

Crossroads



Art and literature by students at
Hudson County Community College

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County Community College

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She Was Color

J.A. Cardin

Born to beauty in a colorless world,
I saw your torment and struggle to remain.
You gave me hope and encouraged me to dream.
I saw your soul struggle to stay.
I saw color in joy and the sounds of laughter
As you danced with my heart in your capture.
You danced and swirled around, filled with sound.
I saw a memory being captured and stowed away.
You wiped my tears away
And gave encouraging words to fight through my hard days.
You were tired as the night came and went
Yet your beauty still remained.
I held your hand as a newborn child,
Scared to let go and be open to pain.
Time was the enemy I wished I could have slain.
You went where there would be color, a place I could not follow.
I remember and cherish each day.
Your beauty gave me color.



Rayos de Luz
Kimberly Parra

The Perfect Date

Xi'an Tate

I've been thinking of it for a while now. Maybe I'm being neglectful. I've spent all of my time at work or with other people.

I feel empty, void, as if something was missing from my life.

I wouldn't be where I am if it weren't for what they've done for me.

I rolled out of bed and found some clean clothes. I slipped on a pair of pants and a decent shirt, grabbed my wallet and keys, stepped out and locked the door behind me.

I thought it would be a good idea for us to take a journey somewhere nostalgic to rediscover our roots.

We met at a crossroads between the place I live now and the neighborhood in which I grew up. It was marked by an old doughnut shop across the street from the train we could take the rest of the way.

One train ride and 15 blocks later, we found ourselves in the place we were from, the same place we had met.

My mind was alive with the memories scattered among the place; the school we used to go to, the park our friends used to meet at, and the store we used to get candy from.

We stopped by the waterfront to take a seat and relax.

I couldn't help but reminisce about our times together, wonder where all of the time had gone, and miss the way things were.

It was at that moment that I thought,
"Maybe I should spend more time with myself."

My Darling Moon

CCMouse

Kind and gentle
Like his voice
Calming me when needed
Like his eyes
Warming me when cold.

He accepts me as I am
As I wish to be
As I hope to become.

Together as one
We overcome trouble.
Step by step
United we stand.
If one falls,
The other will always,
Always pick him up.

Only a year has passed
But it feels longer
But it feels shorter
All at once somehow.

I wouldn't change it for the world,

From your wonderful sunshine.



Crescent Moon, Algeria

Abderahim Salhi

New Year's Sneeze

Alessandra Molina

HOURS BEFORE THE CLOCK STRUCK MIDNIGHT, I discovered that I am severely allergic to adorable cats. Nothing like kicking off the new year with a stuffy nose and a bottle of Benadryl to replace the Moscato I had bought for the occasion. The party started in the basement with intoxicated people singing karaoke at the top of their lungs, and completely off pitch. If only my ears were clogged from my miserable sinuses to tune out the loud vocals. Nevertheless, it was fun and eventually, I joined the chorus.

I was not going to let my sudden allergy ruin my night, especially because it was finally my turn to celebrate with my boyfriend of four years. Yes, it is true; never have I ever celebrated New Year's with the love of my life nor ever received a New Year's kiss. The minutes approaching 12 a.m. were exciting and nerve wrecking. I did not want to ruin this "first" for us with a sneeze on his face and a delayed kiss.

"Do not mess this up! Hold that sneeze in and God will bless you later," my distracted thoughts spoke to me. The live stream in Times Square enlarged the countdown on the television, minus one minute to 2018. Everything was in slow motion as I was waiting for the moment. This was it, but what would "it" be? An expected kiss or an abrupt sneeze? It needed to be perfect because even though we've shared an infinite amount of them before, this one was different. The memory will forever be known as *our* first New Year's kiss. I certainly did not want the recollection of this day remembered with tissues, instead of my boyfriend, in my face at midnight, or someone saying, *"Hey, remember on New Year's when you sneezed on your boyfriend's face? Haha, classic!"* No, thank you.

"Five, four, three...", everyone was counting. *"Two, one...."* Here we go. *"Happy New Year!"* Thankfully the allergy medicine kicked in and the kiss was pure. The first minute of the new year was still in slow motion, and it felt as if we were the only two people in the room. I almost forgot where I was until we separated. The kiss was worth the anticipation. Hugs, tears, and

laughter from my family filled the room. At the beginning of the new year and the end of the night, I was finally sneeze free.

I guess you could say that in January, I learned more than ever to appreciate everything in life, no matter how big or small. Days go by so quickly and moments should never be rushed, regardless of the anticipation. Do not take things for granted and enjoy every precious moment in life's simplicity.



Wanderlust
Cecilia Martinez

Songbird

Sharon Lazo

IT WAS JULY, 1977. They never knew they would truly find one another in a crowded venue full of people. Janet and Eric had known one another since they could walk; they cherished memories of making mud pies together. Janet was a wild child, no one could tame her. She got in trouble most of the time, stealing her parents cigarettes or her dad's liquor. Although she was a pain, her parents loved her, and wished she was more like Eric. A Momma's boy for sure, he was disciplined and would definitely be nominated for Most Likely to Succeed at school, but he liked the way he felt when he was with Janet.

At 6am, there was a honk outside Eric's house. He knew it was Janet because he could hear music blaring from her car. All ready, he hurried down the stairs, picked up the bag of snacks his mom had set up for them on the kitchen counter and practically skipped towards her car.

"I can't believe I'm finally gonna go to my very first concert!" he said.

"It's gonna be so sick, 400 miles of me, you, and just about the best albums ever made," she said, sticking her head out the window while holding as many cassette tapes as she could in one hand, "until we're breathing the same air as Fleetwood Mac."

Eric hopped into her dad's most valued possession, his Pontiac station wagon, and saw her outfit consisted of high waisted denim shorts, beat up Keds, and a white cropped peasant top adorned with necklaces. Eric admired her naturally wavy brunette hair and her parted bangs, not casting a shadow on her freckles.. As he was waltzing over to the car, Janet felt lucky to be able to call this goofy, intelligent guy her best friend. She couldn't help but wonder if they were right together in other ways.

Two hours into their roadtrip, with ABBA and David Bowie playing in the background, they blabbed on about school and their love lives.

"He's a total burn-out. I want someone who shows their feelings, or even has some brain cells left."

Eric listened intently as Janet complained about her new

beau, Matt. Eric was always there for her when she needed a shoulder to cry on. He had learned the best thing to do with her was to listen, let her vent. Janet was used to having her heart broken; however she never built up walls, at least never with Eric. They didn't realize it then, or maybe they did, but together they were one person; soulmates.

By the fourth hour of driving, Janet was now in the passenger seat holding onto the trusty map, while Eric's clammy hands took control of the steering wheel.

"You sure you don't want me to hold the map? I'd rather hold the map, Jan."

"Dude, chill out, you're driving just fine. I'm in charge of the map now. I won't get us lost. I promise," replied Janet, trying to calm the nervous wreck Eric was becoming.

She knew he had only ever driven in the back parking lot of the A&P, but he had to learn someday, and she thought the I-90 would be great practice. Janet heard the low murmur of their favorite song and progressively amped up the volume.

"Is this the real life, is this just fantasy..." she sang softly and as dramatically as Freddie Mercury.

Eric tried his best to ignore her and focus on the road, but it was so hard.

"Mama, ooh, I don't want to die, I sometimes wish I'd never been born at all!" Eric gave in, while Janet was ready to give an electrifying air guitar solo.

They sang at the top of their lungs to this song, the highs, lows, every pitch they delivered with execution. They didn't realize how much fun they were having. Eric wasn't nervous anymore, and Janet was over the lame boys she was talking about. Right now, nothing mattered except them.

As soon as they arrived to Buffalo, New York, both their cheeks hurt from smiling. As they looked at each other, the pair knew this day was going to be one to remember.

"I can't wait to finally see them live. We've been saving up for this for as long as I can remember," said Eric.

Janet replied, "It'll be worth every grocery you bagged this entire year, pal".

He didn't know why, but hearing her call him "pal" didn't sit

well. She'd called him that an abundance of times, but for some reason, looking at her as she said that hurt him. He would soon understand why.

Janet was quite pleased to find out they were the two of the 20 people on line. Having arrived at 1 pm, they would be waiting for six more hours until the doors opened. Neither of them could hide the absolute excitement they had. Childishly, they began playing I Spy to pass time, but they were out of things to guess.

"I spy with my little eye something orange," said Janet, Eric rolled his eyes since he had already guessed that.

"Come on, Janet, it's the last orange in the bag of snacks. Pick something else!"

Janet replied, "Fine if you're so full of ideas, you try it then, what else is there to guess?"

"I spy with my little eye something hazel." It was reaching golden hour and Eric couldn't help but stop and see how the boring old brown eyes of hers were actually hazel when the sun hit them.

Janet, the only one who knew that little blurb about herself, fell dumbfounded and almost vulnerable in front of him.

"Okay, let's play something else," blurted out Janet.

The doors were finally opened for everyone queuing outside. They had a phenomenal view, center stage with only two heads in front of them. As soon as the opening chords of "Say you love me" began, the room was filled with ambient lighting and people who all shared the same love for the artist.

The concert was nearing the end, and Eric and Janet were slowly but surely falling in love with one another. Neither of them wanted to admit it, but they had always loved each other. As friends, sure, but now it was different. How could they have not realized earlier? It was the final song, one of Janet's personal favorites: "Songbird". Janet had always worn a hard exterior everyday, pretending she didn't care, but Eric could see through it. When Christine McVie's voice rang through the venue, Janet and Eric couldn't help but glance at one another, the other glancing away when caught staring.

"And the songbirds are singing like they know the score and I love you, I love you, I love you, like never before."

These lyrics drew them together. Finally, they shared a gentle first kiss. It was comforting for both of them, falling in love with their best friend. The kiss lasted for a short minute, but it meant the world to both of them. Driving home that night, they wouldn't think about what the future held, or if they'd last. All that mattered was right now.



Disguise

Aminah Chaudhary

Averna's Demons

Evan O'Garro

"WHO ARE YOU AND what are you doing in my house?"

It had been a nice day for a walk. The sun was warm on her face, a cool breeze making the petals from flowering trees fall like snow. The Royal Gardens were not unlike a maze, rows of tall, flowering hedges and shrubbery leading you this way and that until you stumble upon whatever it is you were looking for, if anything at all; shaded seating areas for tea, several koi ponds for the Queen, and a large open space for banquets were the most frequented places. The wooded area surrounding the oversized garden disguised the castle walls nicely, making you feel as if you were taking a stroll through the park, if anything. The gaudy, oversized castle that seemed to be looming over her did not cast its shadow upon the grounds today, thankfully, or she might've had to stay in. No one else was really taking advantage of the weather, all stuffed up inside because of a few clouds – better for her, really. No one outside meant no whispers under breath, no pitying looks as if she were some stray who had wandered onto royal grounds.

She had been there all along. They were the strangers. Not her.

It was almost as if she were a sideshow attraction, an oddity for her father's kind to watch from the windows –hands fly to painted lips that gasp and conspire like she couldn't see them, just as they saw her. *On the outside looking in*, she'd read once. Was it something they put in the glass that made the other side look so bright? When the other nobles saw her–them in their tight corsets and obnoxiously extravagant skirts and suits, lips so red she could make out their mouths before anything else, and her, in her plain linen tops and cotton trousers–did she look as bright as they did?

Probably not, she thought sourly. She could stand in the middle of one of those *damned* masquerades the King loved to throw, and she'd feel just as far away, just as dull as always.

Not that it mattered, since she wasn't even *allowed* inside the castle unless her father called for her, which was rarely ever and never worth it.

...Anyways, in a shocking turn of events, their apprehension was apparently worth it because it didn't just rain, it *poured*. It felt like God itself was holding her under a hose at full blast. She had traveled a ways away from her house at the far end of the gardens, and by the time she made it back, she was soaked to the bone. But at least she was home.

Not that that was end of things.

And so, the story begins.

Averna stood in her doorway, watching the strange...person? Maybe? Lounging on her bed, waiting patiently for an answer. Squinting, she really took in its features, a sinking feeling welling in her gut as she did. It was very long – or very *tall*, rather – forced to bend its legs at the knee just to keep its whole body on the bed. Long hair the color of mint sprigs splayed over its shoulders and across her pillows, nearly touching the floor where it fell off her bed. If its silvery skin, not unlike the coins strewn on her desk, was not a tell-tale sign of trouble, the two short horns jutting out of its forehead definitely were. Averna had not been allowed to read many tales of demons growing up, but she knew when she was looking one in the face.

The being looked up a moment later, as if only noticing her presence – it held an air of confidence, of superiority, looked at her like she was barely worth its time.

She hated it.

Finally (surprisingly?), it spoke. “You call this a house? Looks like a shed, to me.”

What a soft voice for an awful personality, she thought, admittedly caught off-guard, if only for a moment. It wasn't wrong, though—her home was, for all intents and purposes, a shed that had been converted into a living space. A bed, a desk, a nightstand, and some bookshelves made up the bulk of her room; a cooking area and a bathroom were the only notable additions to her gilded cage.

At least she had a radio. Most birds didn't get those.

But that was beside the point.

“Answer my questions, please. I do not want to have to call the guards.”

The intruder made a sound suspiciously close to a scoff, stretching like a cat before easing off her bed. She hadn't been wrong about the height—the demon looked to stand about seven feet, tall, maybe more. Likely more. Her room seemed much smaller, then, seeing someone so close to the ceiling when it didn't even have on shoes.

Oddly enough, it wore the clothes of common folk, not too dissimilar from herself—a thin, slightly oversized shirt and light, cotton trousers. *Lucky it's not outside, 'else it'd be wet as paper in a pond.*

If it caught her staring, it didn't say as much. “I doubt they'd come this far out,” it said matter-of-factly, crossing its arms as if expecting her to get angry. Maybe she ought to be, or at least worried. Demons didn't often come from the Underneath often, especially not after the death of their king. It was a death sentence. One making itself at home in her bed could very well get her in serious trouble, even if she's the one who reported it.

“If I mentioned a demon on castle grounds? I beg to differ.” Though her tone was as flat as always, Averno was losing her patience. Stripping herself of her coat, she grabbed the towel laying draped over the back of her only chair—light rain usually didn't faze her, catching in her thick hair and barely making it to her scalp, but heavy rain like the world outside her door had left her head feeling much like a soaked sponge. Wringing the water from her hair, she didn't break eye contact with her “visitor”, who didn't seem bothered in the slightest by her threats. In fact, it looked more amused than anything.

“You know,” it started, leaning back against the wall coolly. “For the king's bastard child that he hides in a shed in his backyard, you're awful stuck up.”

Averno raised an eyebrow. It was tempting to react more openly to that, to demand answers and names, but it seemed like that was right where the demon wanted her to be. She said nothing, even though her heart was pounding in a way she hadn't felt in years. Was it excitement? Fear? When the demon started

walking towards her, though, her heart and its palpitations seemed irrelevant.

She was by no means short, but when it stood right in front of her, clawed fingers tilting her jaw up, she may as well have been staring at the ceiling.

Definitely taller than seven feet.

“What? Cat got your tongue?” It smirked, and she caught a glimpse of sharp, sharp teeth. One of her hands found itself against the demon’s bare wrist, and she noted with some disdain that its metallic skin was not so dissimilar from her own. She’d read many a story of bronze-skinned adventurers, but she always knew her case was a little more...literal.

“...If I *am* the King’s bastard child, are you going to try and hold it over his head? I doubt you would get very far.” Averno could hardly make out what she was saying, the hand on her jaw squeezing and releasing until her words sounded more like baby talk. It was enjoying itself, at least.

It hummed thoughtfully to itself, still toying with her face. “Hm, that’s certainly an idea, but one for another day. I’ve got a proposition to make, actually. Bastard to bastard.”

She slapped its hand from her face, rubbing her stiff jaw but otherwise waiting for it to continue. It stared for a moment, and she stared back, locking the two in an awkward staring contest that she didn’t really understand the reason behind.

“I expected more *‘like I’d ever work with you, demon!’* at that point, you know.”

“And extend this encounter? I would rather not.”

“Fair enough.” It stepped back, considering her carefully. “I am the child of the King of Demons, yes-” It held up a hand to stop her before she could interrupt. “The one your parents killed...ah, however many years ago, I don’t remember the specifics.”

Awful flippant, Averno couldn’t help but think, but that wasn’t the important part. “You know of my mother?”

“Who in the underworld doesn’t? A demon-blooded woman comes galivanting into the Underneath with a band of humans and slays our King, rises to fame, and then dies ‘mysteriously’? Demons aren’t immune to gossip, Averno.”

Her name on its tongue sent shivers up her spine, but she kept her composure. "...Interesting. Go on."

"Yes, my proposal! Well, you see, with the King gone, the only person left to protect me was my mother, a succubus who caught my father's eye on one of his rare trips outside the throne room. When she 'passed', or rather, was *made* to pass on, there was no one left to watch over me."

"And you were fair game." A game Averno was too well acquainted with.

"That was the general consensus, yes. Every day was '*Get the Bastard and Win the Queen's Favor*' day, it seemed. So, I fled, simple as that." It shrugged as if it hadn't just confessed to being ran off from its home, and losing any family it might've had.

"And fled into my shed, specifically?" She hadn't even realized she'd taken a seat at some point, her head throbbing slightly with what she hoped was just a head cold.

"Well, more things happened between that, like reconnaissance, bribery, and so on. But yes, essentially. I wanted to see how differently things like us lived on the surface, so who better than the child of the ones who struck my father down and profited most from it? Though, being honest, I've been watching you for a few days now, and I'm thinking you got the short end of the stick." It rubbed its chin as if deep in thought, like they weren't in a cramped shack on the edge of castle grounds that she was barely permitted to walk on.

"How astute," Averno muttered, rubbing her temples. All she'd wanted was a warm bath and a nap, not unwanted visitors and exposition. "So, what exactly do you want, again?"

"Was I not clear enough?" It had the nerve to sound annoyed. "I want to stay here, with you, and experience the Overworld."

"The way you say it makes it sound like there is no room for 'no'."

It smiled again, sharp teeth on full display this time, as it flounced back onto her mattress. "Not really, no!"

"You understand that if I get caught with you, *especially* on castle grounds, the executioner will gladly have my head?"

“That’s the thing about a deal, dear Averna, they’ve got to be beneficial for both parties.” It propped a head up in its hand, watching her with a look she could only describe as *blatant overconfidence in its abilities*. “You give me a place to stay, and I make sure your head stays on your shoulders. Fair?”

The odds were absolutely *not* in her favor. Harboring demons was a criminal offense, and there were plenty of people who knew of her existence who were just jumping at the chance to see her gone for good. But...there was also a part of her who longed for excitement, who was tired of the monotony of seclusion in a place teeming with people—a part of her she thought died long, long ago.

“I *promise* I’ll make it worth your while,” it grinned lazily, snapping her from her thoughts.

It was absolutely a bad idea.

Nothing good could come of this.

But also?

“...Sure, why not.”

Tinder
Kissarne Pang

In the pursuit of happiness and love,
I tend to make it quick and easy.
There is an abundance of love everywhere
Yet here I am, being choosy and picky.
Sometimes I just don't understand
Why I get easily bored and disinterested.
Even though I know
What I want is already in front of me,
My expectations cannot be reached.
Illusion and perfection,
These are the things that I have in my vision.
Cannot deny the fact that I'm an imperfect human being,
But I only want what's best for me.
Because I already had the worst,
And that's what hurt me the most.
I'm sorry, I can't be that girl.
The one who can be contented by the simple things.
I'm hating myself for being this way,
And I'm sorry I can't find a way
To be more open to everlasting happiness.
And don't take this the wrong way,
It's not you, it's me...

The Gallery, the Dream, and the Suit

Brandon Dimatteo

THE MOON'S LIGHT EMITS FROM ABOVE, showing a strong reflection of nostalgia. The moon has always come off as something beautiful, like thoughts that run rampant through one's mind causing utter bliss. All you can do is sit there and feel the lone breeze of sixty degrees pummel across your face, but it is a gentle breeze at the same time. As you stare at the moon, you remember the good times of your ex-girlfriend and the memories you shared, the direct hit of nostalgia. Pleasant feelings and very bad, tormenting feelings come back. Coincidentally, as you are remembering the good times, the ex-girlfriend comes back in a text message. From a number you haven't seen before, she hits you with her obsessive tendencies. She says she's done with you, mocks you and insults you, months after your break up back in May of last year. Suddenly, your nostalgia breaks, and the unsettling feeling of your ex and her bad memories come to your attention as you continue staring at the moon.

"It's such a coincidence that I started to think good of her and all of a sudden she pops up on my phone with her stupid remarks," you say, frustrated.

"You're an idiot, John. I never loved you or anything. I hate you." You read the words that pop up on your phone. You spent seven years with Carmen, and this girl was your first love. Being 30 years old now, you feel as though seven years went by pretty quick and at one point your feelings for this girl were so immense that you could not think of anything else. Then, it got really bad. You remember how she would take your phone while you were asleep and use touch I.D. to look through all your conversations with your friends and family. It would offend her if you talked bad about her, so one day she broke your phone. You took her to court for that. You look back and understand why she is doing this. Your ex has a case of schizophrenia, bipolar, depression and anxiety. Over the years that you dated her, her mind got progressively worse. These are memories you want to erase.

"I don't know why she pops back up in my life. Maybe it's her mental illnesses that prompt her to come back at me with pain.

Even though I hate her, I can't say I don't love her. Maybe I'm crazy. But that's what love is, right? Being crazy?" you say as you lay in bed. It is midnight and already April 1st. Falling asleep, you have a dream.

You're in the college library and you're in love, and she's in love with you back, and you and she are both studying on campus. The feelings are so mutual for both of you that you're smiling in happiness like never before. She's got her hand on your chest and you've got your hand locked in hers.

"I love you," she says peacefully.

"I love you, too," you respond. After reading and studying for your math test, the two of you take a walk. Suddenly, a gallery on your campus catches your eye.

"Wow, they've got a bunch of dresses and unique clothing here," she says, surprised.

"Yeah, I've never seen this place. It must be new."

You and Carmen both walk inside the gallery and see a few odd-looking dresses, but one set of clothing catches your eye specifically. "It's this suit. This damn suit. It's so good looking, I'm in love with this suit. This teal suit, oh my God!" you say ecstatically. "I love this teal suit. The sound it makes when I rub my fingers on the outside of this suit brings joy to my ears. The look is mesmerizing. I never knew I could love the color teal so much until now. It strikes the eye with passion. Its light color engulfs the eye with so much vibrancy. I wish the color of the sky was teal, and I wish the skin on my body was teal. Teal, the color teal is amazing," you say more ecstatically than before.

"You really are a weirdo, but that's why I love you," she says.

You end the day by walking her to her house. You say, "I had such an amazing day with you, I couldn't imagine having it with anyone else. I hope nothing comes between us. And I hope we can overcome everything together. Maybe one day I could get a teal suit just like that on our wedding day, because I've never seen anything as good as that suit (besides you, duh)."

"I've definitely never met anyone as goofy as you, John, but you really love that suit. I also hope nothing comes between us. I really love you and I'm glad we met," she says.

The dream repeats, and you don't know why the dream repeats. You never wake up. Your mother comes into your room and sees that you've emptied a bottle of sleeping pills.

"How could you do this yourself?!" she cries. She calls an ambulance and you're pronounced dead at the scene. It is 6:03 in the morning.

"For once in my life, I wanted to have a normal relationship with you, or at least, have a relationship that lasts forever. I guess that's why I stare at the moon. I look at its beauty and it reminds me of when we used to look at the moon together enjoying a nice walk, before your mental illnesses took over our relationship—and my utter selfishness to not stay. Though I think if I did stay with you, I would end up going crazy. We're both crazy, Carmen."

You say it one last time.



Sunset, Singapore
Abderahim Salhi

Si del cielo le caen limones, aprenda hacer limonada

Mario Martinez

TOTO AWAKENED LIKE MOST PEOPLE in the city, to the rhythm of the alarm of their smart phones, and, as everyone does, he engaged in the battle of pressing the snooze button and the alarm going off again, which continued a few times until he finally surrendered and woke up. The first order of the day was to check the emails he received from the night before, trying to keep up to date, but there were always too many; no matter how many he unsubscribed from, others would take their place and the number of emails never seemed to decrease. Next he would check social media to make sure that he did not forget any of his friends' birthdays, anniversaries or graduations, because that would be an unforgivable sin. Finally he would check the weather to dress accordingly—"Thank God for Apps and smartphones, everything within reach of one's fingers"—he would say to his friends and to anyone who would listen.

The rest was a predictable routine, shower, teeth brushing, and dressing. Then he would sit at the table and drink his daily cup of coffee served in his favorite mug, the one with the shape of the Pisa Tower, which he had bought on the last summer family trip to Italy. This morning, the house was full of noises, of people talking and laughing, and Toto felt easy and happy for having his family together. It had been years since the house had a festive ambiance, his children and grandchildren together at once. They were adults and living their own independent lives (after all Toto was sixty seven years old; he had lived a very good life, which, like any other life, had its ups and downs, but that is another story). Today they were all here, and that made him really happy.

While he consumed his cup of coffee, he could not escape the reality of the moment; they were here to celebrate his college graduation and they were proud of his accomplishment, but he felt the bittersweet feeling only comparable to a war hero receiving a Purple Heart, happy for the accomplishment and sad for the high price paid, living with pain inside and wearing a smile on the outside for the world to see. Suddenly, his

granddaughter's voice pulled him back from his thoughts to the present. She was twenty-two years old and serving her country in the Air Force. "Good morning, *weto*," she said, using the diminutive for grandparent, "I'm proud of you. You always show us through example that we can accomplish anything if we put our mind and effort to it. How do you feel today, *weto*?" And for a split second he felt the desire to embrace her, to tell her how sad and afraid he was, different from all the other students graduating with him today, with their futures full of expectations, hopes and uncertainties. He knew exactly what his future was: dark and hapless.

"Hey, sweetie pie. I miss you so much and I'm glad you can make it. I feel good seeing you guys doing well, all grown up." There was no reason to alarm anyone especially today, he thought.

* * *

EVERYTHING HAD STARTED two years back, the day he received the statement from his financial advisor. It was a routine four-times-a-year mailing, which he had received for the past 5 years, after his decision to invest his retirement money to gain a dividend good enough to permit him and his wife to have a good life, traveling every summer to Europe, Asia and especially to South America. He was also saving some money to buy a boat and enjoy the open sea, where he always felt like it was his natural environment. Since his childhood, he used to help his father, who owned a few fishing boats, with the daily maintenance of boats. So, after retrieving the mail, he threw himself on the sofa and opened the envelope and proceeded to read. As his eyes ran through the lines, the color of his semblance turned pale white, as if all the blood in his body had been drained. He read the letter time and time again, fixing in his head the idea that if he read the letter many times the content would change.

He felt steps coming from the living room, turned his head, and noticed his wife approaching. He rapidly hid the letter under the couch.

"Anything wrong?" she asked.

He forced a weak smile and responded, "No, sweetheart,

everything is copacetic.” But inside his head, he knew that his world had collapsed into ruins. Later that night, while his wife was in a deep sleep, he left the bed and walked under the dim yellowish lights of the hallway in the direction of the bathroom. Once inside, he got the sickening desire to scream and curse heaven and hell, to punch the walls, but he knew that would accomplished nothing. So he calmed himself and decided to wait till the next morning to talk to his investor—perhaps there was an error—and he returned to bed, but his mind was full of dark thoughts rushing one after the other, which made it almost impossible for him to rest. Looking out the window, in his room watching the night depart and the new day coming, he finally fell asleep.

Next morning, after his wife left for work, he called the investor’s office and it was painfully confirmed that the company in which he was a shareholder, the same company that for the past five years had provided enough gains for him to afford the house down payment, travel to Europe—that same company—had falling into a state of bankruptcy. As a consequence, the shares he owned had no worth. He just hung up the phone. Overwhelmed by the reality of the situation, he cried, asking himself why. And why him? He always helped people in need, he was always courteous to people, so why him? Then all of the sudden, he thought that he had to do something about the situation. Telling the family was not an option. They had always been opposed to the fact that he had placed all the money in the market into one stock—diversify he was told many times—but he refused to listen because he trusted his friend, the manager of the investment company. Besides, five years of good return gains proved that he was right. Only now, none of that mattered. Admitting that his family was right was like admitting defeat and he would never acknowledge defeat, never. That would be more devastating to him than losing the money.

Later in the afternoon, he waited for his wife to get back from work to put his plan into action by announcing to her that he was tired of doing nothing. He argued that he wanted to feel part of living society. He continued in the line of argument that retirement was not all that it was cut out to be, that he felt

solitude at home, and like he was losing his mind. After some convincing, his wife, as always, gave into his demands.

Next morning, he awoke full of hope. He dressed up and kissed his wife goodbye and stepped into the street. Not sure where to go, he decided to visit working agencies. They always needed people with experience, and he had plenty of it; for the last twenty-five years, he had worked as a software engineer. “How difficult could it be to find a job in the field that I worked in for so many years,” he thought. At the end of the day, he went back home without any results, but he knew that tomorrow would be a new day, the day that he would find what he was looking for.

* * *

IT HAD BEEN A MONTH and he was still unable to find a job. His experience was good but without the proper education that agencies required, he was getting nowhere. He had never received a formal education because when he started working, years back, he learned everything by hands-on; he had been in the right place at the right time, so he never worried about learning more than what he need to know at his job. Now was not the time for regrets or to feel sorry for his past decisions; he had to take care of the present in order to control his future, which did not look bright at all. A new decision had to be made and it was obvious that it involved higher education to get a degree that would allow him to get a job that he so badly needed.

Therefore, the next morning, he took the bus into the city and, after arriving, he walked into the HCCC admissions office and took the admission test. He passed and was accepted. He felt so good, pleased that his brain still worked properly. “This is a great day,” he thought, only this time he felt peace in his heart because it was a new beginning. During the bus ride home, reclining his head on the window, looking at the traffic lights and the light of the cars on the road, a thought came to his head. “Funny how the world works. This college is where my daughter Jojo graduated as a Psychology major, and my granddaughter Kelsi graduated as Liberal Arts major, cum laude, and now I close the circle. I can only hope to be as good a student as they were.”

He arrived at home and called his wife. “Gina, come over: I have great news. I am a college student. Two years from now, I will be a Computer Science major. What do you have to say about that, eh?”

His wife kissed him because when he was happy, she was happy. Plus, she knew from past experiences that her husband accomplished what he started. “Congratulations, Toto, I know you will do good. I am certain of it. Besides, I love you no matter what.”

* * *

IN THE BEGINNING, school was hard. It had been almost fifty years since his high school graduation and trying to recall Algebra, Chemistry and Physics was a challenge. Yet, being surrounded by a young generation of very competitive students and being accepted as one more of the group presented a much bigger challenge. But, like any other challenge in life, anything can be accomplished with desire, hard work and commitment. Little by little, he felt more comfortable and more sure of himself, gaining the respect of his peers, and in no time, he became a member of various groups, clubs, and honor societies. Every day was a happy day, with the only exception being when there were tests; as any other student he stressed the night before midterms, finals or any presentation. After obtaining good results, he was so proud of himself, of having put in all the effort needed to succeed.

Two semesters had gone by and he was already thinking ahead, not wanting to leave anything to chance. He realized that during the past year spent in school and doing homework, he had put aside his exercise workouts and some of his clothes did not fit the way that they should, so he registered himself to start going to the gym. He went every day. Early in the morning before anyone was awake, he was already running, jumping and sweating. Regrettably, because of his age, his metabolism was very slow and losing weight seemed impossible, no matter how much effort he put in. It seemed like he gained weight faster than he lost it. “Once again, back to the drawing board,” he said to himself.

After thinking for awhile, he decided to go see a doctor to

control his weight. He wanted to look good when looking for a job; after all a good presence was important. "People judge you based on looks, if I look like I do not take care of myself, it makes me look older than I am. It is definitely not a good impression and first impressions count." After looking in the newspapers, he finally found a doctor whose advertisement promised to help lose weight faster than anyone else in town, so without thinking twice, he went to see him, to start the road to a new him. The doctor gave him this new medicine that was supposed to attack the fat accumulated around his body. He asked if there were any secondary effects. The doctor replied with an outstanding "NO," and he believed him. "After all he is the doctor, and he knows best."

By the third semester, he had settled into a daily routine: waking up, running for thirty minutes, taking his diet pills, gathering his books for the classes of the day and walking to the bus stop. He noticed he had lost about fifty pounds, but instead of feeling good, he felt tired, irritated and in a bad mood. He mentioned it to the doctor, who assured him that everything was alright, but his body was telling him a different story. The next day he went to see his family doctor, who decided to run multiple checks (blood, urine, sugar, etc.) and for the next two weeks, he continued going to school, and with his student friends and the projects for the semester, he managed to forget about what he had been worrying about the past few days.

* * *

THE COMMENCEMENT DATE was announced in the school magazine, during his final semester. He felt like he could touch heaven with his hands. He was on cloud nine; after many days full of stress, there was light at the end of the tunnel. He started getting mentally ready for the end of school, the many friends and great professors that had helped him along the way. He could not believe he would miss school after all. As always, heaven had different plans for him.

When he arrived home, there was a letter waiting for him. It was his family doctor, asking him to make an appointment as soon as possible, and a dark wave reverberated through his body. Once again, he looked to the sky for some comfort, a voice that

would tell him not to worry, but there was no voice nor any consolation. The following day he pulled himself into the office of the family doctor. It was like his heart knew what was going on. After an exchange of pleasantries, the doctor's voice changed to a grave tone, which was never a good thing. He explained that the use of the so called "diet pills" had debilitated his heart to the point of no return, and as much as he would like to give him an exit, a solution to the problem, there was none. The best advice he could provide was to put his things in order, talk to his family, and explain to them about the time he has left, and enjoy with them every moment in order to leave them with great memories. He thanked the doctor for his advice and departed.

As he walked back home, his legs felt heavier, but there was no rush to get anywhere, so he continued walking like a zombie. The gate of dark sinister thoughts had been opened and swamped his mind. He was not upset because his life was coming to an end. "We all die sooner or later, but like this?" he reflected. "It seems unfair. Perhaps there are millions of bad people who deserve to die, and I happen to be the chosen one, why?"

He sat on a park bench and lost track of time, remembering happy days of his past life, when he realized that his departure would not only create emptiness and pain for his family, but his wife would have no money for her future. He had never come clean about losing the retirement money; for the past two years, he had been taking the money he was saving for his dream boat and depositing it monthly into their bank account. He was running out of funds, but he had hoped to find the elusive job and be saved. Now, what would he do? Taking the Diet Doctor to court would drag on for a long time and he did not have much. What to do? Suddenly the idea came to his head like a silver savior bullet.

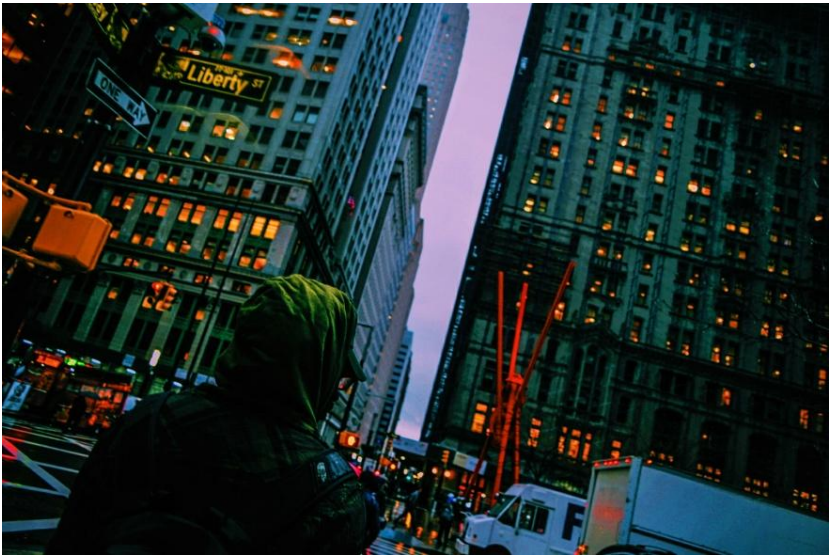
* * *

AFTER A RESTLESS NIGHT, he went out to an insurance company and successfully bought a life insurance policy to cover any need his wife might have after his departure. This time, God was on his side. He passed the physical test, and though he could not understand how it had happened, he was not going to complain. Besides, life owed him at least one silver lining, and in

his morbid mind, he felt happy to finally be beating the system. “Time to start getting prepared for the graduation ceremony,” he thought. It would be in three days, and time to him had become a cruel enemy. As much as he wanted the date to get here, it only meant fewer days left for him.

So, after participating in all the events prior to graduation, like decorating his graduation cap, taking the yearbook portraits and attending the formal dinner, the day everyone was waiting for, Graduation Day, had come. He wore the green gown and the honor society cords, and he felt full of pride, smiling with his fellow students, shaking hands with professors. He tried to look up to get a glance of his family, seated in the upper level, looking down, watching for him as well. When his name was called, he walked to the podium and loud cheers erupted from all the friends he had made over the past two years at school. The feeling of accomplishment and friendliness filled his chest and some tears showed. He tried to fight them back, and at that precise moment, the voice of his grandmother resounded in his head giving him confidence and an understanding of life: “*Mi hijo, si del cielo le caen limones, aprenda hacer limonada.*”

If the heavens rain down lemons, learn to make lemonade.



I Don't Need More Enemies for Friends

Jarell Bryant

A Park Ave Story

Matthew Lee

IT STARTED EIGHTH GRADE SUMMER. We were happy to be out of school. A few days ago, we'd had our eighth grade graduation and now summer had officially begun. It was warm out with specks of clouds in the blue sky. Not enough wind was blowing. It was very humid, one of those upper 80 degree days, but that didn't keep us from walking in the park. All the trees were full and dark green. The birds bathed in the clogged-drain water fountains. Whistles were blowing from the summer basketball league. Young children made noise from the slides and monkey bars. This was the hangout spot. Plus, my mom didn't mind because she knew exactly where I would be. Me and Tommy spent most of our summer days here running through the sprinklers, playing basketball, or flag football. The 4th Street Park was the place in the summer in Hoboken. Cars were parked on the street near the basketball courts so the ballplayers had some music to listen to. The hit song of the summer always had the park sounding like a big chorus. Every car was tuned into this song. The women knew all the lyrics to Mary J. Blige's part:

“Like sweet morning dew
 I took one look at you
 And it was plain to see
 You were my destiny
 With you, I'll spend my time
 I'll dedicate my life
 I'll sacrifice for you
 Dedicate my life to you”

Then all the fellas would take over Method Man's part:

“I got a love jones for your body and your skin tone
 Five minutes alone, I'm already on the bone
 Plus, I love the fact you got a mind of your own
 No need to shop around you got the good stuff at home
 Even if I'm locked up North you in the world

Wrapped in three-fourths of cloth never showing your stuff off.”

Me and Tommy walked with a little motivation from the music playing. Tommy was my best friend, more like a brother. You know that saying, “brother from another mother?” That’s what we always told people. We were around each other so much that people thought we looked alike. My guess is when you’re around each other too much, your looks and facial features start to combine. Tommy and his mom lived next door to us in our three-story apartment building. Tommy was an only child and my mom had daughters after me. “Every young boy needs a brother to watch his back, and vice versa,” is what our moms always said.

Tommy tapped me on the arm to gain my attention. “Angela is by the swings. She keeps looking over here.” We were enjoying the game, but Tommy obviously had to give his attention elsewhere.

“So what? She just looking at the game”

“Hey, Chris!” Angela waved at me.

I hadn’t noticed Angela because the game was more important to me. My fingers were in between the diamond-shaped metal gate that isolated the basketball courts from the rest of the park. This is how we watched because no one was allowed to go past the gate. People sometimes climbed the gate and watched from a “bird’s eye view,” but last time I’d tried that, my legs got bruises from the metal gate pressing against my skin. That pain reminded me not to do it again in this moment. My shoulders shrugged at Tommy’s reminder and my focus went back to watching the game. This was better than watching the New Jersey Nets. Jason Kidd had nothing on the neighborhood legend, Sky High Clyde. He would grab rebounds, lead off into a fast break, looking as if he was against five players by himself, fake a pass left, put the ball down into a crossover to then have the ball in his right hand, and underhand throw the ball up towards the backboard, where the basketball ricocheted back towards him. Clyde had a running start with a knee rising towards the sky; Clyde was up high, catching the ball with two

hands from the backboard ricochet and flushing the ball into the net!

“Oh baby.” “Whoa.” “He touched the sky with that one,” a few overly excited spectators expressed.

I felt a hand on my shoulder, and before my head turned to see, Angela mouthed in my ear, “You hear me calling you, Chris?”

“Yes, Angela, hello,” I responded.

“Ebony and I are on the swings, why don't you and Tommy come sit with us?” Angela asked.

My pause gave Ebony the courage to make her opinion on the matter known. “If he doesn't want to sit with you, Angela, oh well, don't be sweating him.”

“Mind your business, Ebony, dang,” was my comeback.

“Ebony, don't start with him,” said Angela.

“Oh, sweet, we about to have a fight,” Tommy said, rubbing his hands together with excitement.

“Shut up, Tommy!” the three of us yelled at him in unison.

All of my interest in the game left because Ebony was talking too much junk. Plus, Angela knew sitting on the swings next to her wasn't an issue. It was something we'd already been doing. Tommy and Ebony didn't know that, though.

* * *

ANGELA AND EBONY WERE twin sisters from uptown, 10th and Park Avenue. They lived in a nice part of town, much nicer than where me and Tommy resided. Their neighborhood had trees we could climb up and hide in so nobody could see us when we all played hide and seek after school. The houses were brick or concrete and looked as if they all were connected. The only way you knew they were separated was from the black gates that divided them. There was a parking lot across the street, where we had chalk games drawn out on the floor. Skully was my favorite. I used a special Snapple bottle top and my record was like, zero losses. Me and Tommy used to go to the hardware store to get metal washers to wedge inside our tops, so that they were heavier and would slide better on the ground. Angela made me show her my secret, but she swore an oath to never tell Tommy. He wouldn't have liked that, since he didn't know why Angela was always beating him. Me and Angela had silent laughs at his

frustration. She and Ebony lived with both parents, and their mom would always leave orange juice and chips on the porch for us when she saw us playing. Tommy didn't know that Angela's mom sometimes had me come up for dinner, calling my mom to get the okay. That was cool. She even warned me and Tommy ahead of time about Angela and Ebony's dad being home shortly, meaning that we should get going. From the sound of it, they had a mean dad.

* * *

TOMMY WAS A ROUGH KID, who always liked to hang out with the fellas and knock on doorbells and run. He was always gassed up when planning our missions. That's what Tommy called them, missions.

"Chris, you ready for this mission?" Tommy asked me and before I could answer, he continued, "I'm going to walk past first. I'll signal by acting like I'm tying my shoe and you walk across the street to make sure there isn't anyone looking out their windows. Got it?" Again, before I could answer, he turned his attention to our two friends that he had dragged along with us.

"You two wait for the signal, then walk down the block towards me. When y'all reach my meeting point, we wait on Chris for the umpire safe signal. Now Chris, make sure you not too obvious doing baseball moves all out in the open and causing attention."

"We are four black kids ringing white folk's doorbells and running, all of this is obvious," I thought to myself.

Tommy continued his master mission plan, "Now when someone comes to the door after we ring it, we going to egg they ass." We laughed and proceeded to carry out Tommy's mission.

This was Tommy, this was his excitement, and this was probably how he got his mind off of the struggles he had to endure growing up. Tommy told me how he vividly remembered the day police were chasing his dad and how they shot him dead. He always dropped a tear telling me that story.

When we all ran, the opportunity to sneak away to Angela's house seemed like a much better thing to do. Plus, her mom cooked damn good! My mom worked late and sometimes dinner wasn't ready until after seven.

* * *

ME AND ANGELA WERE SITTING on the porch of her house one day after school. There was about a week or so left until school was finished. It was reaching the evening, but days were a bit longer, so the sun was still out, giving the sky that yellowish-orange look. Angela called it a sunset. She was into poetry and stuff like that. Her head lay on my shoulder.

“My mommy said I should ask you if you have a girlfriend.” Then she lifted her head up and looked me in the eyes. Brown eyes.. Big.. and Brown. Her hair was this brownish\reddish tone and she wore it with a twist in the front going towards her left ear, with another twist going towards the right ear. Her hands were small compared to mine. We always put our palms together to see whose hands were bigger. Her hands were soft, skinny. She started to use green nail polish after learning that green was my favorite color.

“Angela! Come on up, baby, your dad will be home from work soon.” Angela’s mom had ruined the moment.

“Coming, Mother!” replied Angela.

Angela gave me this glare in her eyes. She looked at me as if to say, “I want to know the answer to my question,” but she would hear no words from me.

“Thank you for letting me hang out with Angela, Ms. Kante.” My movement was fast as I turned to see who was approaching. I saw a shadow that was long and ghostly, and then started to shrink. It felt like a scene out of “Honey, I Shrunk the Kids.” Then this tall, full-bearded man wearing a jean jumper with a dingy wife beater underneath it came within arm’s reach of me. He looked me in my eyes. A long hard stare. A stare with power. A stare with curiosity. A stare with determination. A stare that said, “Don’t blink or the world will blow up right here.”

“You a friend of Angela?” he said still staring at me.

“Yes, sir, Mr. Kante,” my voice got out after a hard swallow. Angela wasn’t blinking herself, which signaled trouble. Then I turned my attention back towards her dad, and to my surprise he said, “Well, come on up my youth, dinner is waiting for us.”

I must have looked very worried, because her dad gave me a smile and a quick chuckle with a tap on the arm. “It’s alright, my youth,” he said.

“Yeah, this is trouble,” I thought to myself. He guided me towards the front door.

On the journey up two flights of stairs, my position in the group on the way into the building changed, and I was now in the back with Mr. Kante now leading the line. The door was wide open when we got to the top of the stairs. It smelled good in that hallway. No words were said during our walk up. Mr. Kante turned around, looked at me and then at his feet to demonstrate he was kicking his shoes off to place them outside the door. Just then, I heard Ms. Kante’s voice from a short distance. “Take those shoes off before y’all walk in my house,” she said.

I placed my shoes right next to Angela’s father’s shoes. Angela’s mom welcomed us over with a wave of her hand. She hugged Mr. Kante, then put both of her hands on the side of his face and kissed him with her teeth. She was smiling. She pulled back her head. With her hands still on his face, she closed her eyes and made duck lips with her mouth. She leaned in to put her lips on Mr. Kante’s lips.

“Hi, my husband. I’ve missed you,” said Angela’s mom.

Mr. Kante was now smiling. “I missed you more, baby.”

We were all smiling; my eyes glanced over at Angela and I caught her smiling at me. This moment had given me a bunch of jittery and nervous feelings. My face felt warm. A warm hand touched mine. My eyes grew wide and I snatched my hand away as quickly as possible. Angela assured me it was safe with another reach of her hand towards mine. “Is she trying to get me killed?” I thought. There was silence for a few minutes or so. Holding hands, me and Angela continued to watch her parents rub their noses together. It was very appealing.

Ms. Kante released her husband’s face and turned to the dining room table. The kitchen was over to the left; my eyes quickly noticed the fire to the stove was still on. Ms. Kante pulled her husband’s chair out and waved for him to sit. Then I was seated next to Mr. Kante. Angela sat next to me, and Ms. Kante stood next to her husband. Ebony walked out of the room, in a world of her own. She had on Sony headphones attached to the latest Sony Walkman. Ebony continued to walk past us, shoulders bobbing up and down; she was leaning forward with

both elbows bent by her side. Her hands clung together in front of her chest. Then she leaned back, doing her shoulder shrugs again. It was clear that she didn't know what she sounded like singing, but my guess was that no recording label would pick her up.

Ebony continued her dance moves and song...

“It's just one of them days, when I wanna be all alone
 It's just one of them days, when I gotta be all alone
 It's just one of them days, don't take it personal
 I just wanna be all alone and you think I treat you wrong...
 I wanna take some time out to think things through
 I know it always feels like I'm doing you wrong but
 I'm so in love with you...”

Everyone at the table let out light chuckles. If only Monica could listen to you, Ebony, ruining her song. Mr. Kante shook his head as well. An old memory came rushing back to me. My mom had once said, “In order to have gadgets like that, one must work,” after I asked her for a Sony Walkman. “You better save your coins or go and find your dad. I got too many bills to pay, Chris babe, to be wasting my money on that junk.” Last time me and my dad bumped into each other, he asked *me* for money. So, my guess was that ship had sank.

Mr. Kante must've noticed my inner mood change, as my eyes were intense from thinking about this memory. He asked me if I was all right. Good thing my stomach and ribs were having a slap-boxing match, making my stomach growl. Mr. Kante turned his mind to the food as well and said, “Oh, he is hungry! Aren't we all? Let's eat!”

Tree Remaining Steadfast During Change

Stacy Kim

There is one thing that never changes.
There stands one tree in front of my house.

In spring, birds sing every morning.
New beginnings await all living creatures!

In summer, my tree will be my shadow to protect me from the
scorching sun.
My tree will be my friend always.

In autumn, my tree is splashed with colorful foliage,
which brings joy to my heart.

In winter, my tree must endure the time when leaves endlessly
fall down to the ground.
All of my friends fall off the branches, but my tree still remains.

My tree, like God's love,
brings joy because it is patient and never changes.



Redang Mutiara Island, Malaysia
Abderahim Salhi

Escape

Bianelly Tellez

SHE TOOK A DEEP BREATH; the sweet smell of a summer night filled her lungs. She exhaled and opened her eyes only to be met with the beautiful summer night sky. She laid in the middle of a grassy field, staring into the abyss of the stars. Contemplating her own insignificance in the vast universe.

There was not much time to think about where she came from. The city was a busy and jostling place. A place where the sky lights were man made. There was a time when she found it beautiful, but lately it had become suffocating. The garbage scented air and subway rats began bothering her more and more. The number of people in the train cars began making her feel more and more claustrophobic. The people around her became more and more pretentious and disingenuous.

Thinking back, it was in the train where she had the sudden urge to escape. The train was full, as usual during rush hour. She was standing, staring listlessly into space, when she caught her own reflection. A thin, pale face with a pair of dead sunken eyes. Lifeless.

That had scared her, so she had run away. She had run, escaped the city, into this beautiful grassland. It was empty. There were no buildings or people. It was silent. There were no cars honking or sirens. It was perfect. There was nothing but her and nature.

Laying in the meadow, the starry night and fresh air, she finally understood all those poems she read as a child.

Cosmic Reflections

Cecilia Martinez

While skipping stones on stars,
cosmic energy ripples across the universe—
in waves, light years ahead of time.

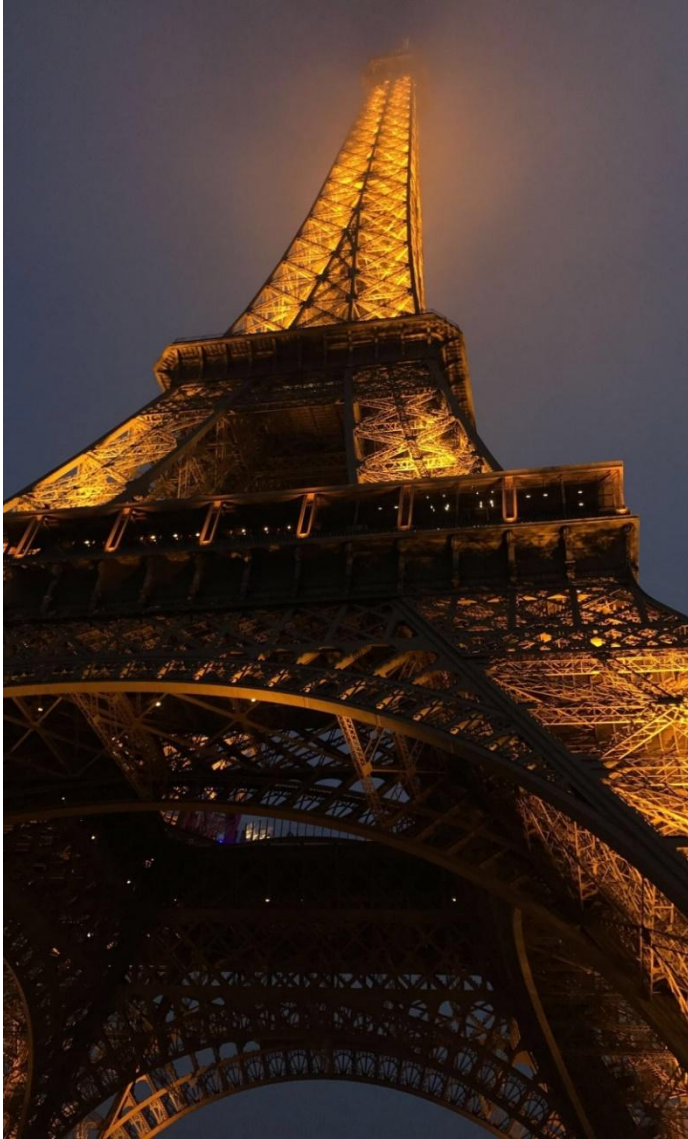
A lone astronaut, up she springs
on top of meteorites with wings,
while traveling through planets never seen.

Cloudy eyes gaze
upon an intergalactic maze.....

Depressed breaths drink in artificial air,
Cosmic dust stuck throughout her hair.

The comets refuse to stop her.
She grabs ahold of their tails
to speedily sail
across a congested universe.

It's pitch black,
This limitless, endless night,
For a starry, colorless flight.



Always Looking Up, *Dedicated to Angelica Perez*
Maritza Quiroz

Through Seeing, I Learned

J.A. Cardin

I was tired of the potatoes instead of the steak
Yet you served it like a four-course dinner with such grace.
You stayed up late cleaning and fixing.
I was tired of the noise so I later complained.

I was tired of doing homework
So you became my teacher and never let me stray.
One day I got new shoes and you took me out to play.
I was tired of seeing you unhappy after that day.

Through your struggles, your beauty remained.
I saw internally you were strained, yet you never complained.
You never tired physically and kept a cracked smile upon your
face
I saw the strength of a woman I hope to have someday.

I learned to be thankful and see between the lines.
The worth of a mother can be never replaced.
Through labor, aches, and pains, love was surely given,
And so I say, thank you for teaching me the way.

I sleep well to the sound of noise and crave potatoes every other
day.



Bonds
Bianelly Tellez

The Sacred
Gabrielle Lauria

It is eternal,
The distance
Between the sinners and the saints.

So we build walls
Around the wait.

At the door, repentance breathes you in.
She is calm yet resentful,
Soothing yet remorseful,
Eager yet cold,
Beautiful yet dreadful.
You taste all the same
On her wilting tongue

Your body heavy with bones,
You think of your mother
Who held you without sorrow.
Prayer, the empty word, melody shall soon follow.
Your eyes trail your arms.
They are smooth and pale,
Like the underbelly of a snake.
You miss the lover from New England who left you.
Through the window, the winter sun comes
And warms you. It's an Indian summer after all.

Though saints don't think of sinners
For they all have wings the same,
You find a loose feather
And name it grace.

Another Spring

Bianelly Tellez

THE CHIRPS OF THE BIRDS made the figure stir in the sheets. The sun peeked from the curtains and with a deep inhale the lithe figure awaked from the deep chambers of Hades. The birds continued performing to the awakening fields of flowers and the shining sun, signaling the beginning of another Spring.

'Another Spring,' thought the figure in the bed. She sighed and closed her eyes, wishing once more for the sweet embrace of Hypnos. She opened her eyes and gathered her bearings, sitting up and donning a white bathrobe. She began her descent down the stairs with a growing, unquenchable hope for his return. The closer she was to the door, the more eager her pace became, and with a breathless sigh, she opened the door. Outside, standing on the porch, she could see the meadow, blooming and effervescent, extending far into the horizon, but there was no sign of his return. The realization of his absence filled her with unbridled anguish. Once again, she was faced with the grim reality that he was gone.

She walked away from the porch back into her home, shunned by the light, the light that did nothing to warm her ever growing cold heart. She headed into her room, where a body length mirror stood. She looked at herself in the mirror, her hands running down her strands of graying hair, a pale comparison to her once vibrant blonde locks. Her fingers traced the wrinkles that were setting deep in her eyes, giving her a brooding and bitter expression. Finally, her fingers traced the once soft and pink lips. The lips that he had kissed were now cracked and dry.

He had left. She had waited, waited, and waited.



Kuala Selangor Firefly Park, Malaysia
Abderahim Salhi

The Dark Side of Me

Kissarne Pang

Another day has passed,
Yet I'm still emotionally wrecked.
Mentally tired,
Yet I still survived.

Another day went by,
Since my soul got lost.
I need to find myself
Because I don't wanna be worse.

Regret, envy, hate, and resentment,
Yet, I could not forget your involvement.

Too much kills,
Too much hate,
Too much pain,
Too much everything.

Another day to be depressed,
Another minute that was repressed.

I wish I could forget everything,
Because now, I can't feel anything.

Today, I convinced myself to be okay,
But my demons want me to stay.
Because there will be another day,
Another day of endless episodes,
Of the dramas and self-sabotage.

Please, I just want to be alone.
Yet I forgot that since then, I am alone.
With the presence of my demons,
With the sadness of the truth,
That will always make me feel blue.

Drugged in Love

Rosemary McNally

HIS ADDICTION WAS REAL, and so was mine—but our forms of addiction were dangerously different. I loved him as much as I could; I did everything for him. He was aware of my love for him at times. Though he loved me, there was another woman that he couldn't get away from. Her name was Snow. Snow was dreamy, beautiful and deadly.

With just a glance into her deep, crystal eyes he would find himself staring within a second, unable to pull away from her longing gaze. Any man that ran into this woman, married or single, would leave whoever they were with or even worse—cheat. Snow, of course, didn't mind this at all. She was completely fine with taking away the one person I loved. She even told me he couldn't control it. She was still a monster in my eyes, and I hated her and what she had done.

February 5, 2018 was when she took it too far, however. That morning was like any other morning for me. The sky was grey with a chilling bite hidden in the wind. The birds, despite the cold, were still singing happily. Sometimes they were drowned out by the loud, rustic wind. I was in class; again, it was a normal morning. He was on my mind and so was she. Her more-so than him; wondering what her next move was going to be. I grimaced at the thought, took a deep breath, and continued with my day.

I'd known Alex for a solid two years. Even then, Snow was around him constantly. She was around even before I was in the picture. When I arrived, she decided to stay and ignore me. She had plans even then. Alex and I had our ups and downs—mostly downs, to be frank with you. Snow would tell him things that were untrue and unjust, and he would then go off on me. Sometimes those random fights were over the phone during the middle of the night.

I remember the scent of his cologne and body wash, but her perfume would overpower his. The scars of her abuse were covered up by his long-sleeved Nirvana shirt along with a smile to top it all off. He would complain constantly about her, and then he had days when he just loved her. Those days I was just a

second-thought, and that hurts even now. The last phone call I remember was after his work hours. We had planned to meet up, but Snow held me back. Not Snow herself, but the abuse she had done to him. I couldn't bear the thought or the image, so I made up an excuse, stating I was busy.

"Damn," he said. "I was really, really looking forward to seeing you."

"I know, Alex, but I promised my father I would watch T.V. with him."

"Oh, alright. Talk to you later"

And that was it. That was the last time I had ever heard his voice. Many people have encountered Snow—some of them are very lucky to have gotten out of that abusive relationship. Alex, however, no matter how many times I would tell him she was toxic, didn't listen. No, he couldn't listen because that bitch would whisper things in his ear and he would listen to her instead.

I truly wish I could punch her in her face. I can't. My fist would only hit the victim she is controlling. She knows what she has done, and she doesn't regret it one bit. When one is done, she moves on to the next. Alex, now, is dead because of her—because her love was more powerful than mine. She was able to give him what I couldn't: A gateway into a world without pain.

Foolish Pride

CCMouse

The mighty knight storms into battle.
His sword strikes
But its edge is dull.
It hurts no one.
He refuses to realize this
And continues to fight.
His opponents laugh
And march away

A colossal lion roars,
Attempting to enforce fear,
But the lionesses do not stir.
The cubs play without care.
The colossal lion roars again.
It falls on deaf ears.
Yet the colossal lion roars evermore,
Causing an endless cycle of ignorance.

A fierce drake appears before the mighty knight.
The mighty knight raises his sword.
The fierce drake opens its maw.
The blade is dull,
The breath is smoke.
Neither party is hurt,
Yet they refuse to retreat,
And so they fight
And will forever fight,
Never wounding the other
For all eternity.

The colossal lion has reached his final days.
His roar has disappeared.
His lionesses have left him.
His cubs have followed suit.
For the colossal lion has done nothing but roar;

But the roars are useless.
They do not provide food,
They do not bring the rainfall,
So the colossal lion collapses,
Never to roar again

Do not let it overtake you.



Valle Hermoso, Argentina
César Omar Sánchez

A Strange Visitor

Waymon O. Davis

IT WAS A BRISK FALL NIGHT. The wind blew hard whistling through the trees, blowing the leaves through the air. I had just gotten off from work. Walking down the street to where I lived, I snuggled into my wool trench coat with the top breast and collar pulled up around my head and cheeks. Finally, I reached my house., I pushed open the squeaky gate and climbed the stairs to the front door. I felt an immense relief at being home out of the cold. I pulled off my hat and coat and hung them on the coat stand that stood in the foyer. In the kitchen, I put some water into the kettle and turned on the stove, then went into my bedroom to put on my pajamas, robe and slippers so I could have a hot cup of tea with honey and lemon. Back in my living room, I listened to the radio and began to unwind. Suddenly, the telephone rang out. It was my older brother, Jesse. Our mother had just passed away about a month earlier.

He said, "Little brother, I have a letter here for you. It's from Mother. I need to get it to you."

I said, "Yes! I'm up! Come on over."

He replied, "I'm on my way."

Ten minutes passed and then my doorbell rang out. I heard a deep, low mumble. I opened the door and the wind blew so hard into my house I had to back up. I said, "Come in," thinking that it was Jesse, but to my surprise it appeared to be a woman. It had the shape of my mother, but the voice sounded like my older sister, Sapphire. Strange it was.

A cool breeze flowed through the living room where we stood and the fragrance of my mother's favorite perfume filled the room. Then the woman spoke, "Sit down, my love," and I did, feeling the fear of unknowing. I nervously blurted out "Who are you? Why are you here? My brother will be here shortly!" The woman acknowledged that Jesse was on his way with a letter for me from my mother, that I should take heed of this message, and not let people deter me from doing what it said. It would not be easy to follow the instructions, she said, but there is an abundance of Joy and Peace on the other side. Then, the doorbell

rang out again and the wind blew exceptionally hard and whistled throughout the house, and she was gone. I hurried to the front door and snatched it open. It was my brother Jesse.



Untitled
Abou Traore

Truth or Consequence

Rosemary McNally

PEOPLE DIED BECAUSE OF A VIDEO; because of me. I had two options: discard the video completely to save face or leak the truth that everyone was trying so hard to avoid. The choice, though, was very obvious as a journalist. I mean, that is what we do, right? We join this career path knowing that what we do will change us forever. This gets us into trouble, but I knew that. I knew exactly what I was getting myself into. But this was too far. I love what I do, but at what cost? I was questioning my entire life at this point because I had made this job my entire life. It was a mistake, I know.

The *Wall Street Journal* was mostly to blame, however. They knew I was dedicated to giving our readers the truth, and they knew I would make the “right” choice. They marked me as anonymous, thinking it would keep me around. Of course, they didn’t understand the bigger story. I find that hilariously ironic. You’re probably thinking now to yourself, “If you got the truth out, why the hell are you complaining?” I had no idea people would die as a result. My company, however, were aware of the outcome. They were okay with it.

I want to give you the full, unedited story. I want my dedicated readers who stuck with me throughout thick and thin to know everything. By now, if you haven’t already figured it out, I am the one who leaked the video. Some people were relieved the truth was out, others of course, not so much. Those of you who are absolutely pissed off, I want to give you someone to blame; the right person. I’m sure even after this story is out there, it won’t change a thing. Those innocents will never be brought back—all because of a damned video.

It was Friday morning. Unbeknownst to me, it was the last decent morning I would ever have. It started off like any other day; coffee, coffee, and more coffee. Working as a journalist, that’s really all you need to get you through your day and to prepare yourself for the havoc ahead. After my 4 large cups of coffee, I headed to the bathroom to attempt to cover up the rows of bags that sat under my eyes. As a journalist, I need to be

“bright eyed and bushy tailed”. At least, that’s what my boss tells me. I don’t want the hard work and stress to be obvious. I splashed some water on my face to help me wake up.

I leaned over the sink, letting the water drip into the drain before grabbing a nearby towel. I looked up into the mirror and a heavy sigh escaped my lips. My black and blue hair was tied up into a messy bun with parts of hair falling to both sides of my face. Whenever I first wake up in the morning, it seems that my eyes are almost like crystals. It’s honestly one of the only things I like about myself.

After drying off my face, I opened up a small case next to the towel and pulled out my eyebrow piercing. It took me about twenty minutes to get ready that morning, which is kind of a record for me. I grabbed my laptop case and book bag and headed out the door to catch a taxi, which in New York, is very hard to do. Most of the drivers here are complete assholes.

The drive to the WSJ from my house was only thirty minutes, so it wasn’t that bad. That morning at The Wall Street Journal dragged. None of my colleagues had a story, and the meeting was just spent trying to figure one out. For the past year that I had been working there, I would tell them that a story could be found everywhere. In response, they would tell me that they needed big stories, stories that people would care about.

The chief editor stood up from his seat, looking proud of himself. “I have something!” He waved his flash drive around, smiling like a goof. That man was Sully. He had been working at the WSJ for over a decade and was one of our most respected writers. He had recently become our editor-in-chief and was one of the few that deserved it. He was also my best friend, so maybe I was just biased. “I know, I should’ve said something thirty minutes ago, but I completely forgot. Somebody from WikiLeaks emailed me this video, edited of course, so I dug through the amazing inter-webs to find the UNEDITED one!”

“Does it check out?” Mark said, from across the room. Mark was the douche of the group; self-centered, rude, and crude. “You’re the editor-in-chief. You should know that WikiLeaks isn’t trustworthy,” he scoffed.

“Did you not just listen to me? I said I found the unedited version. Right here. In my flash drive. That’s in my hand. Right here.” God, I miss Sully. My face was buried in my laptop. A clear indication that I did not want to be in this room with these people. Sully, though, being the great friend that he was, called me out. “What do you think, Zoe?”

“Yeah, Sinclair. What do you think?” Mark repeated.

I glanced around the room as their stares burned into my skin. “Well, um. I trust Sully. I mean, he is the chief editor for a reason.” I looked over at Sully, his chubby face giddy about my opinion. “And I think we should watch the unedited video and decide what we should do with it from there.”

“Wow, Sinclair. For the new kid, you sure know what you’re doing.” Mark smirked, slicking his black hair back. He was uncomfortably handsome; what I mean by that, was that he was such an asshole, but so attractive. You didn’t ever want to admit it, but you just couldn’t help it. I couldn’t help it. My face flushed red. “Yeah, thanks, Mark—I guess.”

“Okay, okay, enough chit-chatting you two. Now, it’s time for business!” Sully boomed. “Everybody except for Mark and Zoe, you are excused.” Disappointed, the rest of the room was emptied out. “Okay, now, are you SURE you are ready to watch this video? It’s... brutal. I would not recommend it to the faint of heart.”

“What are you, a warning label? Get on with it.” Mark pressed on, eager. Carefully, Sully plugged the flash drive into the projector and started to play the video. The video was apparently footage from inside government headquarters. Hundreds upon thousands of nuclear weapons were being showcased, along with hundreds of tanks and other military-grade weapons. The three of us fell silent. The video cut out and paneled over to prisoners who were then being used as targets to test out the weapons. Explosions sounded off and the results were traumatizing. So many people were dead. The video stopped, and we were at a loss for words. We looked at each other, stiff in our current positions.

“Well, umm,” Sully began. “That was something, wasn’t it?”

“What do we do with it?” Mark was monotone. He couldn’t even bother to be his current demeaning self.

“What does the boss want us to do?” I chimed in.

Sully looked apologetically over at me. “Not us. He wants you to make the choice. To publish it or discard it. By publishing it, you will suffer a backlash. By discarding it, you will still face a backlash. Either way—”

“Either way, you’re screwed, kid. Those are the perks of being a journalist.” Mark leaned back, crossing his arms. “Want to quit your job yet?”

I shook my head. “What? No. I need to talk to him about this though. You both have more experience than me, why is he choosing me?”

“Maybe to test you,” Mark chuckled. “Big boss man loves to test the newcomers.”

I stood up from my chair, and without a word, walked out to speak with the boss. I calmly knocked on his door, nervously waiting to hear his raspy voice.

“Come in,” he grumbled.



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