

# *Crossroads*



Art and literature by students at  
Hudson County Community College

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Art and literature by students at Hudson  
County Community College

Sponsored by the Writing Center,  
Sigma Kappa Delta & the Literary Club

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\* This work received special recognition as a winner of the HCCC Writing Center's Annual Writing Competition.

**She**  
Jennifer Franqui

She can be a mother, a daughter, a granddaughter, a great  
granddaughter, for she is the gateway to life.

She can be the venom that brings hatred and heartbreak,  
The venom that steals your joy, and your happiness, or she can be  
the antidote that nurtures your heart and soul with all that was  
taken away.

Whether she was born one or transitioned into one, her essence  
and beauty is still there.

Whether it's a he, another she, or they, her love is limitless.

She can do whatever her heart desires.

No one can tell her otherwise, not even man himself.

She is beautiful, creative, innovative, caring, loving, passionate,  
powerful, wild, seductive, courageous, and everything in  
between.

She is a woman.

**Three Haikus**  
Pedro Moranchel

Joy

Biking with my dad  
Endless asphalt road and trees  
Scorching summer dusk

Hope

In an autumn morning  
At a cemetery with barren trees  
A monarch flies high

Alone

The sun shines on snow,  
Bright and smooth on the mountain  
A lone daffodil

## **Timber Vibes**

Brendan Rafferty

IT HAS BEEN ABOUT A MONTH since I've begun this relationship with the cat that seems to have some sort of ability to sense when I'm crying. He has visited me probably close to 20 times in the month that I've known him. I say "he" but really I don't know if it's a boy or a girl, I'm just guessing from the slight glances I've managed to grasp. After our fifth meeting, I decided to name him Timber, not for any reason in particular, he just gave off "Timber" vibes. His light gray coat with black specks near his neck make him a little strange looking, but I love him nonetheless. Every time we meet, he always seems well fed, even though he's smaller than most cats. On this particular day, he was able to save me from a nasty conversation with my mom.

"Hannah, you're gonna be 28 soon, isn't about time for you to get married? Or at least a boyfriend for crying out loud." she said. It's the same conversation every time we talk, I try to tell her I'm not interested in marriage right now, she tries to start a fight with me about it. I used to be pretty close to my mom when I was younger, but now our relationship has soured pretty harshly due to her constantly badgering me about something. It's not that I'm not looking for someone, I'm just not confident enough to try and attempt to get with someone. Personally, I think I'm a very boring person. My looks aren't anything special, my bust size is average, I don't have any traits that stick out for the most part, and I'm not that good at talking to people. The only things I think are great about myself are my long, black hair and my dark blue eyes, but that's just because they're what I've been complimented on in the past.

None of that ever really seemed to matter when I was with the cat. He didn't care about the way I looked. He didn't care about whether I was boisterous or gloomy. He didn't care about my age or my relationship status. He would just sit there with me on the oft overcast porch, sometimes for hours and hours, soothing me until my pains began to go away. I loved every moment of it. Even though we weren't able to speak to each other, I felt as if he understood me completely. His sharp green eyes had a special way

of telling me that everything was going to be alright. Every moment we spent together on that porch was special to me. The moments of my life that weren't on the porch were spent thinking about going to that magical place.

The enchanting encounter that led to our relationship started off with a shitty day at work. I work as a customer service representative at a pretty large software company. Having to deal with customers who are often angry or annoyed and almost always have little to no understanding of what they are attempting to talk to me about is already pretty stressful. Add to that the fact that the pay isn't exactly fantastic while having bosses who have no sense of patience and it leads to a very insufferable workplace.

"Ma'am, I've already told you, your current package doesn't allow for you to do that." I said to the elderly woman on the other end who either wasn't paying attention or didn't care. This however didn't stop her from badgering and belittling me before finally asking to speak with a manager. So, I called my boss over, to which he blatantly rolled his eyes before slowly making his way to my cubicle, sighing as he reached me, and picking up the phone gleefully. He opened with his "nice" voice that he always uses with customers while raising his other hand to point into the distance. I knew what this meant; it wasn't the first time I'd been commanded into his office for failing to handle a customer correctly. Once he had reentered his office where I sat alone, he hit me with his classic, "Miss Morris, you need to be able to interact with the customers better. Remember, the customer is always right." while sounding as unintentionally snarky as possible.

That's what led up to me crying quietly on my front porch while being completely alone. As I sat there, just waiting for the soft dribble to stop flowing, I noticed a creature begin to make its way towards my location. I could quickly sense the curiosity from this minuscule beast as it began to climb my porch stairs. Its little body struggled to make it up each stair as its small paws were eclipsed by the size of the steps. Now within arm's reach, I gently laid my hand near the cat's mouth, hoping for it to make the first move. I was met by slight licks, soon followed by a further escalation of rubbing my hand with its head. The soothing purrs



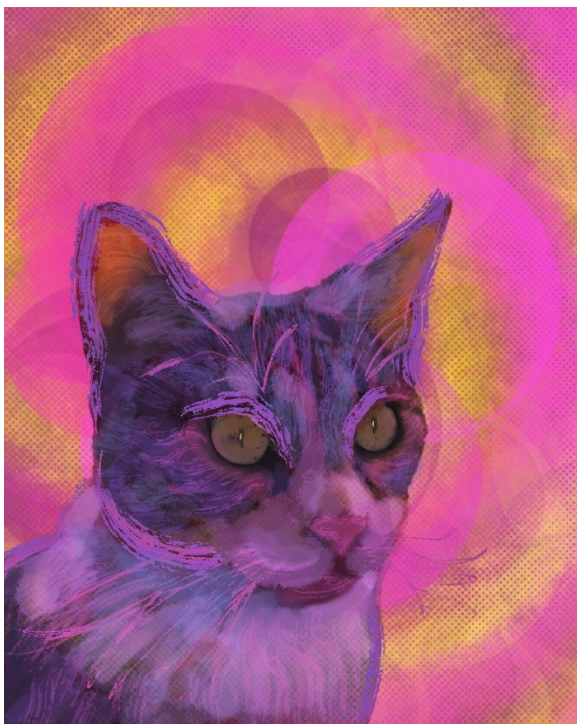
that escaped from the mouth of this tiny animal was all it took to dry my damp eyes. I quickly dashed into my house to grab something for the cat to eat. I grabbed the closest item that looked edible and rushed back outside hoping that he hadn't ran off yet. I sat down on the porch, ripped the roll in half, and we leisurely ate a piece each as we enjoyed the other's company. After that day, we continued to meet often on the porch where it began.

It's been about six months since we met each other. Over the last few months our relationship has developed even further. I found out a few of his favorite foods, while also finding out that he has a rather strange dislike for tuna. When we first met, I thought that he was on the younger side, but seeing as he hasn't grown at all in the last few months, I don't have any idea how old he is. Today wasn't a great day for me. If I attempted to give a reason as to why, I couldn't. Nothing bad happened to me at work and there wasn't any conversation with my mom that made me angry. I just felt sad. In order to keep up with my tradition of the last few months, I went outside and sat on our porch. In the cool breeze of August, I began sobbing gently. I knew that it was only a matter of time until my hero showed up to save me from this moment. The rain continued to come down from my eyes without so much as a break in the flow, as the minutes passed without any sign of Timber. It was rather strange; he would always find me without fault within 5 minutes of the waterworks starting, yet close to 10 minutes later, he was nowhere to be found. I sat there for what felt like an eternity, waiting for the man of my dreams to show up, even if only to say goodbye. Hours were spent waiting, yet Timber never showed.

I've been spending every waking second of the past few days on the porch in effort to be there when Timber returns. My attempts have been met with nothing; not a sign of the tiny cat has been seen. I've called into work sick the last three days. Physically I wasn't sick, but there was no way I could walk into that office and be forced to deal with the people in there for more than five minutes without blowing a fuse and exploding. Even getting out of bed has become an arduous task that I wish I could put off for another day. The constant ringing of the telephone has turned into a white noise that encompasses my life. I'm pretty sure that most

of the calls are from my mother, but I don't have the energy to argue with her anymore.

Then one day, everything seemed worse than usual. The screeches from the tiny birds outside seem to pierce my ears in a newfound way. The frigid air that stormed the room shakes my bones rapidly. The pungent smell that came from the light drizzle of the night before assaults my nostrils. I try to ignore it all and go back to sleep, but my dreariness is interrupted by a soft meow coming from somewhere nearby. I launch out of my bed and throw some clothes on as the excitement bubbles over inside me. With my pullover sweater only on one hand and the other hand entombed by the wool, I fling my front door open to see what awaits me. There, slowly skulking up my porch, is a large orange cat. It's not Timber. My mouth changes from a gleeful smile into one overcome with disappointment. I slowly make my way to the lip of the first porch step and sit next to the cat. The slight strokes I add to its head are met with calm purrs. I look up towards the bright blue sky to notice just how beautiful a day it is. The scenery in front of me gives me a small feeling of hope. I still miss Timber, and I know I'm gonna miss him for a while, but I think I can start to move on.



**Untitled**  
Lillian Brisson

**Black Queen**  
angUnique

Hate to see a black woman win  
I'm achieving  
Think Imma let you look at me like that for no reason  
A lot of racial hate they discriminate  
Jobs don't want my natural hair if it isn't straight  
Embrace your crown  
Represent so loud  
Raise your fists  
We're black and we're proud!

## From a Winter Wonderland into Paradise

Kelsey Cartagena

YOU WAKE UP EARLY ONE WINTER MORNING in your warm, soft bed. As you open your eyes you look out your window from across the room and see the oranges and purples dancing in the sky as the stars and puffy clouds start to ease away with the light wind. While your eyes adjust to waking up, slowly the full picture focuses, and you finally see what has happened overnight. A beautiful snowstorm has passed and outside is an untouched blanket of white fluff. It is going to be a fun, unforgettable day, especially for the children of the neighborhood.

Still lying in a warm bed, you gain the energy and the confidence to rip off the thick and heavy blanket to run to the restroom. Finally, when that is over, the morning routine starts, shower, hair, brush teeth. As you do this you wonder, “How much snow fell last night? Who is up this early? What are we going to do today?” Then once the morning routine is done, you put on layers upon layers of clothing just like Mom always tells you to do.

Once this is all done, you look at the clock and see about two hours have passed. Kate is awake by this time, usually. You put on snow boots and open the front door, all the snow still untouched. You open the second screen door, struggle with all the snow piled in front of it and squeeze out of the space made available by nature and her winter wrath. You think to yourself, “It’s okay. Dad will shovel it later.”

Before speaking to anyone you take a moment to look around, the cars all covered with a white blanket, the trees all coated with what looks like confectioners’ sugar, everything in a white veil. You walk out and realize the snow is a lot deeper than anticipated and you say aloud, “It’s up to my hip!” As you walk next door you see that Kate’s screen door is already open as her father is out front shoveling the driveway.

“Good morning kiddo! Looks like we have a snow day! Kate is awake inside getting ready. I’m just going to finish shoveling and then I’ll join y’all later,” Kate’s father says.

You walk inside Kate’s house and realize you must take off some layers before you overheat and pass out. Kate house is one

of the few houses that is still kept warm by a fireplace. As soon as you walk into her house, all you feel is the heat from the fire all over your body. It is like walking from a winter wonderland into hell itself. You look down the hall and see Kate in the kitchen already in her layers, eating some cereal.

You walk down to her and say, “Gosh can you believe all that snow! We are going to have so much fun! Does your father have the four-wheelers ready?”

“Yup, we just have to wait until he’s done shoveling the driveway,” Kate answers.

She finishes her cereal, puts on the rest of her layers of clothing and you both head outside. “Let’s go to Krista’s house and get her and her siblings. By the time we get there and get her out, everyone else should be awake and already outside,” Kate said while breathing heavily, walking through the dense snow. You and Kate head over to Krista’s house and a usual one-minute walk easily takes about five with all this snow. You get to Krista’s house with Kate and to your surprise she is already prepared for your extravagant day. You and Kate wait for her younger siblings to put on their shoes and start to head over to the hill behind Brad’s house. This time it takes even longer because you can’t help but throw snowballs and have fun in the snow on the way there.

You and the rest of the group get to Brad’s house and you see his head peeking out of his front window. He looks excited and gleaming with joy as he sees you walking up to his house.

“Hey guys! Just go around the house to the back and start heading for the hill! I’ll be right out.” He shouts with half of his body out of the window he just opened up.

While you and your friends walk around the house, the group of young friends passes Brad’s trash cans, all of them taking the covers of them. You and everyone else gets to the back of Brad’s and he is already going down the stairs of his back patio, as fast as he can with all the snow piled up on the steps. You hand him a trash can cover and start walking north towards a really steep hill off a highway shoulder. You look up and see the clean sweep trucks removing the snow off the roads just pushing it more towards the hill. More snow for more fun.



You and all the kids start climbing the steep hill with your trash covers and slide down with the trash covers under you like a sled. One at a time, two at a time, with a cover, without a cover. There goes Little Johnny, Krista's youngest brother tumbling down the hill. As he is tumbling, you look at him do this from the top of the hill all the way to the bottom laughing every time he bounces just like the rest of the group. When he finally reaches the bottom, he pops up instantly.

"I'm okay," Little Johnny screams as you all laugh. Some even clap at his splendid spill down the snowy hill.

Suddenly you hear a small roar growing bigger and bigger, the sound being amplified with the snow on the floor and in the air.

"Four-wheelers," you and the rest of the kids start screaming in pure excitement.

You look by Brad's house and see Kate's father driving up with his four-wheeler, treading through the snow, and then see Krista's father on his right behind. As they get closer and closer, the roar grows louder and louder. You all shake more with excitement than being cold.

"Come on down kids! Let's get this snow day started!" Krista's father says with excitement. All the kids start to run down the hill, all with their trash covers in hand.

You and all your friends run towards these big mechanical beasts. Krista and Kate's fathers get up from their four-wheelers and take the rope out of their deep jean pockets and start to tie one end of the rope to the back of the bike and the other end to a trash cover.

"Alright, get on, and the rest chase," The fathers say as they take off on their four-wheeled gas guzzlers.

They go around the neighborhood, driving their bike around and dragging you all on the ends. You go around the block for hours, taking turns with these bikes dragging you. Being dragged on one of those bikes on the snow is like being on a wintertime roller coaster. The kids that are not riding make snow angels or snowmen and start snowball fights. The younger boys pee in the snow, trying to make little urine drawings. The rest of the day goes on like this, from sunup till the streetlight come on. Even then you

all just run inside your houses, eat super quick and run back out to join the fun.

The adults look out their window and watch the innocent fun, with some even going out with their kids and joining. After everyone has their fair share, you all head to Krista's house. Both fathers park their bikes in the driveway and clean them off, fueling them up for the next day. Then Krista's father starts a bonfire in his outdoor fireplace right next to his house. At this point of the day, almost the whole neighborhood joins for some s'mores and hot chocolate while the adults wine and beer.

Anytime you hear the news now saying there will be snow, you think back to your childhood and remember those days getting dragged by the huge four- wheeled bikes. You remember Brad, Krista, and Kate. You still talk to them from time to time. You are all adults now, Brad still lives in the same house, Krista is married, and Kate has a baby boy.

You sit down and flick on the news. Coincidentally there will be snow tomorrow. You call Kate who still lives close by and ask her, "Has Julian had the proper snow day like we did when we were children?"



**You Still Here**

Jennifer Mendez Roldan

## Uncertain Tears

Racco Maristela

Green Leaf...  
Green Left...  
Once a blue sky  
Now brought red eyes  
Animals, five hundred in million,  
All, have rested and now gone

Uncertain tears at the 20<sup>th</sup> year of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennia  
A premonition about startling fear and engraved trauma  
Birth of a plague that left millions out of breath  
Billions of faces in a mask to avoid the shadow of death

A knee in the streets planting a certain face  
Provoked indignation against the discrimination of race  
Months of worries felt like 3 decades compressed as it was  
passing by  
I was one of those people that just slept to get through the night

Socially distanced now the world is to you...  
Socially distanced we are from the truth  
The 12<sup>th</sup> month ended its run, bringing in 2021  
Never again I'll take for granted the warmth of the sun.

## **The Earth Is Crying**

Eli Merles

The earth is speaking so we can survive, she is hurt and saying  
you've made me cry.

I gave you fresh air, the sun, and the trees, so why have you not  
been listening to me?

I am hurt beyond what words can say, do you really not know  
why I am in dismay?

She continued and said, yes, my tears are real, so why do you  
resist my tears and fears?

I put all this in place for you my children, help me wipe my tears  
from my eyes, I am hurting my children please see why oh  
why!

I am confused by the choices you are making and causing me to  
choose.

Do I give you back the fresh air, the singing birds, and the leaves  
on the trees, when I know you are not listening to me?

I cry for your attention and gratitude so don't leave me high and  
dry like the leaves on the trees so that I must choose.

Love me as I love you and I will restore nature back to you...

## **You Should've Known When He Didn't Have Any Sugar**

Antonio Melgar

YOU'RE GONNA DREAM ABOUT THIS MONTH for the rest of your life.

The man beside you is sleeping. His name is Zed. It's an unusual name, you've often thought to yourself. His real name is actually Gerard, but no one ever calls him that. Gerard Delacroix. It's very French-Canadian, he's very French-Canadian. He spent his childhood in flannel and camo, trudging through frozen forests. Eventually, he found his way to New York and into your life, and you found your way into his bed.

You didn't intend this. This wasn't supposed to happen. Sam had just left you and it started a chain reaction of all sorts of terrible thoughts inside your mind. Sam left because you'll never really be a man, because no man will ever love the malformed creature that you really are, the failed woman playing pretend. Everything would have been so much easier if God had just made you male from day one instead of forcing you to claw your way into manhood.

None of that was true, of course. Sam didn't leave you because you're trans, he left because you moved too fast, too quick. You opened yourself wide and wanting and he shrank away in response. The tragedy of it all is that he was exactly what you wanted but you weren't what he wanted. Still, the terrible thoughts calcified into a dark stone deep in your belly and you lost yourself in grief. Maybe that's why when Zed kissed you, you kissed him right back. Maybe that's why you jumped into his bed even though you knew in some little corner of your mind that this would not end well.

It was probably the way he looked at you, like there was something worth looking at. Like how Sam used to look at you. This gaze led you to Zed's apartment, two weeks post-break up, six-pack of beer in tow. You owed him a drink; a promise made months ago after he covered your shift. You can lie to yourself all you want and claim innocent intentions. You and he both know the truth. You indulged in that selfish impulse to be wanted and returned his kiss when he gave it to you, two beers and half a pizza



in. Zed was tender in his motions and in his gaze, tender in unraveling you. He confessed, half-ashamed, that you're the first man he's ever been with. That thought terrified you, still terrifies you. There's such a weight to that. Long ago, you were at a college party with a friend, a Lit major named Derek. Deep into the evening, you sat next to each other on some withering couch that almost certainly did not start out as brown, a bit too high to walk back home. He turned and looked at you with an alarming amount of clarity and completely unprompted said, "I think gay men have two soulmates in our lives. There's the man we grow old with, and the man who teaches us the freedom of loving men." It was honestly kind of infuriating how eloquent he could be when you were at your least coherent. But what Derek said that night stayed with you. So, when Zed confessed that, his ears red from the booze and the nerves, you wanted nothing more than to press love into his skin. The weight of this man's self-actualization was on your shoulders. You pulled yourself open for him, a little awkwardly and a little crudely, but you did it. You've always believed there's something divine about two men making love, something downright spiritual. You wanted to give him a holy night. You made no promises of anything after and he was under no delusions. This would begin and end here. It was a great goddamn night. He became someone else, someone freer and brighter and bigger. He was transformed, not by you, but by the simple act of letting himself have. You're still a selfish bastard for it, but he wanted you too.

Several hours and a shower later, you began to dig around for your clothes.

"You can stay. If, uh, if you want."

You looked up at him and his eyes were wide and tender. Something inside you somersaulted.

"Only if you want to, of course. I just mean, it's kind of late to drive, you know?"

Wordlessly, you climbed in beside him. The thump of your heart was faster now, your head laying on his chest, than it was when he was inside you. You stayed the night. That was your first mistake. You could have still salvaged it. You gave him a great night, gave him what he wanted, and took a little bit of his love for

yourself. But you couldn't bring yourself to let go. You clung tightly like a leech.

You made him breakfast that morning. The eggs were too runny, and the bacon was a little burnt and there was no sugar or creamer for the coffee, but he didn't mind. It was as if something unraveled in you, in both of you, when he let you sleep in his arms. That night and morning turned into even more nights and mornings, which turned into movie dates and dinner dates, holding his hand on the subway, and shoving him into a dark corner on a street and kissing him stupid. You took him to a gay club for the first time. At the start he was his usual, awkward self, dressed in flannel and unsure of where to put his hands. He'd lost the flannel by the end and was wrapped entirely around you. He was so shocked that he spent the whole night getting hit on. You made a mental note to yourself; you had to make sure this boy internalized just how wanted he was.

A week into whatever this was, you practically moved in with him. A year ago, you had committed the mortal sin of dropping out of college. Two years into school, tens of thousands of dollars in debt, but you just couldn't cut it. You live with your parents now and they barely acknowledge you're there. You've written up a big old list of justifications for why they should forgive you already: you work, you bring in money, you pay for your own food. But in your heart, you know they'll never read that list. They decided long ago you're a perpetual disappointment. So, Zed's place served as a refuge from all that and he was more than happy to share his drab little apartment with someone else. You bought him a plant.

Being with Zed is a liberation in some ways. It's the way he holds you, the way he says your name like a prayer meant only for you, the way he so readily leans into your touch. You run your hands through his hair as he curls up into you and it hits you: he's just as desperate as you are. And for once, you don't think about Sam. You kiss him and you sleep with him and you buy overpriced coffee with him and you don't ever think about Sam. It's just him, only him. Except when it isn't. Except for those final moments at night and those first moments in the morning, in the space between sleep and consciousness, when the only face you see is Sam's. There's a small whisper of disappointment in your heart

when you open your eyes and the first face you see isn't Sam's. You've been trying to smother that disappointment in its sleep. You want to squeeze the life out of it, will yourself into seeing Zed's face. You want to choose Zed. But you can't, no matter how hard you try.

On some level Zed knows. You know he knows. He has to have known since at least last Friday, when you both ran into Sam on your way back to Zed's place, groceries in tow like a proper couple. As soon as you saw him you dropped Zed's hand without thinking. You weren't aware you had done this until he took it back. He was quiet when you got home. He didn't lean into you as you sat and watched a movie, he didn't wrap his arms around you as you made dinner, and his kiss before bed was aloof. Initially, you chalked it up to the awkwardness he must be feeling running into his boyfriend's ex. Boyfriends? Is that what you are? You've never settled on that. Why haven't you settled on that? You don't want to acknowledge why or what happened or what it all means. It's eating away at you, though, and you know you have to. It's not fair to Zed otherwise.

Yesterday, you realized you were out of creamer and you forgot to get sugar.

"How come you never have any here?" You ask him.

He looks up from the couch. "Oh, I usually take my coffee black."

"Babe," you say, looking at your hands like you've just committed a murder. "I've been making your coffee for like a month and putting sugar and creamer in it. Why didn't you say anything?"

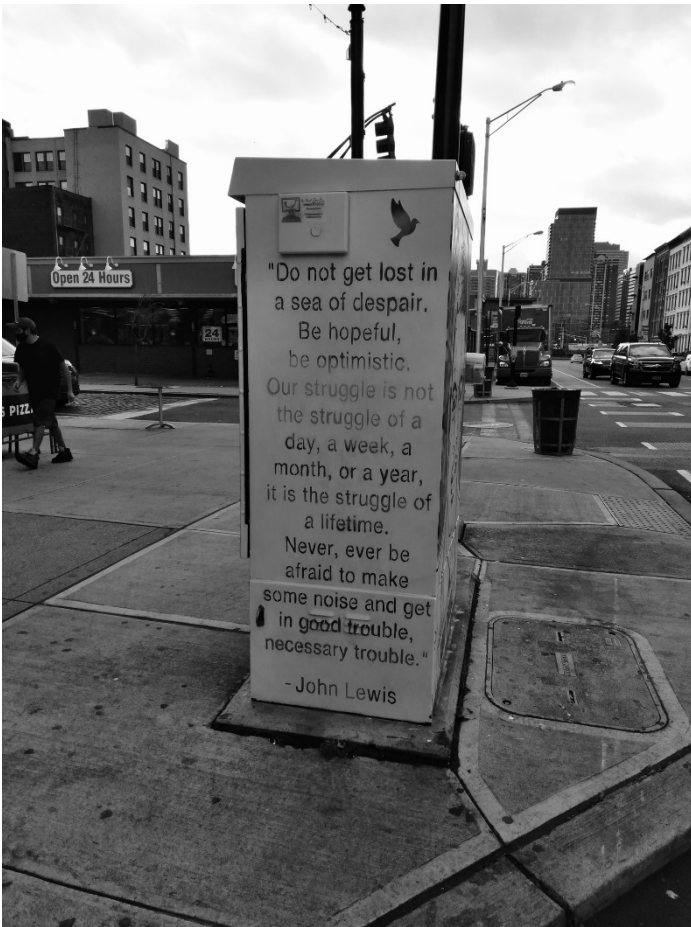
He shrugs like it's a conversation like any other. "You just gave them to me. Didn't feel right to complain."

It hits you then: you weren't the first man he's ever been with because he denied to himself that he liked men. You were the first man because he doesn't know how to assert what he wants. Even on your first night, you had to guide him towards his wants. Even asking you to stay was couched in your wants. You start feeling a little out of your depth and then ashamed for feeling out of your depth. You don't know this man and you don't really know how to

help him. Of course, you don't, you're only 21. You've been together for a month. It's okay. It's okay. It's...

You know it's not okay. You know things are reaching their conclusion. You had fun. You loved him and he loved you. You were loved. You felt loved. You need to end things.

It's gonna tear you both in two.



## Wondering in Space

Melissa Vasquez

**Worth**  
Krysta Alvarez

A teaspoon of people  
Hold a hogshead of the world's money  
Their blood is green, from it all.  
Gold runs through their veins,  
Diamonds back up their names.

We scream we want change,  
But the only change that occurs is microscopic,  
Oh, it's the dust at the bottom of their pockets'  
The leftovers from when they break their benjamins.

A new rhythm is heard in the background  
Vibrated off of places no one bothers to look,  
The silent but persistent beat of the drum, thumping,  
To the growing, pulsating anger of unfairness.

Masses of people,  
Who've never been shown,  
Past the trigger of a gun,  
Or guided beyond the crowded street corners.  
Instead were trapped with a statistical burden,  
Of what percent won't finish high school,  
Let alone finish college.  
Preparing pigs to slaughter.

Singling out the makeup of this country,  
Cornering the lower class like cockroaches.  
Yet all the eye can see is hopeless opportunities.  
Never looking beyond the gloss of a police badge,  
Not bothering to think of how this all came to be,  
Separating the lock and key.

Ask instead,  
Where is this supposed change going,  
Working towards nothing,



Jingling its way down the drains of mansions,  
Collecting dust on the mantels of fraud.  
Where can we find the prosecutors of these crimes of inequality.

Look through a kaleidoscope  
Of rubies, emeralds, and diamonds  
To show you the silver tongued,  
Porcelain faced, privileged Americans,  
Fighting over how much less you need not take.  
It's that paralleled road,  
That two sided tape,  
That withering wall of democracy,  
Where two seas meet.

One a decimalized size,  
Compared to the other,  
But infinitely worth more.

## Confessions of the Earth

Aarsh Chauhan

I DO NOT RECALL MYSELF as a social person who partakes in holidays such as New Year's. Whereas my fellow colleagues took a day off to visit their families and friends, I on the other hand woke up in the morning at seven. As expected, it was a hectic day for me considering the day of festivities.

My usual routine as a cab driver has been quite mediocre now. Each and every day, I pick passengers from their requested coordinates and drop them off at their desired focal points. Such has been my daily life for roughly twenty years. This continued until the last day of 2099. Populations all across the solar system were awaiting the dawn of a new century and here I was having the lengthiest ride of my history. Needless to say, the three passengers that requested my service for a long journey did not bother me at all. What poked my conscious brain was all the "chat" they transmitted to each other throughout the ride.

At this time, I received a request from a lady named Monica who booked my service for four persons, herself included. Courtesy of the air tunnels, it did not take me long enough to arrive at the pick-up point and welcome the passengers in their shiny protective e-suits in my car. From the badges lodged on their suits, I soon inferred them as natives of Jupiter who were probably visiting their beloved ones on Earth. Soon after the formalities, the couple's teenage twin, Dave, protested, "Why do we have to visit this small prison each year? Can't we just invite grandma and Uncle Rhys back home? It's so spacious there." Supportive of her brother, the daughter added "Yeah, ma, I don't want to keep wearing this thick suit each and every minute, we are not sensitive to all the lurking viruses or the stinking air out there!"

"Enough you two," said the father, adding, "If you don't wear it, all those greenhouse gases or those released by the war will suffocate you." A part of me was silent, focused on my job, whereas the counterpart agreed with him. After all, experts and entrepreneurs at the beginning of the century bragged about making the earth a nature-friendly planet by the first half. But did their speculations prove their prowess? This was answered by

Monica's stance that followed a brief silence.

"The war destroyed everything."

"Was it that terrible?" questioned the daughter. As their tumultuous conversation embedded in silence and responses continued, I stopped the car at a red signal and gazed on the streets whose sidewalks were now heavily ornamented with artificial green herbs and bushes. After a while, it came to my attention that my generous customer had added a new destination en route which was the global war memorial. This came as a surprise to me as well as to her family. While I speak for myself, I speculated this decision as a consequence of the argument her husband had had with their children over the issue of protective suits. Nevertheless, upon arriving at the site, she demanded her family get out of the car.

After getting out of the cab, she pointed her hand at the memorial, a humongous inscribed stone that prided itself as an unmovable natural element in the midst of the block constructed from the so-called "eco-friendly metal," in spite of the diminishment of resources during the war. But what was this war that affected every single human that was born before the second half of the century? This puzzle of mine was resolved by Monica's shocking explanation to her children.

"This war, its causes, and events following it are the only reasons why your father and I decided to relocate the household. It is true that nonsensical theories foretold the war to be a conflict of nations, but little did they succeed in explaining the grave misery it would unfold to this planet."

They started walking closer to the memorial and I on the other hand struggled with resisting my hate towards the children whose criticisms of the earth disheartened me. Was this the new form of hate that was dwelling across in the world, or may I say the solar system?

Monica continued talking to her children about the war. As my human mind was gradually becoming intrigued by her talks of the past, I parked the cab and then followed them to the memorial. Now the rock's shadow almost absorbed me in broad daylight. Up to this moment, the children remained awestruck by the memorial's appearance which made me highly doubt if they

listened or empathized with their parents' revelation that was full of grief for the people like me and them who experienced the immediate outcomes of the war, with our families being part of it themselves. Damaged landscapes, air raid sirens, gas masks, nuclear emission trackers, radiation sickness, and refugee camps are some of the images I recall as a child.

Keeping his pale face to the ground, her husband lamented, "It all started at the end of the pandemic. Vaccinations in some parts of the earth made people boost up their hopes for an efficient recovery...". When Dave inquired further, Monica replied, "We assumed that the world would be on a normal track once the vaccination programs ended, but soon, the centuries-old issue of discrimination, which was addressed but not resolved, gained momentum. People expressed their concerns, but governments did very little to execute what they preached."

To this matter, the daughter eventually filled the void of instant silence by making a query. "From what my teacher taught me in my history class, racism was the only issue that went unresolved in America and Europe. How did it go global then?"

"No, no, no, no, Sarah, racial discrimination was just a part of it," continued the husband, "intolerance persisted in all forms and across all regions of the earth. America and European states indeed had racial tensions, but bigger than that were xenophobic tensions." He stopped suddenly and once again stammered before ending his statement.

"How so?" inquired Dave. In response to this, Monica looked down at him with tears almost raining down her eyes. She proceeded, "Growing up, I remember my grandmother telling a story of how the beginning of the '20s was cruel for those fighting against racial injustice. But this was not the only problem that those suffering from such prejudice faced. While attending college, I read selective news archives, saw video clips, and heard speeches from the leaders who were the frontmen of the movement. In the U.S, the struggle was for African Americans; in Brazil, it was indigenous of the Amazons; in the Middle East, migrant workers were exploited based on their distinctive religion; Russia, along with political opponents, suppressed ethnic Muslim populations that also remained stigmatized in the western

world, Israel, India, and China. Hindus faced religious prejudices in certain developed parts of the world. Not to mention, fragments of anti-Semitism still prevailed even after the major destruction of such ideology after the latter twentieth century. Moreover, immigrants in the west of any ethnicity were subjected to xenophobia and their voices were heard only momentarily.”

She continued, “People protested and marched peacefully at first. But it all changed in 2045. Riots escalated in most of the world capitals and global cities. D.C, Moscow, Beijing, Brasilia, Delhi, Doha, you name it. Turns out global discrimination was not the only issue unresponded to by the governments. Scarcity of resources, enormous weapons deals of superpowers with developing countries, and confined human rights finally forced people all over to take up arms against their failing governments.”

To Dave, this came as an element of surprise for which he argued, “Wait, people turned against their own governments, even after they elected them?”

“Yes, and then started the war between the people and the world governments who for their own self-interests and that of elites inflicted the worst military brutality on their own people. It was the only time when people of the Earth unified under one roof to counter the enemy that kept dividing them at the stake of morality.”

I kept hearing stories of all revolutionary movements that followed the war sometimes from the passengers on the occasion of Liberation Day but little did anyone recall the events of the actual war. I suppose that day was fortuitous for me as a keen learner. I started retreating back on my way to my car with their voices stuck in my developing memory.

As the four of them reentered the cab parked at the gate of the memorial, I became anxious, not because I feared the couple suspected my awkward presence behind them at the memorial. This duress was rooted in the sense of guilt that I felt for misjudging the son for his discomfort with this planet, which led me to question my perception: Was I igniting a new kind of hatred in me against a person who was barely aware of a historical event? Was I becoming a ‘planetophobe’?

We reached the destination. The kids and their father entered

the building, but Monica stopped at the entrance. As I was in the process of sending the receipt to her, she turned back and approached me, and whispered politely, “I know you were there, I am so sorry if my kids offended you in any way, it’s their first time here.” Guilt and embarrassment were the only elements that mounted her face while she apologized. To me the guilt expressed was unnecessary. Instead of her, it should have been me to apologize for prejudging them. And so I did by conveying “It’s alright ma’am,” before deactivating my cab status and riding back home.

With no governments or preachers to further divide us through philosophical fragments, who was I to regress my conscious mind to the troubles of the past. Utopia had been finally achieved, not with the prevalence of the “perfect world” as people imagined. It rather manifested itself with no existence of boundaries between the lands, no divided governments to rule on the freed, no alienation between cultures, no deprivation of basic rights, and no more bigotry on the issue of discrimination. However, this all came at a great cost. Destruction of natural terrains led the innovators to artificialize nature by biotechnology, polluted air imprisoned people to shackles of protective gears, absence of rituals made individuals more distant from their beloved, and historians till this day argue about the relevance of the past events. Such lay the confessions of this earth on the dawn of a new century.



**Freedom**  
Eli Merles

## Rat Race

Krysta Alvarez

Nibble by nibble, the bland taste does little to satiate the  
cravings.

Bite by bite, the taste no longer matters.  
It's garbage.

Creeping through the tiles in the night.  
Hurry. Quick. Don't let anyone catch you.  
Gnawing, gnawing on the old rotten filth.

It does nothing for the body.  
It just stuffs the stomach.  
It fills the empty void in the belly. But just barely satisfies.  
There is no satisfaction. There are no emotions.

The light turns on.  
Fear freezes the muscles.  
How do I look? Am I a rodent? I feel like a pest.  
Things don't feel very welcoming to me.  
I creep. I am a stranger in this house.  
The light turns off.

Muscles relax.  
I am alone again.  
I continue to tear, rip and shred.  
I am doing no favor to myself.  
Do I deserve this?  
My body will not thank me for it.  
My mind doesn't seem to take notice either.  
It's numb.  
There is no satisfaction. There are no emotions.

The light turns on.  
Fear freezes the muscles.  
How do I look? Am I a rodent? I feel like a pest.  
The more I swallow the more I feel full inside.



I creep. I am crazed for a change in the hollowness.  
The light turns off.

I won't ever relax. I don't know if there's any point in continuing.  
Others are here. We are all tearing into garbage.  
We consume the garbage.  
We all come from the gutters.  
Will we ever escape?  
Bit by bit, nibble by nibble, bite by bite, we tear what little  
garbage is left.  
Soon there will be nothing left.  
We need to stop eating the filth.  
We need to stop succumbing to the darkness.  
No one will ever see us.  
There is no satisfaction. There are too many emotions.

The light turns on.  
Fear freezes the muscles.  
How do I look? Am I just another rodent? I feel like just another  
pest.  
Thoughts keep circling.  
It's guilt and disappointment.  
It's worse than feeling empty.  
The light turns off.

I am just a rodent. I belong with all the other pests.

**The Night Shift**

Pedro Moranchel

The bustling chatter transforms  
Into faded passing cars.  
My companions now are  
The dimmed bulbs over barstool rows.  
I reach and clean the bottom of the pint glass with my rag,  
Placing it on the rack.  
I grab my jacket on the coat hanger and shove open the back  
door—  
I pause.

Facing a fearsome rain battalion combating the pavement  
With daring droplets falling through the fire escape above me,  
Causing tiny splashes on my shoulders and hair in their bravery.  
I reach into my pocket, taking a cigarette and lighter,  
Clasping my hands over it protectively inches from my mouth—  
I pause.

I drop, stomp, and scrap it.  
Only to return to my companions—  
The dimmed bulbs over barstool rows.



**Gentrified**  
Eli Merles

**Don't Touch Me**

Madison Negrón

Across the platform  
I'm flying  
No that's just the train  
My migraine  
Hello  
Wow lots of faces  
Please don't touch me  
Please don't look at me  
Don't direct your gaze towards me  
Undressing me  
Undressing you  
I sit here for a while  
In my thoughts  
In these thoughts  
Filling the air with hot breath  
Hot bodies  
Dirty bodies  
Freshly showered bodies  
I'm suffocating  
I'm done  
You're alone  
Isn't everyone?  
In your head

## Suited for California Living

Rebecca Burghardt

WHEN I WAS TEN YEARS OLD, my father told me he loved his car more than he loved me.

He drove a silver BMW convertible and refused to park it on the unprotected asphalt that made up our driveway. His car couldn't be exposed to the harsh winters and oppressive summers that existed in The Garden State. We had a two-car garage and half of it was filled with miscellaneous items; think Dick's Sporting Goods and Home Depot had a baby in the bric-a-brac section of a Goodwill. As a result, parking his car in the garage wasn't an easy task and neither was exiting or entering the vehicle.

One afternoon, we arrived back home after going to the supermarket to pick up milk and a few other items.

My dad never put the gallon of milk in a plastic grocery bag because he said it was easier to carry the jug by its handle- it was. I was in charge of holding the gallon of milk and the singular yellow plastic grocery bag being that I was sitting in the backseat. When I opened the door, milk and yellow bag in hand, I swung it open just a little too hard and hit a bicycle that was resting too close to the car.

Knowing how much my father cherished his car, how much he prided himself on keeping the silver exterior as shiny as it was the moment he purchased it from the lot, I cringed when I heard the car door brush against that stupid bike, and I froze immediately after shutting the door. My father had already left the garage by the time I had gotten out of the car, my tiny hands distracted by the groceries we'd bought.

I turned around to check if he had heard, my eyes meeting with his. I could instantly feel his rage travel from the driveway down to the garage, turning into fear as soon as it fell at my feet.

"What was that?" He asked, his voice monotone.

My stomach birthed a million angry butterflies as I turned my head to inspect the door.

"Christine, hello? I asked you a question."

“Oh, um, when I was getting out of the car, I was having a little bit of trouble opening the door since I had to hold the milk and that bike was really close to the door so they-”

He cut me off, raising his voice this time, “You hit my car, right?”

Before I could open my mouth to tell him that the car was fine, that there were no dents, only a small scuff mark left near the door handle, a scuff mark similar to the ones I’d seen him buff out before, he rushed towards his car, bumping into me when he strode into the garage. I could feel the pitched roof of the garage falling and the walls closing in on me. With tears beginning to blur my vision, I squeezed out from behind him, making my way to the asphalt a few feet from where I was standing.

He crouched down to look at his door, and when he saw what I had done he closed his eyes and clenched his fists until his knuckles turned white.

“What the fuck, Christine?”

I didn’t respond; instead I stood staring at the ground wishing I could hit some magical rewind button and make this whole situation disappear.

It was a spring day and the sky was completely blue without a single cloud in sight. There was a slight breeze that rustled the green leaves of the trees and ferns that lined our driveway, and the air was crisp with only a touch of humidity. It smelled like spring. The atmosphere of the world that existed around us wasn’t a reflection of my father’s mood in the slightest.

Throwing his hands up in the air and walking out of the garage, my father spoke through his teeth, “So you’re just not going to answer me? First you disrespect me with your carelessness, and now you’re blatantly ignoring me?”

“I’m sorry, dad. It was an accident,” I whispered, wiping the tears from my face.

“Sorry doesn’t fix it. You know how much this car means to me,” He sharply retorted.

Left with nothing else to say, he and I stood a few feet across from each other in the driveway, engaging in a silent face off.

My thoughts begged him to tell me that it was no big deal and that he could fix it tomorrow, but instead, when he opened his mouth he said, “I love my car more than you.”

His square face contorted, making his five o’clock shadow take on a shape I had never seen before. He looked like a cartoon villain.

Standing across from my father and being told my worth is less than that of his car made me feel as small as one of the crimson-colored pebbles resting next to my feet. It didn’t smell like spring anymore.

I wanted to sink into the driveway and never look him in the face again. After all, the driveway wasn’t worthy of housing my father’s car, so I would fit in wonderfully after being deemed unworthy myself.

When the clusters of tears rolling down my face turned into sobs, he told me he was only joking, and that he wasn’t even mad about my carelessness. He rushed up to me with the same fervor he used moments before when he ran to inspect his car door.

When he reached me, a mere five steps away, he crouched down, making sure his brown eyes were level with my green bloodshot ones.

“Hey, come on Chris, you know I was only joking, right?” His tone told me he had asked that question rhetorically.

He only called me Chris when he was attempting to express some form of sympathy.

I stood there staring at my dirtied canvas sneakers, crossing my eyes so that I could watch the hot tears roll down my cheeks and eventually fall onto my shoes. I didn’t want to talk to him, and I couldn’t muster up the strength to open my mouth anyways.

He pushed again, “Chris, I was playing, I swear. You know I love you, and when you love someone, you would never do anything to hurt them.”

My tears thickened and I tasted their saltiness as they pooled in the ridge of my upper lip.

I didn’t like hearing my father tell me he loved me; he was only saying it because he was supposed to say it.

I wanted to say something, just to make him stop lying, but I knew that if I opened my mouth my labored breathing would lose its muzzle and turn into high-pitched wails.

He put his hand on my shoulder and broke the silence yet again, “You know, during parent teacher conferences Mrs. Blair told me how kind you are to your classmates. Part of being kind is forgiving others, hon.” He was desperate now.

He gave me a hug, my arms dangling at my sides. A mixture of snot, spit, and tears temporarily stained the soft cotton of his white Calvin Klein crew neck t-shirt. When the hug was over, he pulled away and glanced at his shoulder. He opened his mouth as if to say something, but he didn’t. Instead, he grinned, thinking his platitudes had bandaged the hurt he inflicted on my 5th grade heart.

We’d been standing outside for what seemed like hours. I just wanted to go inside.

I knew he wasn’t going to go in the house until I pulled myself together. My mother was home and she’d ask questions.

I hated when she badgered my father for things that wouldn’t change, and on the occasion that she did, I was filled with second-hand embarrassment.

When I finally decided to open my mouth, I immediately regretted what I had said.

“Well, Mrs. Blair would say that you didn’t follow the golden rule,” I retorted in a whisper, my voice cracking halfway through.

“Chris, I was only joking, I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings. I told you that already.”

I nodded, my sign of agreeance a plea for him to start heading inside, and an indication of my defeat.

“You know, Grandpa would call me names that I can’t even tell you about until you’re an adult. I love you; I didn’t mean it; I don’t know what else you want me to say.”

Silence followed, and he finally looked like he was ready to go inside.

My tears had slowed. Not because I forgave him, but because I physically couldn’t carry on anymore. My face was red and splotchy, and the dried tears felt like plastic wrap clinging to my face.



He got up from his squat and headed for the door. I followed, maintaining enough distance so that he would walk in before me.

“More than your car?” I asked, standing behind him, stretching the words and spacing them out at risk of crying again.

“More than my car, yes. You can ruin my car, Christine, and at the end of the day I’ll still love you because you’re my daughter.”

My father tried to explain his wrongdoing away rather than own up to it. He told me that he wouldn’t even be mad if I’d destroyed his car, which I knew was a lie, and he had affirmed that he loved me only because I was his kid.

A glass of spilled orange juice ignited such rage in him that my sister and I would eventually become conditioned to break down each time we spilled a drink before any yelling even started. My father had unknowingly Pavlov-dogged us. This pre-conditioned crying continued for years, and even occurred after my parents split and my sister and I no longer lived with my father.

In the days following the incident, my father made sure to tell me he loved me, tacking on “more than my car” on the end of his “I love you”s. His alteration to that commonly used phrase stuck around for weeks on end, and months later he would sew it right back on, hoping to make light of the situation. It wasn’t funny to me then, and I don’t think it will ever be.

Now, my father drives a Lexus SUV. I don’t see him very much since he moved to California after my parents’ divorce. Apparently, he got a job offer with a higher pay than his pre-existing one on the East Coast. He’s more suited for California living anyways.

In the years following, he got remarried and had more children. I’d only seen him a handful of times. His new wife is an immigrant from Bulgaria and she’s about half his age. It’s clear she married him for his money, lifestyle, and a visa. He married her to fill a narcissistic void. I’m surprised they didn’t capitalize off of TLC’s “90 Day Fiancé.”

The last time I saw him, his wife, his two children, and his SUV was during summer break of 2019. He asked my sister and me if we wanted to spend a week at his place in California, and without hesitation we said yes.

That week in California, I discovered that the way he treats his current car is much different than the way he treated his BMW.

When my sister and I were children, he made sure to keep the car meticulous. We weren't really supposed to eat in it, and on the occasion, we did, the garbage was disposed of in such a way that ensured no crumbs were left behind. I even remember him making my sister and me take our shoes off before sitting on the grey leather seats after a day spent at the Meadowlands State Fair so that we wouldn't dirty his floor mats.

His Lexus is a pigsty compared to his previous car.

There are crumbs plastered in between the seats, tissues stuffed in the compartments of the side door, and even a few miscellaneous baby clothes scattered around the car- one of which is a single shoe.

Seeing the way he treats his car now hurts.



**Dysfunction**  
Lillian Brisson

## Summer Blues

Kissarne Pang

All these ruminating thoughts are spinning through my head as  
fast as the speed of light wondering and wandering  
as my demons are instigating and extreme melancholia suddenly  
begins waving.

The constant battle in my head is fucking exhausting.  
Can I just disappear for once? How long would this misery last? I  
picked my poison  
so I started drinking heavily  
until I arrive to disillusion.

Sitting alone inside a space  
that is supposed to be my sanctuary with all these intrusive,  
unwanted, and disturbing thoughts  
that float freely inside my head quite jaded and crossfaded  
feeling almost detached from reality. Will there ever be an end  
to all these confusions?

Everything is in motion  
yet no one could hear my notion. I'm drowning, please save me.  
I'm going down the rabbit hole, gently pull me.  
Because this might really be a cry for help.

## Pawprints on My Heart

Elaine Rodriguez

I WAS FINALLY A SENIOR! I couldn't believe it. I was so excited for all the things that would be happening this year. There's senior prom, graduation, project graduation, yearbook signing, memorial weekend with the girls. I was prepared to make my last year of high school unforgettable. I had my best girlfriends and Matty by my side.

First day as a senior and I woke up super early. Matty had woken up too since I was no longer in bed. I wanted to look my best despite the fact that I had a uniform to wear. He sat at the edge of my bed just looking at me while I rummaged through my closet. I laid some options on my bed to see which one would look best.

It was 7:00 A.M. and I heard an "arf-arf". I turned around to see Matty smiling while he shook his little bottom. He definitely loved the morning. I made a run for the bathroom before my little brother could. Matty jumped off my bed and ran behind me. He wagged his tiny tail as he waited for me. An amazing 20-minute shower later, I went back to my room so I could start getting ready. Right behind me, I heard little pit pats coming from Matty as his paws hit the cold floor. He hopped onto my bed once again and relaxed. He curled himself into a fluffy ball. When I turned around, I couldn't help but plant a kiss on his forehead. He looked at me with his big brown round eyes. He was a little yorkie with very light brown and gray fur. It was silky smooth and every time I ran my fingers through his fur, it felt like heaven.

Several jackets later, I finally decided on this denim jacket. It was a little oversized, but it complimented my navy-blue collared shirt with a white soaring eagle that said Union City Public School on my right chest, my black school pants and my moccasins.

It was 7:50 A.M. and I couldn't be late. I grabbed my cell phone, keys and bag. Matty knew I was leaving, so he followed me all the way to the door and whimpered. He stood up on two paws and scratched my leg. His eyes said, "please don't leave". He sat down like the good boy he was and gave me the puppy dog eyes. My heart felt sad because I wanted to bring him along, but school

was no place for him. I got down on both knees and gave him a tight hug. Leaving him alone in the mornings was tough.

“Bye Matty... Be a good boy. I love you and I’ll be thinking about you,” I said as I embraced him. I looked at the clock and read 7:55 A.M. Crap! I had to run to school now.

“Alright, I seriously have to go Matty”. I raced out the door. Thank god I live two blocks away, I thought. Surprisingly I made it with two minutes to spare. Trying to catch my breath, I ran into my best friend. Cam was a lean, five foot, ten inches tall gal. She was beautiful with her long, straight, golden brown hair. Her pearly white teeth made her glow every time she smiles. Cam was super smart but with her good looks, she could definitely make it as the next Kendall Jenner.

“Hey Isabel... Are you okay? You look like you’re about to pass out.” She raised her left eyebrow and stopped right next to me. She saw me with both hands on my knees and heard me breathing heavily.

I reached for my bottle of water, took a sip and replied, “Yeah, no I’m just trying to breathe”. I stood up, closed my eyes and focused on my breathing. I continued by asking, “You ready for our last year as high schoolers?”

She had the biggest smile on her face, but I noticed her smile fading when I mentioned this being our last year together. Part of me felt a little bummed too because it had just been us since freshman year. She turned to me with that smile of hers and replied with, “I’m so ready but we’re old as shit.” She laughed.

Sadly, we didn’t have any classes together for the first two hours of the day. She had calculus and I had volunteered at the guidance counselor’s offices. That was an authentic way to start every morning. I knew I would enjoy helping them out, especially since I would get to do tours around the school. I was told that students would be transferring from Florida, Texas, New York, Colombia, Dominican Republic, and other places, which I found to be pretty cool. I would be meeting new kids every couple of weeks.

The day was actually going by quicker than I had expected. It was already 1 P.M. and I was two hours away from going home to

see Matty. I was a little worried because although my dad and sister were there, I wasn't.

All of my classes were quick and easy. I just wanted to meet up with Cam so we could talk about our day. It had been our tradition since freshman year. I reached for my phone from my back pocket and sent Cam a quick message. I was getting an incoming call from my sister, Hallie. I picked up her call and all I could hear from her end was crying.

"Hey, Hallie, is something wrong? Why are you crying?" I asked. She kept crying and I still didn't understand.

She paused for a moment, sniffled and confessed "Matty is dead... Un carro lo atropelló y murió...". I didn't say anything. I didn't believe her even though I knew those tears weren't fake. Deep down I wanted to throw my phone and collapse in the middle of the hallway. I wanted to scream and cry, I just stood in the middle of the hallway as kids passed by. It felt like time had stopped except it never did, it just kept going.

I sprinted out the door. Now all I wanted was to be home. At the corner, I noticed blood and some of it was on the street. I was shaking my head because it wasn't true, I didn't want it to be true. I told myself everything was going to be okay... I just knew it. I quickly prayed to God as I was walking home.

I was outside and I felt something different. I can't exactly explain it. It felt wrong, and the feeling wouldn't go away. I opened the door and walked in. I saw my sister with Matty wrapped around in a blanket and my dad sobbing. I dropped my bag on the floor and cried. Everything hurt.

Once I had him in my arms, I held him tightly. Tears were streaming down my cheeks and I couldn't believe Matty was taken from me.

I'll miss him like crazy.



**We Are New York**

Lillian Brisson



## The Black Notebook

Briana Delgado

YOU FORGOT WHAT IT FELT LIKE to have the sun touch your bare skin. Inside the walls of your apartment where the sunlight tried to peek through the dark shades over the window, you've been in quarantine. You sit unbothered, with your black hair hanging down to your shoulders. Your eyes as green as emeralds stare ahead out the window, but your focus is amiss. You sit still in the wicker chair, legs and feet apart, holding a black notebook. It is not out there, from your window, that piques your interest. All you can think of is everything that is in that black book. You sit there holding onto the black notebook, your finger caressing the black rubber band that secures. You think to yourself while rocking in the wicker chair, 'everything is going to be alright'.

The endless nights of reading through the black notebook, and countless days reading word for word that book. You haven't showered, eaten a good meal, or talked to anyone in the past three weeks. You get up from the wicker chair and slap the black notebook, almost the size of the Bible, onto the small glass table. You pass your little office area where there are books stacked upon books, a laptop and printer, boxes that contain all your work, and post-it notes stuck all over the wall. What book is this? Someone might ask you, if present. Who is this person that wrote this book? You would just shrug, but you know the truth. You know what this book is, and who it belongs to. You shrug off the feeling of disgust, and the thoughts that start to cloud over your mind as you remove your clothing. You turn the shower on and get in. As you wash your hair, you have this sudden flashback from when you were a teenager and you would write almost every single day. You just knew it was the trigger, the feelings of when you wrote them.

You leave the bathroom and look at the big black notebook splat on your glass roundtable, scrunching your face while holding your towel up close to your naked body. You think to yourself, 'Why, after reading the whole damn book, I must be crazy. I must search for this author!' The towel drops to the floor, and you quickly grasp the book. You run to your room to dress and hurriedly grab your bag. You try to convince yourself that people

won't think you're ridiculous because you're a journalist. On the other hand, with self-doubt and fear, your two feet are trapped underneath the dirt. You hold the big black notebook for dear life, as if a tornado will come into your house and swallow you whole along with the book. You want these crazy thoughts to stop for a while; you start to become weary. You set down your bag and take off your jacket while you pour yourself a drink and pop out a smoke. Your heart is racing, but the water and the smoke calm your nerves. You come to realize that you are not ready. The sweat on your face from earlier becomes tears. You cry gullibly, and you pour yourself a new drink.

Three hours go by, and you wake up with your face pressed against the kitchen table. Your shirt is open and has liquor stains on it. You have drooled on the table. The phone rings. You search for the phone in your surroundings and answer it.

"Hello?" You speak.

"Where are you? I'm at this event, and you said you were coming for a book signing," your friend Charlie tells you.

I'm on my way, I'm coming." Your speech is off.

"You drank without me, what bar are you at?" Charlie is laughing, and then you hang up on him.

You try to get up and walk, and you fix yourself using the mirror in the bathroom. You wash your face and grab your stuff. You definitely see double; going out in broad daylight in New York City while drunk is not a good idea, you think. You've never been to this place where Charlie has sent you the address. You have to get on a train to get to the other side of the city, which is where you are going to meet your friend. When you get there, you realize that he sent you to a bar. You laugh and wonder, why would a book signing be at a bar?

Charlie is sitting at the bar waiting for you when you walk in. He gives you one of his hugs and offers you a drink. You kindly dismiss the offer and ask for water instead. You ask him, why is the book signing taking place at a bar? He just shrugs his shoulders and points behind you. As you turn, there are guards who are eyeing you up and down. You guess they were guards for the event. People start to gather and crowd the bar, eager to get

their books signed by this anonymous author. You smell of liquor and your hair sticks to your skin from profusely sweating.

“Are you ready?” Charlie asks you with a big smile on his face.

Your mind is playing its drunken tricks on you. Your vision becomes more blurred, your speech is off, and you walk funny. The bar is filled with laughter and conversation, and you aren’t sure if the room is spinning or if you are. You lick your lips which are as dry as cotton and your stomach feels like you are ready to hurl.

“Hey, buddy. Are you okay? You don’t look so good.” You can hear Charlie’s voice above you just before the lids on your eyes close and your body collapses onto the floor. When you wake up, you don’t remember why you were at a bar. You know things about yourself like you’re a journalist, you live in New York City, and you have just finished reading a thirteen-hundred-page book. Then, you suddenly remember you are looking for the author.

“Is he or she here?” You ask Charlie, slurring your words still.

He helps you stand. You brush yourself off, and sheepishly go back to sit at the bar. People watch you with confused, shameful faces. Some are starting to whisper. Their actions confuse you and your cheeks begin to blush red. You see that Charlie is watching the football game on TV. You elbow him in the ribs and whisper into his ear: “Dude why are these people staring at me like hawks? I’m not feeling too good.” You accidentally spit in his ear, trying to hold back from yelling over the noise from the tv. Your veins are popping out of your neck and forehead and sweat appears by your ears.

Your friend averts his eyes to the crowd. “They kind of do look like blood-thirsty zombies,” he says.

“You are the anonymous author, right?” A blonde high schooler from the crowd inquires.

You realize you have the big black notebook sitting in your bag, that you have brought it along with you. You have no recognition of writing a thirteen-hundred-page novel, nor do you recall having the ideas that came to mind about the book. You just kept saying that you are a journalist and you wouldn’t write such a thing.

“Then why are we here?” Charlie asks.

You swear you weren't unhinged on your way to the bar on the train. The eyes of the fans of this book burn a hole inside of you. Some even looked like they know it has to be you, others are upset because they have other places to be. What really makes your face flush is the look on Charlie's face.

"Have you gone mad?" He says.

"I'm afraid so," you reply, your face now as pale as a ghost. "I don't want this life."

You can feel the people's eyes glowering behind your back, and Charlie puts his hand on your shoulder. Then he goes on drinking his big glass of beer.

"I won't tell you what to do. At this point, everything is on you," he tells you.

You could get more famous and sign the books, or you could turn down this opportunity and let down everyone at the bar. You look at Charlie, who is already tipsy and ordering more drinks for himself. You want to get drunk enough to black out the crowd, who keep their eyes glued to you even though you sense they are becoming bored. You pray to God to make them go away. The more irritable you feel, the more you drink.

The music isn't as loud as before, and people start to come and go inside the bar. You and Charlie are so drunk now that you are singing songs together and having intimate conversations. The liquor has wrapped itself around your brain once again, and that feeling you had when the bar was overcrowded is gone. As you and Charlie are getting ready to leave, a person with amazingly blue eyes stands in your way holding the black notebook. In that moment, everything around you stops.

"Can I get your phone number? Name?" "Of course," you reply with a cheeky smile. You haven't smiled like this for a long time. You scribble your name and phone number on the last page of the black notebook. The blue-eyed person looks down at your writing and smiles back before disappearing.

## Childhood to Adolescence

Wilhelm Ramos

THE WAY TO A BRIGHT FUTURE beyond your wildest dreams is the wholesome upbringing of childhood. Years past my birth, I was a baby boy dressed in pajamas, covered with a blanket in a cubicle of security, crying out in the hope that I could be relieved from my loneliness. Kindred to those who had seen me, in my younger state of adolescence, my mother and I defied the odds from life-death expectancy. Her walk with God was quite a solemn act because of the choice she made to raise a son.

The apartment was divided into four sections with two beds, a couch, and a dresser. The clothes we wore were of a modest type, but it was the fear of insects crawling on our legs that would remind many of our humble beginnings.

It was not just us who lived with this cruel weight on our shoulders. It had to be all my family members, relatives who brought their children along and found residence in certain areas of the city. However, the apartment's rent was cheap and local grocery markets were not too far from home. We settled for quite a few years, hoping a better outcome would arise amid our discreetness. My mother taught me to be open-minded and hopeful, for there is a better world outside of where we stayed. We were all that we needed to maintain focus, to reach our goals, and to arrive at a new destiny.

The landlord, our property owner, once gave me some advice. He said, "Take things with a grain of salt. Become an owner and do not settle for less. I became an owner of this property at 19. You can, too." He mentioned this to me, as if I could undoubtedly achieve this goal without looking back at how I grew up. I was not like most kids with more opportunities and a better success rate at the same age. Unfortunately, a few years after that conversation, we moved. Our plan had been to continue living in that residence, only to save money of course, but an opportunity came up after my mother's promotion on the job. This became a blessing in disguise. This fortunate occurrence grew into a new apartment on the high-rise of Overlook Terrace, 56th street in West New York, NJ. I began to wonder if I would ever return to

40th street in Palisades Ave. I prayed a lot because of it and did not look back.

I do reminisce from time to time. I have no other solution but to remain humble living in my new residence. Children should not have to resort to substandard living conditions under extreme violence. For the sake of families, with harsh setbacks and financial deficiency, I intend to reflect on these experiences with my daughter as she gains understanding of how to live her life whole-heartedly. My child bases her reflections on personal experiences and compares them to my counseling. We parents position our children to be accountable for their actions. The process of adaptation becomes a habitual thought pattern waiting to manifest as a child's behavior changes over time. So many of our children are raised under unfathomable conditions that these unexpected outcomes are unthinkable due to the success of parents.

The fulfillment of accomplishments creates an experience that uplifts the child, enabling parents to continue with their success as a reward. It is the gift of parenting. As a whole family structure evolves due to the child's well-being, the family's environment upholds the privileges of success and rightly so, raising families to become model citizens. In return, respect is given. The self-sacrifice of parents, as their child's example unfolds, is the secret success of generations to come.

## Food and Memory

Khalood Ashraf

GROWING UP, ALMOST EVERY SATURDAY MORNING, I would wake up to aloo paratha and mint green chutney. Aloo paratha is a crispy buttered flat bread stuffed with seasoned potatoes and herbs. I always knew it was a Saturday when I smelled the food, and it would be the same routine every week. My mother would be in the kitchen and from my bedroom, I would hear sounds of her cooking over the stove, and of my dad at the table watching the Pakistani news channel or reading the paper.

I would smell the paratha from my room, picturing the butter on the pan and my mother frying the paratha on each side, along with the sizzling sound it makes as the bread fried in the butter and turned crispy. I remember not getting up right away -- just lying there with my eyes open, smelling the aromas, and listening to my mom and dad talk to each other loudly with the television in the background. Sometimes, it would just be the TV and my mother shuffling around in the kitchen and the rustling sound when my dad turned the pages of his newspaper. It felt comforting in a way, even if they were arguing, because my mom would continue cooking and doing what she was doing.

She would then make some mint green chutney as a sauce for the bread. I would hear her whisking the yogurt in its container, and the clatter as she got ready to mix three kinds of mint pastes with the chutney. Eventually I would venture my way into the kitchen and my mom would have one crispy paratha ready for me.

My mom did not make aloo paratha daily--only on the weekends for my dad as a treat. He commuted to New York to work every day as a jeweler and would come home just to eat and sleep, so this was meant to be something special. I didn't think much about it as a kid but reflecting on it now as an adult, I really looked forward to waking up to the aromas and noises of my mom making aloo paratha every Saturday. I'm not sure when it stopped but I do remember the feeling of disappointment I had when it did, and even now there are times when I catch myself wanting to go back in time.

## **The Endless Sandpit of Hell**

Anthony Perrenod

SPRINTING ALONG THE SOUTH SHORT as the waves crash at my feet, with every step I am losing more and more hope of finding you. You were just with me, in my arms while we splashed around in the water, and now I would do anything to turn back time just 20 minutes to know exactly where you went. The pain seeps out as I scream your name. The more I yell the more I feel it, praying that you would turn up somehow just hiding somewhere to joke with me like you always did. Always behind some corner with that crooked smile going ear to ear with those dimples, oh those beautiful dimples. I can feel my legs going out with every step you are not taking with me. The sand reaches up and slightly tugs me down. My tears are disguised by my sweat and my stomach is getting weary. I can sense you yelling back at me even though I cannot hear nor see you. I turn kids that look like you around by the shoulders, hoping to see your face. I run up to every person I see praying they have seen you, describing you down to that cute little birthmark on your cheek, with your blonde hair, your beautiful blonde hair, both of which you got from your mother. I can't lose you the way I lost her. I must find you; I am not leaving this beach without you. These people who are here must think I am crazy running up and down the beach asking everyone the same question three times around, screaming your name hoping you will hear it and return.

I am beginning to get dizzy, not just from missing you but from running around trying to find you in this blistering heat. I keep looking out to the water, praying you will be running in soon to start splashing around like you love to do. It kills me that we are apart. After an hour of searching, I call the police. They tell me that I cannot file a police report yet, but they will keep an eye out for you. That is just not good enough for me, though. You are my world, my everything. It does not matter how tired or dizzy I get; I will find you. I'm practically ripping my hair out due to the stress of you not being in my sights. My stomach feels turned inside out like I'm going to throw up everywhere. I want to cry, but you cannot see my weakness for when I find you, you



can only see my strength, and I have no strength without you, no life, no meaning, no purpose. I can only hope you return to me in one piece. This beach seems to be an endless sandpit of hell, seagulls circling me no matter where I go like vultures, my feet scorching, and my heart aching. The sun is blinding my sight, squinting down the barrel of the horizon. The sun is starting to retire but it is still beaming at its brightest. With every seagull call, a tear drops down the side of my cheek.

Just when all hope is lost for me, I go back to our set up and there you are laying on your Frozen towel eating your snow cone you got from the ice cream truck you chased two blocks down. Nothing has ever sent relief through my body harder than seeing you right back where we set up.

“Andrea, you scared the hell out of me.,” I say with great relief. “Don’t ever do that to me again.” Nothing can replace this joy of your return to me. My heart grows brighter as the sun sets, a quite literal transfer of energy in my chest. I cannot begin to explain to you what went through my head or my heart. I cannot even bring words out to you as I held you so tight. You try to push me away and I know I am annoying you, but I do not care. You can hate me for the moment; I will love you forever.

Nothing will ever be the same now that you are in my life. I will end someone’s life or lay my own out for you. There is nothing, no one, nowhere that could eliminate my love for you. I can just stare at you for the rest of the night, you will never have any idea of what exactly went through my body when I thought you were gone. Maybe one day when you have a child of your own you will understand. I cannot wait to see who you grow up to be. I can already tell you are smart. You are going to be smarter than I have ever been or will ever be. I can only hope you inherit your mother’s ambition and courage, her independence and brain. As every day goes by, you remind me more and more of her. If only she were still here to guide you. She would have loved to see you grow into the woman we knew you were going to be when you were born. You and she are one and the same. I cannot wait until your rebellious years in high school, or to see how you find your way in life and what roads you decide to travel and then finally I cannot wait to walk you down that aisle.

From now on my journey in life is no longer just to go for the ride. Everything I do, every decision I make, every instinct that I have will be in your best interest. I am with every fiber in my being in love with you.



**Space Mermaid X**  
Racco Maristela

## Lavender and Cosmos

Christina Kemp

THE CLOSED WHITE COFFIN affirmed Jean's sense of relief that her mother was dead. It was a modest audience, about twenty in all. Most of the attendees were in their twenties or thirties. Men wore beige or soft grey suits that were too large for them and women crossed their legs in below-the-knee skirts or dresses. They would have dressed this way even if it were not a funeral. Their collective style was to remind themselves and others that they were normal, content with the boundaries between men and women. Most were from the Caribbean and living in Roxbury or Jamaica Plain though one couple had traveled from Hyannis.

Jean was grateful to the congregation's members, none of whom she knew or could recognize. For nearly three decades, they served as a surrogate family for her mother Benena, providing her with an outlet for her sadness and delusions. They also protected Jean from her mother's psyche that had begun to feel like little fires that could not be put out. She had long stopped considering the validity of her mother's stories in which Benena was mocked by a bus driver, nearly robbed a greedy neighbor, spat upon by a businessman, terrorized by spies walking on the roof "at all hours of the night using The Machines." Benena lamented such abuses for those thoughts were like a crawling ivy strangling parts of her. With the congregation, they were no longer just personal, they were part of the plan of grandmasters: God and Satan who shaped the large and small events of Benena's everyday life. She was continually being tested but always landed on the side of the almighty. Weeks before she lay in the coffin, Benena pleaded with her daughter to convert and read the magazines that shared the good news of the afterlife. "Don't you see, Jean, the last days are upon us! Some will be resurrected, others will be nothing. Do you really want to take a chance and risk not being part of the chosen?" "Yes, I really would," Jean said dryly.

She was a decent daughter but not a good one. She didn't visit her mother more than three or four times a year. When she was there, she listened to long hapless monologues about the unprovoked humiliations Benena was made to endure and more

than once Jean snapped: “For God’s sakes, stop drowning in yourself.”

But what loyalty could Benena expect? Jean grew up moving from one apartment to the next: in dangerous loud slums and silent suburbs. After the fourth high school, Jean dropped out and moved in with a man a decade her senior. Still, the much older sisters had it worse, abandoned then pushed into foster care. Yet here they all were for that woman as if they were children waiting for their mother to return. She was lucky that all her daughters attended this service, lucky she was not set straight more often by Jean. Benena’s righteous claims to paradise? How convenient for an old woman with a past!

Jean would not mention any of that in the eulogy, rather she’d note her mother’s love of Ray Charles, Van Gogh, the morning cruller and coffee, her memories of lavender and cosmos on her native Prince Edward Island. Jeanne imagined the audience would chuckle when she’d tell the story of how Benena was able to convince one of the many landlords that their small dog was a cat just by naming it “Hercules the Cat.” She’d tell them how her mother saw herself in each of her children and those in the church because of her desire to be part of something larger than herself.

Hearing the speaker’s voice lowering, it seemed he was coming to an end and Jean moved to get up. But the service had concluded. The formulaic religious service, which said nothing of her mother’s life, loves or influence swept it all away. For the first time, Jean fixated on the coffin and wondered stupidly if she could tell her mother what she had written. The audience was ushered out of the funeral home. Another death was waiting to be packaged.

She looked down at the funeral program. On one side, Benena was the young Suffolk University student bursting with enthusiasm, oozing glamour despite her white button-down shirt. On the other side, was the octogenarian Benena, a haggard movie star with too much lipstick, wearing a defeated look of a femme fatale refusing to get offstage.

Three of the “elders” from the congregation joined the family for lunch. They had announced they were coming. They drove Jean and her sisters in various cars to a Chinese restaurant in a

suburb. In the lobby, Jean waited for the others. One sister approached her with a determined friendliness, teeth ablaze. Laughing easily, her performance was warm “Great to see you, we really need to catch up.” It had been several years since they had spoken but Jean was grateful for her enthused artificiality.

The guests sat around two tables and ate dim sum, ribs, and various noodle dishes. Guests moved their chairs to speak with one another. A young beautiful woman spoke. Jean thought she looked like a lady from a Modigliani painting but with a tan. She stood up, recalled her friend Benena, and smiled as she described her. “I loved Benena. She was always interested in how others felt, their problems. She paid attention to every detail.” Jean sensed a gnawing feeling growing inside of her.

“Her handwriting was the most beautiful I’d ever seen. Her choice of words took some time but you knew she was going to say something interesting, something only Benena would say...maybe comment on the color of your scarf or ... she was a lovely, lovely person.”

The woman paused and stared past the group then burst into tears and sat down. The rest of the guests stared blankly at the feast. Jean would let herself feel once she was alone.

## A Reason to Go Home

Paula Ortiz

SHE HAD WORKED EVERY NIGHT since she was fifteen in a small diner downtown and saved almost the full amount of her money. She had done everything in her power so she could become independent. And because all of her hard work filled her with pride, Callie was ready to leave. She was eager to begin. It started on a Wednesday morning, a particular spring morning at exactly 7:45 A.M. where she woke up already knowing that her routine, what she had known as her normal life until then, was about to finally come to an end. She had already prepared all of her bags the night before; the only things missing to pack were her blue toothbrush and the charger of her phone that she knew would need in the morning. She was nervous. No one knew she was leaving or where she was going, and probably nobody would notice. After getting ready, she decided to head downstairs and prepare herself a ham sandwich and some coffee for the long trip that was ahead.

“You’re ready. You’re strong. You can do this,” she reminded herself.

After packing the food she had prepared, Callie began to bring all of her stuff downstairs. It was hard for her to carry everything by herself, especially the big bags filled with fantasy, romance, and mystery books that she wasn’t willing to leave behind. She also carried her small plasma TV, her laptop, three boxes full of clothes, and a bag with blankets. Just like she didn’t have many people around her, she also didn’t have many possessions. However, her belongings almost completely filled her small green Volkswagen.

Callie had to do something very important before leaving the only house that had seen her grow up, the single place where she had felt safe, but also her own personal hell. Sometimes that residence had been her lair, but, so many other times, those walls made her feel incarcerated, trapped all by herself. Solely remembering memories from her childhood filled her with the courage she needed to continue. Callie walked into the small

studio that was beside the living room, took a pad and pen and began writing:

Dear Mom and Dad,

First I want to say that I'm sorry for leaving without saying anything before, but you probably won't notice it until a few weeks anyway. I hope that until then I am finally settled in my new place and can invite you whenever you can come. We can maybe eat dinner or something (if you guys want to). I don't hope that you understand my decision, but I do hope you guys don't hate me for having made it.

I wish to see you soon, your daughter, Callie.

Callie knew that that letter looked like it was written with a stone-cold heart, but still she didn't have much to say to them; her parents were nearly strangers to her. She left the small letter stuck to the fridge to be read by them whenever they got home, which could be weeks or even months later.

"They were never there for you anyway. It's not like you're hurting them. Be strong." she assured herself.

Callie got the strength she needed by taking more than one deep breath; after calming down she was finally able to leave the residence where she had gone through such a great deal of pain and move on to a new, exciting phase of her life. Filled with joy, Callie got inside her small car and began driving downtown, where she had found a very small though affordable apartment. She was feeling like she was inside a cloud, her delight so big that she began singing and dancing in the driver seat, euphorically. The bliss she felt and expressed was so immense and loud that it could be noticed by anyone who heard her come by. There was nothing that would be able to take that feeling of peace of mind of finally becoming independent.

The music was loud, and so was Callie. And for a small moment, what would be considered one fraction of a second, she got distracted and didn't notice that a small dog was sleeping in the middle of the first lonely road she encountered. When Callie



put her eyes on the road and finally noticed the dog, she pressed the brakes as hard as she could, however, it was not enough. Callie accidentally ran over the dog and heard him scream painfully. She parked her car on the side of the road but couldn't get out yet; her whole body was shaking, and she wasn't able to make a sound. Everything that happened next occurred in a matter of seconds; the abhorrent silence predominated for a glimpse of a moment until the shrieking coming from the dog eventually helped Callie react. When she hurried to get out of the car, she was able to look at the agony she had made the poor animal go through. Callie found a small Golden Retriever crying and bleeding with a broken leg.

The nauseating feeling of guilt and shame filled her completely; every inch of Callie wanted to scream, cry, run, and hide because of the abominable act she had just made to an innocent animal. Although she couldn't move moments before, she didn't think about it twice when she got back to the car, grabbed one of the blankets that she was going to use to sleep that night, and wrapped the dog in it, causing him to continue screaming and squealing. Callie put the dog in the small space she had in the back seat of her car and made it to the animal hospital in only ten minutes.

"Please don't die. I am so sorry for running you over. Please don't die." she kept repeating to the dog the whole way there.

When Callie carefully took him out of the car, she ran to the emergency room screaming.

"Help me. Help me please. I accidentally ran over him. Please help me, I can't let him die."

Two nurses came out, both of them in their uniforms. The older nurse took the dog to another room, while the younger nurse tried to calm Callie down, until she was told to sit and wait. There, Callie noticed that she was shaking and that she had been crying the whole time. She wasn't a bad person and never meant for this to happen. Callie had to sit there feeling the guilt eat her guts for two hours until she finally heard about the dog.

"You can see him now," said the young nurse before guiding her into the room.

Callie almost ran to the room where they had the dog resting after surgery. When she got there, she noticed that he was sedated and had a cast on the injured leg. She sat in a small plastic seat beside the kennel where he was laying, unconscious.

“Hey buddy,” she said, “You don’t know how sorry I truly am, man.” Small tears began falling down her cheeks “I know I hurt you and I’m sorry for that, but man, you almost killed me of a heart attack.”

The older nurse entered the room and handed Callie some papers.

“Hello, I am Nurse Castillo. Are you the owner of the dog? Those are the medications he is going to need to recover.”

“No, I accidentally ran him over when he was sleeping in the middle of the road. I don’t know if he has any owners.”

“Well, we checked if he had any chip, but he didn’t, so if you don’t want him, he will have to go to a shelter,” the oldest nurse replied.

“And what happens if nobody adopts him?” Callie asked.

“They usually get put to sleep,” the nurse answered.

When Callie heard that, something clicked inside of her. Something changed. And maybe it was because nobody had ever cared for her before, or maybe because she had always been alone and hadn’t noticed how much she needed company. Perhaps it was because the three and a half hours that had passed since she met the dog, she hadn’t stopped worrying about him about his wellbeing. It was then, right at that moment, that Callie knew that she loved him and that the dog was her family, and because of that she would take care of him like nobody had ever cared for her.

“I definitely want to adopt him,” Callie replied.

She decided to name him Milo. When he was discharged from the animal’s hospital, she put him in the backseat of her car and took him to what would become their new home. Milo’s recovery was very hard and painful, but for Callie, Milo was her new family member whom she had to take care of. Getting him back to walking normally took several months and many rehabilitation sessions that caused Milo deep pain. Fortunately, both Milo and Callie were willing to keep up with the exhausting sessions needed for Milo’s recovery, which made them able to get to know and love

each other. Eventually, Milo got better and was able to begin moving as he wanted, becoming a playful and energetic dog that sometimes enjoyed eating and destroying Callie's shoes and having late night walks at the park.

Milo changed her world completely. Before, Callie's life had sometimes seemed meaningless. She sometimes felt unfulfilled, but she always felt lonely. She never had anyone that got happy to see her or even a reason to get home. She changed Milo's world too. The veterinarian had told her that before she appeared in such an odd way, Milo's health was in terrible condition and he was starving almost to death. She and Milo became each other's new journey and adventure companion. Her purpose of living before had been to get out of her parents' house. Now she lived so she could finally go home every night to her happy and loving place.



**The Key to Silence**  
Lillian Brisson

## **Employment Status Does Not Define Worth**

Bridget Sweeney

*---Writing Center Contest Winner for Essay---*

WE, AS A SOCIETY, regard doctors, nurses, professors, researchers and the like as the “best” members of our society, because we have it ingrained in our American culture from a young age that education is a measure of how integral and successful a person you are. While education is a reputable and admirable thing to obtain, it does not measure a person’s worth.

When we think of these outstanding doctors and lawyers, we don’t take into consideration the corrupt ones. The ones who prescribe medication for kickbacks. The ones who take advantage of their clients by overcharging them. We don’t consider the professor who barely reads the papers she assigns and instead grades based on how much she likes the student. We don’t consider the researcher who unethically performs research on humans and animals to get ahead. We don’t think about the Superintendent of schools who only got his job because of who he knew in that town.

However, when we think of truck drivers, grocery store workers, garbage men, landscapers, and the like, we think they are somehow “lesser” than the above mentioned. We think that their jobs are easy and undemanding, and because of that they deserve a lower rank in society. We don’t think about the long hours the truck driver spends on the road, driving through dangerous weather conditions just to put food on the table. We don’t know that the woman who bags our snacks at 7/11 is working two other jobs as well just to support her family. We don’t realize that the garbage man wakes up earlier than the rest of us to do a job most people would not do. Four years of laborious medical school is nothing in comparison to the landscaper who lays bricks for four hours in the hot summer sun, just to then climb up to the roof and dangerously work up there. And then wakes up the next day to do it all over again.

What we do think, however, is these people are not equal to the “best” of our society. We need to finally realize that a person’s internal worth has nothing to do with their position of employment. A person’s internal worth is based on their personality. Oftentimes, you will meet a truck driver who never has a bad thing to say about anyone. You will notice that your local deli worker always has a smile on her face. You might even find that your garbage man can offer you the most meaningful advice you will ever receive.

It is time for us as a society to come together to realize we are all equals. Black, white, brown; cop, teacher, fast food worker; we all bleed the same color. We all experience happiness, sorrow, loss, love and hate. We all have problems that we carry on our shoulders as we carry out the duties of our job. We have all made mistakes and we have all made a positive impact on the life of someone else.

My hope is that one day my father, a truck driver, will receive the same accolades and thanks from society that my mother, a teacher, receives. My hope is that we all realize each other’s worth and build each other up instead of tearing one another down. We have enough racism and hatred in the world to let a silly thing like our place of work be another stigma we have to overcome. It is time for us to start thanking the man who stocks shelves at Walmart as much as we thank the nurses that tirelessly help us. We need to see beyond the lanyards and name tags, the degrees and certificates on the walls; we need to see the person and the sacrifice that they are making to make our society a better place.

So the next time you see a truck driver stopped at the red light next to you, be sure to look over and give him a smile.

## **The Intersection of Omaha and Broadway**

Warren Rigby

*---Writing Center Contest Winner for Fiction---*

CHARLIE WAS SHORT AND SKINNY with auburn hair and piercing blue eyes. He found himself repeatedly getting in the way of commuters as he struggled to maneuver through the crowded station until he finally reached the curb on Eighth Avenue and hailed a cab. The trip to Brooklyn was a little over thirty minutes. As the cab hustled through the city streets, all Charlie could do was gawk at his new surroundings. Checking his location on his phone, he noticed a rundown deli on a nearby corner. The car slowly crept up to the address given and he exited. Charlie noticed that the neighborhood was far from glamorous, but it was what he could afford. Luggage in hand, he began to climb the Mount Everest of Brooklyn taking each stair slowly. Once at the top, Charlie examined each doorbell, stopping and pressing 6C. The voice that echoed from the speaker was soft.

“Who is it?” the voice said. As Charlie introduced himself, a loud buzzing sound followed. Before he could reach the top stair, the door swung open. A short muscular Latin boy with long hair and blue eyes eagerly waited to greet Charlie.

“Welcome, I’m Michael. You must be tired from your trip,” he said, as he helped Charlie with his things, whisking him into the apartment. Excited to see his new place, Charlie asked Michael for a tour. The apartment had an open floorplan with lavish appliances and a balcony that stretched the entire length of the two bedrooms. In addition to the larger than life apartment the building had a pool, gym and a laundry room on the lower level. After the tour, Charlie returned to his room, closing the door behind him. Charlie couldn’t believe that he was finally here; as he stepped onto the balcony, all he could see was the breathtaking view that surrounded him.

Charlie heard Michael’s soft voice again.

“What do you think about the view?” As Charlie looked around, he replied, “I can’t believe that this is my new view, it’s absolutely beautiful.” As the two stood there, Michael looked over

to Charlie and said, "You must be starving. Come into the kitchen and I'll make some lunch."

Charlie paused. "I'll be right there I just need to let my family know I arrived safely." After a short time, Charlie emerged into the kitchen. "How is your family?" Michael asked.

"Everyone is good," Charlie muttered.

"That's great, you're not a vegetarian, are you?"

Charlie gave Michael a subtle nod no, as he watched him put the finishing touches on lunch.

Over lunch, Charlie learned that Michael worked at a premier gay club as a lighting technician at night so he could attend as many auditions as possible during the day. Charlie blurted out, "Wow! That seems like such a cool job."

Michael chuckled, "It definitely has its perks and we host some great events - I even got to meet Kristen Chenoweth at our Broadway Mondays." Charlie's eyes widened as Michael explained his job. "How do your parents feel about your move to New York?" Michael asked.

"They weren't too happy to be honest; they wanted me to follow in my father's footsteps and take over the family business. I saw a bigger future than just being a farmer." Charlie quickly changed the subject and asked Michael, "What's the audition process like?"

Michael refilled his mimosa and took a deep breath. "Daunting sometimes, but the moment you get a call back it makes it all worth it". Charlie found it hard to hide his excitement as he learned the audition process, holding on to every word Michael said. Sometimes he even took notes, like Michael's tip that the Village Voice was the best place to find out about the different avenues for auditions.

The conversation moved from the kitchen to the living room as they talked for hours, getting to know each other. Charlie mentioned that he was the youngest of three brothers and that he knew that he was destined to be on the big stage. Michael revealed he was an only child raised by a single mother. This left him envious of Charlie's family, even causing him to joke that he wished that he had siblings. As the clock struck twelve, they



realized how late it was, exchanged a simple good night and proceeded to their rooms.

The sounds of cars honking and flashing of lights were surreal and exciting for Charlie; he had never seen this many people or cars at one time, and he was still in Brooklyn. Michael gave him clear direction on how to get to the subway.

“Turn left when you leave the building, walk three blocks and you can’t miss it”. Just before he left Michael whipped out a MetroCard from his wallet. “You’re going to need this.” The stairs felt endless as Charlie meandered down the wide staircase to the turnstile. Charlie pulled out his MetroCard, he remembered Michael’s voice saying, “go slow or it will steal your money.” As he glided the MetroCard through the reader, he noticed a go sign on the turnstile which granted him access to pass.

“Beginners luck,” Charlie thought while waiting on the crowded platform. While the next train pulled into the station, a swift breeze grazed Charlie’s face, pushing him into the person next to him ever so slightly. The train quickly came to a halt after the squealing sound of the breaks amplified in the station. Patiently waiting, the doors opened and Charlie stepped in. “Please stand clear of the closing doors,” a voice barked over the speaker. Standing in the center of the crowded train, Charlie was jolted as the train left the station, causing him to lose his balance. Quickly trying to regain his balance, he was helped by a fellow passenger who offered him some words of advice: “You got to hold on when the train leaves the station.”

Charlie smiled and said, “Thank you,” grabbing the railing overhead for the remainder of the trip. Looking at the digital map, he noticed that the train skipped many stops; it wasn’t until the train announcements played that he realized it was an express train. The train swayed back and forth as it propelled in and out of various stations until it reached Grand Central Terminal. Michael told Charlie to follow the signs to the Shuttle train to Times Square, which was the mecca of Manhattan.

During dinner at Two Boots, Michael asked how the hunt was going. Charlie’s shoulders were slumped, and he avoided eye contact stating, “Not well. I have tried using Indeed, LinkedIn as well as the Village Voice and Metro without any solid leads.”

“Have you ever worked in a bar?” Michael asked.

“No, although I am a quick learner,” Charlie responded.

“I know the owner of a local watering hole that is looking for someone,” said Michael.

Without hesitation, Charlie said “Really?” Michael laughed and explained the position. Without pause, Charlie said, “I’m in.”

Following dinner, Charlie’s phone rang. It was a number he didn’t recognize; the woman on the line asked him to come to 234 Flatbush Ave in twenty minutes. Charlie grabbed his bag and headed to the address for an interview. Once he answered a few short questions, the owner said, “You’re hired.”

The flexibility of Michael and Charlie’s schedule allowed them to go on many auditions together. Charlie liked having his friend by his side, making the whole process easier. Before he knew it, he had been in the city for a full two months. In addition to his time in the city, Charlie managed to land a small part in an off-off-off-Broadway show called Omelet. Charlie felt on top of the world and his relationship with Michael grew stronger as each day passed. The evening air was chilly; Charlie was excited for his first NYC winter. As he left work, he noticed there was a whistle in the air that he had not heard before. The walk from the bar to the apartment was 10-15 minutes, one that he had done hundreds of times over the last year. As he walked down the street, he could see a glow in the distance. Unbothered by it, he kept to his normal pace. Charlie was listening to a 2004 top Broadway hits playlist that Michael gave him earlier that day. As Charlie finally rounded the corner to his street, he was stopped by flashing lights and a glow that illuminated the night sky.

The officer stationed at the corner stopped Charlie from going any farther up the block. As the blaze of the fire reflected in his eyes, he shouted at the officer, “That’s my building!” Instead of compassion, the officer responded to his anguish by simply saying, “Move back.” Despondent, Charlie stumbled back to the corner when the world around him suddenly stopped. Panicked, he looked around and tried to weave his way through the onlookers, trying in vain to find Michael. His shoulders slumped and he felt his whole body go limp; as tears streamed down

Charlie's face, he screamed Michael's name over and over again until he was hoarse.

Unsure where Michael was, he called one of his coworkers. The phone rang and rang, until finally someone answered, "Did Michael work tonight?" Charlie frantically asked. There was a short pause "No, he's at home. I just spoke to him". Charlie's eyes swelled with tears as the world around him stopped. The sound of his phone as it smashed to the ground startled the officer. "Please you must help. My best friend is still in that building, apartment 6C." Looking in the distance, a body draped in a white cloth exiting the building. Charlie brushed past the cop and rushed to the body, but was stopped before he could see who it was.

An officer placed Charlie into a nearby police car and was taken to the local precinct for questioning. The room was dark and cold; there was a metal table with two chairs. "Take a seat," the officer said the Charlie. "Do you know Michael Cook?"

Charlie's eyes filled with tears as he answered, "That's my roommate and best friend." The night felt long. Charlie had been there for hours answering questions. Pacing back and forth, all he wanted to know was what was going on. Physically and mentally exhausted, Charlie could barely muster the words to ask for some water. As the officer exited the room, all Charlie could do was weep as he tried to process that night's events. A short time passed, and the door opened. It was a familiar face; however, it was not Michael. Emma was Charlie's best friend from Nebraska; she was tall with pale skin and long blond hair. As she walked into the room, Charlie screamed, "What is going on?" She grabbed a chair and sat next to him.

"There's something that I need to tell you," she said. The room grew cold; he knew what she was going to say. Still he hoped she wouldn't. Emma opened her puckered lips and said, "Michael is gone." His eyes swelled as he laid his head in her arms and sobbed.

**Blood Isn't Thicker**

Leslie Cabreja

*---Writing Center Contest Winner for Poetry---*

The thing you never noticed  
Is that you made her feel suffocated  
In a place where she was meant to feel safe  
And so, she ran because  
What better did she know when,  
The only person who was supposed to love her  
Couldn't and didn't?  
And now she's at a crossroad  
With her heart empty of your love  
Because how can she find comfort in you  
When all you do is find fault within her?



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