never made him rich. Blocks of color—soft edges, unfocused, reflections of light. And Lila liked to think of her uncle, Charles, as an embodiment of his paintings—someone she knew and loved from a distance but knew very little of up close and in focus. She flew in as soon as she heard.

In front of her, a 40x80 still life—her uncle's hospital bed, positioned under that sunny window. She had come to care for him in his last days, insisting on it. The room was so quiet that the air hung like paintings in her uncle's attic workshop. That workshop, dank during the winter and hot as a griddle in the summer, was better than any museum Lila had visited. As the artist lay nearly motionless near the window, Lila tip-toed up the stairs. Unframed canvases hung on walls from the paint-splattered floor to wood-beamed ceiling. She recognized each of them. After all, Lila had been sneaking up to this room since she could navigate the attic's steep staircase, visiting nearly every summer with her mother. Charles' palette, a simple piece of wood worn down by time and oiled by paint colors layered like sediment—a piece of art in itself. There were also paintings of those familiar yellow shutters, the curving waters of a nearby creek, and up at the very corner, a little girl holding a red balloon in front of a fountain. Of course, nobody knew that girl was Lila, who alone remembered asking her uncle for the trinket from a street vendor so many years before, back before Charles had a daughter of his own. Lila remem-

bered nearly everything about that afternoon. While her mother ran errands in the village, she and her uncle stole away, taking the wooded path down to the creek, stopping first for warm pralines from a cart vendor near the fountain. They took turns throwing small stones across the water, trying to make it to the other side. Lila couldn't remember whether the pebbles ever made it across the water, nor could she ever remember feeling so happy. She asked for the balloon when they returned from the picnic, and, instead of answering, Charles magically unfurled the red globe from his behind back. "I'm going to buy that painting when I save enough money," Lila told him when she first saw it, still so young she would have had to make payments from a coin bank. She repeated this declaration on every visit that followed. Her uncle always responded that some things are just too precious to sell.

When Claudia, Charles's daughter, was old enough, Lila would escort her to the same spot, heading down the wooded creek trail with a picnic packed, retelling about the pralines, but never the about the balloon, as the girls threw pebbles across the water. "I wish *Papa* would come with us," Claudia would whine, the smack of rocks hitting the water emphasizing her point. But Charles painted in the attic, leaving the two of them to make their own way.

On Lila's last visit, a year or so earlier, the cousins made themselves sick eating Wheat Thins, imports Lila always jammed into her carryon, while she and Charles taught Claudia American folk songs—"She'll be Coming Around the Mountain," "This Land is Your Land," "Yankee Doodle." All three stayed up until dawn, dancing to German funk music in a wedding ballroom made muggy by sweat. He outlasted everyone. To Lila, these memories seemed as fresh as breakfast. Far away and out of focus, she could still picture him as vibrant. Lila's art books, however, had taught her what, in this instance, her heart couldn't bear: impressionism isn't reality.

Between spins around the dance floor on that last visit, Lila told Charles she had begun to study art, too. "Digital collage!" she yelled over the wedding DJ when he asked her emphasis. Charles clapped his hands together at the news and spun her around on the dance floor, as if she were still that same little girl holding a red balloon.

That morning, staring out the shutters, Lila mourned for what would never be. She told her uncle what her mother said about her schooling: "How in the world will you pay off student loans by draw-

ing computer comics?” Her uncle sighed in response, but he could have just been sleeping. How Lila wished he would’ve also painted that scene around the dance floor, just two summers, and a lifetime, ago.

Lila rushed back downstairs to the living room when she heard the front door open, catching her breath in time to greet Claudia. Though eight years younger, she scowled at the sight of her cousin, which made her look older. Lila couldn’t tell if Claudia had suspicions of where she had been. “Good morning, Claudia. How are you?” Lila said in slow, clear English, a bit too cheery.

Her cousin answered, “*Oui, oui, bien.*” Lila fumbled though her cousin’s double kiss, never knowing where on the cheeks to place her lips or how firm of a touch was required. Claudia had returned from school the day before, having been granted a leave from the headmaster on account of her father. She had refused Lila’s offer to meet her at the train station. “*Non, non.* Someone needs to stay with *Papa.* Then, I will care for him,” Claudia insisted. Three was going to be a crowd, Lila knew this. She also knew her younger cousin never liked her father’s paintings. “*Je déteste,*” the younger cousin exclaimed the only time they ventured up to the workshop together—kids at the time. “Always, *Papa* is up here with his *fantasmes,*” she said, gesturing at the paintings around the room like a wizard using a wand, “while real lives are happening down the stairs.” In their last text, before Charles’ tumors, Claudia said she decided to study accounting, “because numbers are real.” At the time, Lila thought this sounded an awful lot like her own mother.

Lila thought back to that morning, those few moments when her uncle had been awake. Out of the blue, Charles whispered, “It’s okay that I won’t be here. My paintings will be here.” He exhaled with a wheeze and closed his eyes. Lila, who’d been holding vigil near the bed, strained to hear his frail voice, as soft as the wind. His frame was so reduced, she could only tell where her uncle’s pajamas ended and the sheets began by his skeletal hands, a watercolor of bruising, dark purples fading into blues and browns, lying untucked at his side. With a small, peaceful smile, he added, “People might look at them in a week or a hundred years. Time doesn’t exist in a painting.” He fell back asleep. *His paintings, those shutters, will still be here,* she thought. *But he won’t.* Claudia watched from the hall as her older cousin tucked a thick blanket up near Charles’s chin and softly stroked his cheek. Lila looked up. Suddenly, the room felt crowded.

“Claudia, I am going to get some fresh air,” Lila smiled as she brushed by to grab a baseball hat and a bottle of water, which looked like a costume in the village. As Lila gathered her things, she watched her cousin untuck and re-tuck the blanket around her father before taking Lila’s spot in the chair by the bed, telling him in French that she was with him now, just the two of them.

It was August and the rest of the country was cooling off on the coast—Nice, Normandy, and the like. There were no shops, no restaurants. Only statues and street cats. “*Ici chaton, chaton,*” Lila said sweetly, reading her phone’s translation of *Here kitty, kitty*. The cat ignored her—how French. “This whole village is dead,” she said aloud, looking around the narrow street, so quiet the sound of her footsteps echoed onto the stone buildings above. Flushed red with shame, Lila thought back to Charles slipping away inside his ancient room. Lila wasn’t ready for any of this—why couldn’t time hang still like a painting? If it could, she’d pick a time long before the tumor and her cousin’s growing contempt.

Lila walked by a seven-hundred-year-old fountain. She knew this fountain as much as she knew anything: the smell of her favorite pillow, or the constellation of freckles running across the eyelids of the first boy to break her heart. That fountain was a part of her of deepest memories—made fuzzy by time but immortalized in her uncle’s painting of a little girl and her balloon. She stopped near the fountain’s edge and felt for a coin in her pocket. At least a dozen years before, in that very same spot, Charles said to her, “You know, *mon coeur*, villagers say the water from this fountain brings miracles.” He flipped her a small bronze coin, adding with a smile, “Make a wish.”

Lila thought that, by now, the well must have run dry but flicked another coin anyway. She had spoken with the nursing assistant the day before, who said, in broken English, “Your uncle will not be here in a very few amount of days.” While the nurse checked vitals and saline drips, Charles, his eyes glazed in a medical stupor, asked when his other daughter would be arriving. Lila knew just enough French to understand the nurse gently explain to Charles that he only had one child while she cradled his wrist to check his pulse.

Next to the statue, Lila saw a gated area shaded by trees; a simple plaque said, “*Cimetiere Municipal.*” The old village cemetery, built in Roman times. Just the night before, over tears and chianti, Claudia told her, “That’s where *Papa* will be buried when the time

comes.” Claudia said he’d picked a spot in the back when he was well enough to walk. They sat in silence until the chianti was finished. Putting her empty glass down, Claudia said, “Lila, I wanted to dance, too. At the wedding.” Lila tilted her head towards her cousin but said nothing. “I just waited for somebody to ask. Nobody did.” Lila reached for her cousin’s hand. “Each year, I lose *Papa* to his paintings, and each summer, I lose him to you.” They both were weeping.

“I didn’t know, Claudia, I didn’t know.” Lila couldn’t force herself to apologize.

“*Non, non*. How could you know? How could you know that he never painted me? *C’est d’accord*,” Claudia said, letting go of Lila’s hand to wipe her face.

A middle-aged woman sat on her knees at a grave near the cemetery entrance, cleaning a new headstone with a spray bottle and rag. Fresh flowers wrapped in wax paper resting nearby would likely be left behind. Lila’s throat pinched thinking that soon, too soon, her uncle would be here, too. Being here felt all wrong, like showing up too early for a party, or sitting down at a table before restaurant staff could clear the previous meal.

Lila took a sip of water and turned to leave when she saw a man a bit farther away using handheld gardening tools to prepare a plot. A gravedigger—she didn’t know what else he would be called. Curious, she walked over in slow, deliberate strides. Leaves crunched underneath her feet with each step. The grave digger looked up.

“Good afternoon, *mademoiselle*.”

“Do you work here?” Lila stood as still as the statue outside the gate. “My uncle,

Charles, the painter. He is dying.”

“I know your uncle.” He stopped working and rested his interlaced hands on the rake. “My condolences to you. And to Claudia.” A single bird chirped in the trees above.

“Will you dig his grave, you know, when the time comes?” She fiddled with the lid of her water bottle.

“*Mademoiselle*, I will have the honor of burying every soul who enters these gates, until it is my turn to be buried.” He knelt to hand-pull a weed from the dirt, then sighed as he looked back up. “Then, it will be someone else’s turn to dig, and another young woman’s turn to grieve.” The gravedigger paused from his work, looked directly at Lila and said, “I worry for Claudia.”

“How come?”

“I was here when she and your uncle came to...make arrangements.” The gravedigger shrugged an apology when he said this. “She was not herself. How do you say it in English- she was mad with grief? Very upset when they left. Your uncle tried to run after her, but he just could not.” He gave a careful, caring smile. “This is never easy, and she is still so young.” The gravedigger sighed again and went back to tending the soil.

“*Merci*,” Lila made a small wave. “*Au revoir*.” Haunted by his words, *I worry for Claudia*, Lila felt herself being pulled back to the house, so compelled to return her walk was nearly a run. Disoriented by grief and worry, she became lost in the labyrinth of cobblestone, not able to decipher one ivy-covered archway from another. Convinced she was going in circles, Lila could not remember the street she took. Was it *Chemin Crouzille* or *Chemin de Courcore*? At last, Lila spotted the yellow shutters that guided her back to her uncle’s front door. The front door was still latched, but she could see from the entryway that the door leading to the attic was open. Lila remembered closing it. She tip-toed up again, bracing herself against the wall so that the steps didn’t groan, a trick she learned a long time ago.

“Oh my god!” Lila screamed in disbelief at the carnage of tapestry laying at her feet in the workshop entryway. Piles of canvases were ripped from the walls, nails dangling like shrapnel from the plaster. Claudia, screaming and sobbing, clenched her father’s putty knife and stabbed the paintings on the ground as if trying to stop a beating heart. Claudia’s eyes, widened, her hair, pulled out of its bun, looked electrified by rage, her red lipstick smeared like war paint. The putty knife, a murder weapon, was thrust into each canvas again and again as the attacker screamed. Claudia stopped when she saw her cousin at the doorway.

“You. Left. The. Light on. Lila.” Claudia’s eyes bulged as she took a breath. “You. Should. Not be. Up. The stairs.” Claudia was panting. Her voice strained as she spoke, as if each word uttered released a controlled amount of anger from a valve. Then, the valve broke. Claudia screamed, her body heaving with each word, “These are not your paintings!” Then, she grabbed the ladder and reached for the painting in the top corner of the wall, a little girl holding a balloon. “And he is not your *papa*!” She screamed from the back of her throat, shaking her head, her lips curled up like an attacking animal. Then, Claudia heaved the small canvas into the pile of paintings below

before collapsing her head on the top of the ladder; her entire body convulsed in sobbing.

Lila couldn't breathe. She crumbled to the pile of paintings, cradling each canvas like an injured animal. She sobbed as she examined them, unable to determine which would be reparable. Above her, still on the ladder, Claudia continued to wail, repeating, "He is mine! He is mine!" The ladder swayed with her words, each sway bringing it to the brink of collapse. Lila rushed to steady the ladder and cradled her cousin, guiding her down. Claudia stumbled on the last step, causing them both to crumble onto the workshop floor. The cousins stayed there, laying on their sides, their bodies curled around separate sides of the pile, with their arms connecting at the top to form what looked like an angel's halo. Light from the windows above illuminated the paintings and the young women on the paint-stained floor. They both stayed there, on the ground, encircling that pile of destruction, grieving for the very different things they had lost. Life around them was still.



LORRAINE ARMENDARIZ

Hidden

Acrylic on Canvas, 2021



