

# 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

Issue 8

Spring 2020

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\* Winner of the Writing Center's Annual Writing Competition

## Unsent Letters

Christine Tirado

Dear Professor: It is as though you expect things because of what I have done or what I can do. All of this “You are smart! You can do this; you can do that,” but my mind does not feel any of it. I feel like an average student, just barely getting by. I lost the will and the motivation, the desire I used to have to always get those straight A’s. Maybe it’s because all my friends are graduating, and I am still here. Sulking in the fears of “what if?” What if I don’t make it? What if I let everyone down? When you constantly call on me to answer a question, or to share, I feel the heat of the spotlight on me, its warmth on my cheeks and ears. A deafening hum takes over the stream of thoughts. I open my mouth to speak, but the words will not come out right. Even before I start to speak, the process of second guessing myself begins. Please be patient with me, I am doing the best I can. I am not better than the rest, but I am doing my best, and maybe that’s what matters.

Dear Family: Why do you have so many expectations of me? I just want to live normally and be somewhat carefree. I get it, I am the first to do this “college thing,” as you would say, but it’s so much work trying to be “everything.” Everything you want me to be, everything you think I can be. Just give me a little space to make mistakes. Your constant critiques take a toll on me and come down on me like tumbling bricks. It gets hard to hold all your expectations in only two hands. Please tell me it’s okay to fail sometimes, that it’s okay to not be the best at everything. Please tell me you are proud of me, not because of my achievements but because of who I am.

Dear ‘Friends’: I don’t know what you expect of me. I am trying the best I can. I want to be a great person and an even better friend. I apologize for the oversensitivity, but it’s how us introverts cope. Eventually I learned that is why nobody invites me to things anymore. I don’t get added to the group chats, but it is just fine for weirdos like me. My story stays untold because trusting is not something that comes easy. Everyone has problems, some just

hide it better than others. So, I'll just accept your assumptions that I don't try hard enough. I try to give as much advice as I can, but it always ends up getting misunderstood. Why do you smile in my face but secretly cannot stand me? Just tell me I don't fit your definition of a friend and let me be.

Dear Ex-Boyfriend: I'm sorry I couldn't be what you wanted me to be. Maybe I was not pretty enough or just not able to fulfill your expectations. I apologize for not living up to your distorted versions of me, and all you thought it was going to be even after all those years. You wanted a girl who didn't question anything. One who accepted everything without reasoning, without forewarning. You expected someone who gave you complete and utter freedom. We are both single now but talk here and there. I feel like you regret the things you said and what you did, but it just caused too much distrust. Maybe, just maybe you need to learn to love again. Or maybe it's my own self-doubt that gets in the way. After all, it was always up to you to provide constant reassurance.

Dear Future Me: Relax. I genuinely hope you have stopped trying to live up to everyone's expectations of you except your own. Your dreams will come true and everyone will swear they never doubted you. Just live for the moment and stop being so overanalytical of the things outside of your control. You are doing the best you can. Although your motivation seems to be lost, you'll find it again. Just remember to keep pushing. You are all you have. Instead of beating yourself up, realize that your journey, no matter how fast or slow, is something that only you have the power to alter. It is pointless trying to analyze why things do not always go according to plan. Don't lose yourself trying to keep up. When the time is right, you will know. For now, just try to go with the flow.



## **The Idea of Love Suddenly Becomes Unfamiliar**

Kissarne Averill Pang

The idea of love suddenly becomes unfamiliar.

We get so conflicted by the authenticity of what love really means.

We often confuse lust for love  
and our souls suffer

as we fill them with wonder  
not acknowledging the fact  
that someone else's feelings matter.

We're terrified to face reality  
so we substitute it with obscurity.

Emotional intimacy is the new illusion  
as we wear masks to hide our vulnerabilities.

We pick our poison to enhance the numbness we're craving.

We hunger for serotonin

but do we really care about our well-being? Do we?



**I'm Not Trinity, but I Love Neo**  
Abou Traore

## I'll Never Not Love You

Ryan Grimes

TODAY CONSISTED OF ESPECIALLY WEIRD WEATHER for a city like LA. Normally, it was seventy degrees with plenty of sun, but apparently, Mother Nature decided to switch it up with mid-fifties and quite a few clouds, which coincided with my attitude towards today's little reunion. I hadn't seen my mom in about five years, so I shouldn't have been surprised when she gave me a call to say that she was in town and wanted to get some coffee to catch up. However, I couldn't help being shocked beyond all comprehension the moment I heard her voice on the other end of the line. With a degree of reluctance, I agreed to her request after looking at my schedule only to see that I had no excuse to refuse her. However, I would be lying if I said that I hadn't worried for her safety, and occasionally missed her quirky sense of humor during our time apart. Hell, maybe some coffee is what both of us needed.

I arrived at the café a little before 2:30. It was a small place, with abstract paintings on the walls and black marble counters. There was also an extremely cheap and out of place "Smell the coffee" rug at the entrance. Upon entering the establishment, I sat down to wait at a booth with beige cushioned seats and a dark wooden table. The café had booths like this one all along the walls of the square-shaped dining area. After a brief wait, my mom made her entrance into the café and back into my life.

Interestingly, she looked slightly different than the last time I saw her. Her hair had gone from medium length dirty blond to shoulder length dark brunette, probably thanks to a department store hair dye. She was wearing a black double-breasted coat, navy jeans, and the ugliest knockoff sneakers I'd ever seen, which were pink and white. Upon seeing her, I stood up and welcomed her with the words, "You still have terrible shoes. It's nice to see you." She smiled and said, "You still smell like pot. Nice to see you, too." I forgot how much I missed moments like this.

Laughing off our greetings, we went up to the counter to order our drinks. I decided to pay for both our orders. I wanted a nice start to whatever this meeting was going to be. After being

supplied with our coffees, we went back to the booth, sat down, and drank our refreshments in the most painful silence we had ever experienced together.

Soon, the silence had become truly unbearable, so she broke it by saying, "I know that you're probably wondering why I called you. I just want to apologize for doing that so suddenly."

"No-no, it's okay."

"Do you blame me for anything?"

I hadn't thought about it in so long, that I forgot. At first, I probably did to some extent. Fortunately, by the time those five years had finished passing, most of the wounds healed. I said, "No. I don't hold anything against you. I'm still mad as all hell at him, though."

"Yeah, that's actually the main reason I reached out to you. Dad is gone."

"What do you mean? He left you?"

"No. Your father is dead. He was shot."

It's a weird thing, being told that one of your parents is dead. It's a type of feeling that is only experienced a handful of times in someone's life. To be fair, I'd always thought that you only felt bad about someone dying when it was someone you really cared about. People that you're really close with and actually give a shit about, like best friends, siblings, your favorite cousin, or even your dog. Not to mention that normally, parents are killed by their bodies from old age, not by bullets. This feeling was different, though. It wasn't anything melancholic or sad. It was pure joy. I was happy. I couldn't help but laugh.

"Why are you laughing? It's not funny. He was your father!" my mom said, becoming teary-eyed.

Unfortunately for her, I kept laughing for a good while. However, soon I noticed a few tears dropping down my mother's face. This made me stop just as quickly as I had started. Seeing your mom crying always makes everything sad and serious, no matter how hard you were laughing or enjoying yourself. Feeling horribly, but still with a smile remaining on my lips, I forced myself to utter the words, "I'm sorry I made you cry."

Wiping her face, she said, "I know you hated him. Though, you have to at least feel a little down. You have to feel bad for him."

Still with a smile on my face, I replied, “Oh, do I? And why would I ever in my life feel any sympathy for that piece of shit?”

“He raised you. He held you in his arms when you were a baby. He was your father.”

Never before had a smile vanished so quickly from my face. In answer, I spit out, “Do not call him that. Sure, he’s the reason I exist, I’ll give him that. But Mom, make no mistake. That man may have been my dad, but he was never my father. He’s the reason why I moved out right after I graduated college.”

With a surrendering sigh, she replied “I agree that he wasn’t the best person that could’ve raised you. Still...you had to have felt some level of love for him. Or was it always hatred?”

Now, I took my time to ponder this question. I remembered being happy when I was really young, just like most people do. When you’re that small and fragile, all you know is the love you receive from your family. Getting rocked to sleep as a baby, being told bedtime stories, parents putting Band-Aids on cuts and scrapes, all good things. Those days were blissful, but it also made it that much more painful when I realized what kind of man my father really was.

In elementary and middle school, my teachers taught all the kids about the civil rights movement back in the sixties. We learned how people of color used to be treated. At the same time, outside of school, I learned that some people still thought that they deserved to be treated that way. One of those people, as painful as it was to realize, was my dad, the man who I used to call my father. I grew up hearing him complain about immigrants and using racial slurs, among other behaviors. His racism got worse as I got older. Mainly due to the fact that I would go against him in his rants and vulgar language. There were even a few times where the fights almost became physical. Of course, with such tension between the two of us, we grew further apart as I got older. When I was a little boy, he was my father and maybe even my hero, however, as I got older, to me, he became a disgusting monster. Instead of staying one of the few people I would continue to love unconditionally, the person I called dad turned into the type of person I vowed never to become or tolerate.

Finally, after going all through my past memories where my family was concerned, I answered her. “I grew up with a monster raising me, trying to turn me into him. He filled me with so much hatred that I did the only rational thing that I could think of. I pointed the hatred right back at him. I’m sorry if that offends you, Mom.”

It took my mom a moment to understand what I said, and what I meant by it. When she was done wiping the tears off her face, she replied, “I understand. I’m sorry you went through all that. I tried to protect you from him, where I could. When I fell in love with him, he was such a different person. I honestly don’t know how he became that way...Do you hate me for loving him?”

“No, I don’t think I do. I’ve fallen in love before. I know how hard it can be to stop loving someone after you realize the relationship isn’t the way it used to be. You see them, and you can’t help but see who they used to be, and you can’t help but feel how you felt when you realized you were first in love.”

“Yeah, that’s how I felt with your father.”

After hearing her answer, I noticed that she had an especially intense look of sorrow upon her face, a type of sadness that I’d never seen on my mom’s face before. Her facial features were calmer, but there was still some grief being shown by her unsmiling lips and limp cheeks. In her eyes, however, there was also a new heartbreak shining brightly, that hadn’t been there when we first started talking. This broke my heart instantaneously.

“Hey, Mom? How about we go do something? Do you want to go shopping? Maybe we can get you some shoes that actually look good.”

Immediately after the words finished leaving my mouth, my mom cackled loudly, which caught the attention of everyone in the café. She said, “You’re an asshole. Yeah, let’s go.”

We started gathering our things to get ready to leave, but then I couldn’t help but think of my mom and me. All the memories of everything we’d been through together. We headed towards the café’s main door, when I touched her shoulder. She looked back, smiled, and asked, “What?”

“Hey Mom, you know I’ll never not love you, right?”

## Wild Horses

Mustafa Bagnato

TODAY, I WAS JUST ANOTHER DOCTOR listening to an old man ramble about his life. The curtains were drawn back and the sun was beginning to descend. The man sat on the bed, withered hands hovering over the photos I had just brought to him. He looked up and motioned for me to have a seat, so I obliged as the old man told me a story. The first photo he handed me was of a woman.

“Let me tell you about how love entered my life,” he began. “It was in the way her hair swung over her shoulders as she lost herself in the music. That’s when I knew she was something special. She swung her hair with such elegance that it seemed to run as free as wild horses. It was in her scent that I learned what addiction was. She smelled of a fall breeze or a spring rain. She just captivated you.”

I reclined in the burgundy chair that sat in the corner of my father's room, cluttered with books he had read and written over the years. Photos of family were strewn about the room like he was looking for something and could not find it. The curtain rod slacked toward the middle. I could tell that he constantly held on to it to maintain balance. He was far from the strong man I knew growing up. His white hair was disheveled, growing in every direction but the middle. He wore a moth-eaten sweater that seemed small on his large frame and his glasses were held together with tape.

“She liked to move,” he said, while adjusting a picture of my mother in one of her shows. “And I liked to watch. She moved like a gentle breeze, skimming the surface of water.”

He looked up and it was as if you could see the movie playing behind his eyes. It was almost as if he wasn't here. I let him live in that memory for a little longer before his eyes went back to the photo album.

“It was hard for you not to feel excited for her when she got a part in a show. It didn't matter how big or small.” My father sighed. I could see the memory die right in front of him.

It was hard watching him slip away every visit. He had some

good days but mostly bad. He was deteriorating as each second went by and I wasn't sure how much more time he had. It was bad enough that I was the only one who visited, and I believe he knew. It was hard for my mother and sister to see him like this. They couldn't help but cry after every visit and then one day, they just stopped coming. When I asked why, my mother told me that he wasn't her husband. I knew what she meant yet I still couldn't stop coming to visit. Even if he didn't know who I was.

The way he spoke of her made me want to know more about her and every time I saw him, he had more tidbits of information to share. Always describing her elegance and how her beauty went unrivaled. It was a story I never got tired of hearing, and he never got tired of telling it.

"She never let the compliments go to her head." His hand shook as he passed me another photo. This was one he was very fond of. It was the one we took at the lake somewhere in South Jersey for my 17th birthday. I had already started applying to my dream college when my father came in and asked me to get away with the family for a week. He rented a room by the lake that we had visited the previous summer. My dad was sentimental like that. He would tell me years later that this was his way of reminding me what family was. We went away for that week every year up until I graduated college. After that, I moved back home, so there was no reason to spend unnecessary money, as mom would put it.

"The day we got married was the best day of my life. I watched her walk down the aisle and as she reached the end, her father handing her off with so much fury in his eyes that they could have burned a hole through me. I promised him I would take care of her." I thought of the life that he shared with mom and the way he described their love. "She made our house a home as only she could do."

When he talked about the love he experienced, it was the same kind of love I felt I had found in my husband, that kind of enduring love. I remember coming out to my parents and how accepting they were. When I brought my husband home for the first time, they welcomed him openly and my father would later tell me that it was because of my mother that he loved with an



open heart. I could not imagine who my father was before my mother came along. He never spoke of his life before her and when I asked him the reason, he told me life didn't matter until she walked in.

He handed me another picture. It was of him and my mother standing in front of their home, my mother fully pregnant with my sister. My mother smiled at the camera, but he smiled at her.

“After three years of being married, we welcomed our first child into the world. We named her Darling because she was our little darling. She protected our little girl with fervor and our little girl grew up with her fighting spirit. I remember the day Darling came home from school and had to tell us how she punched a boy in the eye for spitting at her. She and her mother rushed right back out the door to speak to the boy's parents. The boy spat at her again and she punched him in the other eye.” Dad's giggles turned into a series of coughs. I handed him a glass of water from the nightstand. “Thank you. Anyway, she grew up to be just like her mama, and our boy, my boy has made me the proudest father in the world, and he turned out like his mother, too. They were both so hot-headed and brave. They tackled everything thrown at them. My son excelled at everything. Whatever sport he chose to play, he played competitively. He wanted to win, and it showed in his grades and performances. His own sister said she was inspired by him, and she was five years older.”

It was so strange listening to him speak of me this way. He never said these things in person. He wasn't the type of man that told you how he felt. I had a very strong grasp on who I wanted to be from a young age; I wanted to be my father. I had my mother's mannerisms, yet everything else about me came from my father. He was studious and fought for every promotion in his career. When there was no more room for growth, he opened his own business. My father was never a man of many words and it was often that you would see him reading something. He wrote just as often as he played basketball at the YMCA or went bowling with his buddies. My father told me that he just did what he felt like doing.

“Then our kids gave us grandkids. I watched my family grow into three generations. Our kids and our grandkids make us so

proud. Although, I haven't seen any of them in a while. Did I receive any mail today?"

Just like that he was gone. I handed him the letters. I wanted to tell him how I am about to be a grandfather, yet I refrained, knowing he wouldn't remember anyway. I wanted to invite him to his grandson's college graduation; however, I doubted he would know his own grandson if he saw him. My father was a stranger once again, or was it I who had become a stranger to my father? On the drive home, I listened to all the music he would play on long car drives. The car smelled of vanilla, his favorite scent. I don't know how he didn't see how I had become a second version of him. It was as if he pulled me from his rib and my mother simply added a little seasoning.

I got home and dropped my keys into the dish beside the door. My husband stood there with a big smile plastered on his face. I turned the corner.

"Surprise!" My family screamed throughout the house. "Happy Birthday!"

My family scrambled to give me hugs and kisses in addition to well wishes. I walked over to Darling. "Where's Mama?"

"She's in the kitchen. Where were you?" she questioned.

"I'll tell you later," I responded.

I walked into the kitchen to find the lady my father spoke so highly of. Even in her old age, she held an elegance that no one seemed to match.

"How is your father doing?" Her eyebrow perked up as she cleaned the greens.

"He remembered you today," I told my mother.

"Did he?" she smiled.

"Yeah, but he didn't recognize me."

She sighed and muttered, "You'll get a chance to tell him one day, baby."

She came and cradled my face into her arms and the scent of her calmed me. I knew what my father meant when he said he could not get enough.



**A New Beginning**  
Sadra Munir

**Christmas**  
Nicole Heredia

The lights are hung and joy fills the cold air,  
Hearts are racing as the countdown begins.  
Gifts wrapped in ribbon are ready to share,  
Nothing compares to the children's wide grins.

The tree is up with a star on the tip,  
Gingerbread houses are decorated.  
Warm cookies to eat and cold milk to sip,  
Peace on earth and love are celebrated.

A child was humbly born in a manger,  
A quiet birth that made the world stand still.  
He came to save those who were in danger,  
He died and rose, there is hope in the thrill.

People forget that a Savior was born,  
Yet they pray for Santa on Christmas morn.

**Janel**  
Jamie Swanson

Heart beats like footsteps as you came into my world

Smile soft like spring clouds as the sky sets

You were a dream

Your eyes were gentle

Your touch was kind

A memory so serene

I hear your laughter

When I smell your shirt

What is love

If love can hurt?

I long for one last hug

One sweet kiss

Why did God do this?

Babies aren't supposed to die

Yet here I mourn

Soft whispers of goodbye

And every day

I play back reels of baby coos

And heartache

Every day

The sleep gets shorter

And it's harder to wake

Everything reminds me of you

Your baby face

Your baby laugh

Your baby touch

Why couldn't a mother's love

Be enough?

The world feels empty

Cold and Alone

Without you

I have no home

I stare down the hallway,

Imagine you there

Memories of your stomping.  
Life seems unfair...

Janel...  
My little girl,

Your footsteps echoed like heartbeats as you walked out of my  
world.



## **Carnations**

Elizabeth Guerrero

## Love Always Finds a Way

David LaBella

A COLD AND BITTER WINTER DAY LIKE THIS was the last thing Juniper needed for her monthly trip to the cemetery. Having been the closest of friends with Laura, it made sense that her visits had started out as daily, then gradually dwindled to weekly, and finally to monthly. It was eight years, three months, and fifteen days since she had passed from an automobile accident on the night of December 31, 2006. A date known for the ending of the old and the beginning of the new, but now given new meaning by tragedy. A cold and logical woman, Juniper wasn't surprised to hear there had been an accident outside of her friend Daisy's house party, but when the news arrived that it had been her best friend who was killed, her life had collapsed.

A sunny and bright aspiring artist, Laura had been Juniper's closest friend since their first encounter during high school. They were always seen as a pair, one distant and cold, one always optimistic and bright. Concrete and abstract in their own ways. Despite their many differences, the two found ways to make a friendship work. From the New Year's Eve that changed her life, Juniper could recall everything leading up to Laura leaving their apartment. Her smile, her outfit, her shallow promise to see Juniper in the New Year. Every little detail was ingrained into her memory like a scar. As she stared down at the headstone beside the dying tree, she felt a warm tear glide down her face, burning against the cold and exposed skin.

The March air knew no kindness, it didn't know grief, and it didn't know love like Juniper had. It would have been the following Valentine's Day when Juniper would have finally told Laura the truth. Finally revealed why she'd been so sheepish the last few years, and why she'd been so willing to agree to the idea of a shared apartment, despite liking her own space. The tears grew heavier as Juniper thought of the happy life they would have led. Every day was haunted by those same thoughts and questions. Dreams of little things they would have shared, like greetings or coffee, shaken away by the cold March winds. Under that lonely



tree, in the final days of winter, Juniper felt herself get lost in those happy memories and sad truths.

Turning away from the grave was always the hardest part for her, though she'd never admit it to anyone. 'Death is death', she'd always say, hiding her mourning soul. When she began to turn, the same painful thought crept back into her mind and her thoughts once again raced to whether Laura would have felt the same. A question that could never be answered was the worst kind for a logician like her to handle. As she turned, she noticed a single flower growing from a once-empty patch of dirt near the grave. Marveling at its apparent impossibility, Juniper bent down to see the flower appear to glow with its multicolored petals. A warm, bright, and beautiful flower, seeming like a living work of art. She gently caressed the petals before standing up and heading back to her car, careful not to hurt the fragile beauty.

After fumbling around in her front seat, she found what she'd been looking for: a large, empty plastic cup she kept to hold loose change. Her cold hands placed it on the ground as she knelt down and scooped her hands into the dirt beneath the flower, careful not to hurt the poor thing. Normally, the idea of digging her hands into dirt would have been repulsive, but this was different. She placed the flower and dirt into the empty cup and took it with her back to the car. The cup rested comfortably in the passenger seat, where Laura used to sit. With Spring soon to begin, Juniper started up her car, finally willing to forget the life she'd lost years ago, and ready to begin a warmer life full of new hope.



**Inner Peace**

Iqra Ahmed

## A Skull in my Hands

Sam Killion

THE HAIR ON MY NECK STOOD UP as I felt the brush of a small hand touch me. There it was again, the echo of a twig snapping in the distance. Ma always said these woods were haunted, though I never put much belief in those old spooky stories. Guess I should have paid more attention to them when there was the chance.

The flashlight had died when I first felt eyes watching me. Now the silent sounds of something out there inching ever so slightly into my personal space put a pit in my stomach. Most people would have fled as soon as they heard the deep-throated howl but not crazy me. I loved to put myself in situations like this. Maybe I should get a dog and paint colorful flowers on the outside of my van, I thought. I really needed to find a better hobby. A cold shiver wrapped itself around my spine.

I ran without even realizing my legs were moving, something I'd read in books that I didn't know could actually happen to the body for real.

I could make out the smell of wet stone, which meant I was close to the Black River. Crunching leaves under my boots would be my doom, for no other sound could be heard, not even the river I knew I must be nearby now. My mind was crashing at a thousand miles an hour.

Why couldn't I hear it anymore?

Why didn't I hear anything?

Where was the thing that was chasing me?

My breathing was so ragged by the time I stopped. It was coming for me no matter what it was, and I couldn't show any more fear.

"Alright, then, no more hiding, I'm done with this game."

My voice wasn't full of confidence; nevertheless, when death is coming, does it really matter? I wondered what Ma would think when she woke up at seven only to find my bed empty. How long would people look for me before I just became another story mothers told their children to keep them out of these damn woods? People went missing without a word in our small, not-even-on-a-map town all the time, but still. How would I be

remembered?

I shook my head so hard I felt my hair slip loose from its bun and land softly in my face. This was not the time for thoughts like that. I threw down the useless metal flashlight out of frustration. As it landed, it sounded as if someone had hit a watermelon with a metal bat. Suddenly, it turned on as it hit the bottom of a ditch and reflected off something that I couldn't quite make out.

Like a moth to a flame, my brain needed to know what was making that shadow. Even if I had just convinced myself that I should fight that thing following me. Where had it gone now anyway? I never could force myself to focus on something for long, not even in school. So here I was, sliding my way down the steep incline to the bottom of the ditch. The mud and smooth rocks from the rushing river made getting to the flashlight a little risky; still, I had already made it this far, hadn't I? My heart stopped for a moment when I found what was causing the slight reflection.

"Bones," said a voice almost too soft for me to hear.

I whipped my head around to see who could have been close enough to me for their gentle words to reach my ears. There was no one. I was utterly alone down in this ditch.

The soft childish voice wasn't wrong; these were, in fact, bones. Not just any bones that could have belonged to an animal, mind you, though the fact that they seemed so tiny would have given off that impression at first. No, these were definitely human, and I was most certainly now holding a skull in my hands. It was easy enough to grasp in my soft clutch. Nonetheless, the dull pain of melancholy poured into my heart. I could only imagine the terror a child this young would have felt being stuck in this damp, muddy place. Only able to hear the river and nothing else till the cold probably did them in.

"I am so sorry little one, you must have fallen down here, didn't you?" Suddenly another branch cracked. I held the skull close to my chest.

When I turned, I finally got a look at the thing I thought had been chasing me all this time.

The apparition of a little girl stood before me.

"You were leading me here, weren't you? So that someone could find ya, hmm?"

I gave the girl a sad smile and looked back at the rest of her slightly submerged skeleton. Pieces were still exposed to the elements and faded from years of sun damage. I wanted to cry. I had thought of her as something to fear or to be angry at, but I knew better now. I could make this easy for her with just a simple act of kindness. Yes, kindness. Compassion for a soul left uneasy, that was what needed to be done.

"I'm going to bury this, if that's all right. You look tired from being up for so long."

I was using the voice Ma used on my little sister when it was time for bed. I don't know why, but it felt right. The little girl peeked over my shoulder as I dug a hole and placed her remains inside. She smiled before fading away, the feeling of small hands on my back going with her.

"Sleep now, little one. You don't need to worry anymore."



**Neverland**  
Kelsey Cartagena



**Deep Love**  
Sadra Munir

## Forsaken and Fallen

Christian Rosado

THE VERY OLD MAN'S ANTIQUARIAN EYES gazed over the waves of the sea as his enormous wings carried him on the wind. His once ungainly flapping had become much more elegant, as if he was quickly gaining sight of... whatever he was before he was given "solace," if one could call it that, in a chicken coop. It was as if he were afflicted by some hideous disease; it sapped his strength of mind, which caused him to babble like ancient people whose singular language was confounded by the Lord—of body, which caused him to jitter and fumble like a newly-fledged bird on its first nervous flight.

But that anxiety was now gone, lost on the breeze of the high seas, the same breeze that carried both him and his enormous wings. The enormous wings, which had only recently adjusted to flight, understandably grew tired; he had no wish to go missing at sea, nor did he want to revert to his recovering state, so the very old man changed the course of his flight. He was majestic, for a short while, but he had not the energy to continue this journey—he still looked the part of a sickly vulture, with horrid wings only barely suitable for flight. Yes, it was indeed time for him to return... home? That's a simple way to put it, at least. Perhaps not correct, but... simple, easy.

Upon his arrival, Elisenda greeted him with a cocked brow and clear confusion in her eyes. Was he back, as an annoyance, yet again? Or had he found some purpose along with his flight? She wouldn't know, because he silently passed her curious gaze on his way to the shed. A step up from the chicken coop—a far cry in fact, one that he might be able to get used to if his dreams of sleeping on a comfortable mattress, with blankets and a pillow, came to life. Perhaps even a *few* pillows. An old man can dream, can he not? Regardless of dreams coming true or not, he sat himself near one of the shed walls and leaned his back against it, closing his eyes and hoping to doze off. Or, to at least have a moment of clarity in his thoughts that would clear up the mystery shrouding his origin.

Of course word, and especially, sight of his brief leave and return spread much faster than one would have thought. That



angel must've woken up or something, they mocked. The tarantula-woman had most of them skeptical of his origins and power—he certainly hadn't worked any relevant miracles during his stay in town. Perhaps he was just an ugly mutant of a man, instead of the graceful angel some thought he was from the very beginning... he still wasn't entirely sure himself. Everything was rather blurry, events both recent and distant. Perhaps he had bumped his head after falling so far from the heavens...

...That must be it, he fell from Heaven! Right? That would explain things perfectly; why he felt so terrible for so long, why his wings—and really, his entire body—felt like a wreck. The old man had fallen from Heaven, though he couldn't think of a reason why his enormous wings would not have been able to take him back up. But, that was it, his mind was made up; he'd rest, for now, and fly back to the Heavens from which he fell—hopefully he wasn't destined to fall to Hell instead. A thought he wouldn't ponder too much on, for it'd sour his time spent trying to drift to sleep.

And sleep he did, for he needed all the energy he could get; a pilgrimage from earth to paradise was bound to be exhausting. *If* it was even possible for him to get there. He prepared for his departure, though there was not much work to be done, and took flight without a word. It was not like Pelayo and Elisenda could understand him, nor could the rest of the townsfolk, so there was no explanation he could give. None that would make sense, anyway. The parish priest spoke another language, but that was just as unfamiliar to him. So, with his hideous wings unfurled, he flapped and flapped until he met with the sky. He would not stop until he was met with God's grace, soaring skyward until his destination was found amidst clouds and stars.

He was never seen by any of the townsfolk ever again, but that is not to say his journey ended. God looked upon this fallen angel with scrutiny, but it did not take a keen eye to tell that one with such ugly, black-feathered wings—or what little remained of said feathers—did not belong in Heaven. No, this was not one of his messengers, and he was thusly cast out from God's kingdom.



## **Staircase to Hell**

Paige Bishop

**wicked were we when we**

Dexter Santos

wicked were we when we  
 whispered away the winters  
 wrapped in woolly sweaters

wicked were we when we  
 wasted words and wine  
 white with wits entwined

wicked were we when we  
 wolves were waiting wise  
 wished worms would whisk her eyes

so she stops  
 sucks in a sigh.

should sad she sing  
 surrendering stutters  
 so the sun is sagging from sky  
 we wouldn't wonder why

should shy she smile  
 sinking semesters  
 so summer swims suddenly by  
 we wouldn't wonder why

should silent she sway  
 so softly sleeping say  
 she saw us snakes slithering die  
 we wouldn't wonder why

so she stops  
 sucks in a sigh.

**UBG**  
Crystal Newton

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

Ugly Black Girl, Ugly Black Girl  
Lay down your Naps  
Bend over assume the position  
And make that Peach clap

Ugly Black Girl, Ugly Black Girl  
It's time to perform  
World Star is calling  
For their next media whore

Ugly Black Girl, Ugly Black Girl  
Got to get those likes  
How else are you going to know?  
If your lifestyle is tight

Ugly Black Girl, Ugly Black Girl  
Bleach that skin as well as your hair  
The less melanin you have the more society cares  
No need to seek knowledge

What's the point in going to college?  
So what your ancestors died  
For you to be a higher power  
When YouTube is hiring  
Every hour on the hour

Ugly Black Girl, Ugly Black Girl  
Lay down your Naps  
Time to tippy-tap your way  
Into the Massa heart

Your slave ship is ready  
The whistle has blown

To transport your silicone pride  
To the "Realty" Zone.

Ugly Black Girl, Ugly Black Girl  
Embrace the caricature that you portray  
With all the pride  
Of a Sambo Baby

Lay down, Lay down  
All that's natural and true  
Because your low self-esteem  
Is more important than being you!

## Cuba

Yaime Chirino Trujillo

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

CUBA, THE LARGEST ISLAND IN THE CARIBBEAN, is one of the most fascinating countries in Latin America. There are fifteen provinces in this country and its capital, Havana, is the largest city in the whole country. In Cuba the language is Spanish. I am Cuban and I know the island very well. I lived for many years in this country.

Cuba is inhabited by eleven million Cubans. The charisma is one of the most typical characteristics of them. These people are very friendly and honest. Most of them work as doctors, lawyers, builders, economists, and in other trades.

In this country, the weather is hot. It is very appropriate to enjoy the beaches and pools during the summer. This weather is also very favorable for the vegetation in the country. The geographical location and its own climate are causes for the country to be affected by cyclones and extensive rains during some times of the year.

The most visited places are Pinar del Rio, Varadero, Havana and Santiago de Cuba for their historical value, the antique cars, and buildings that still exist in colonial way. Pinar del Rio is known for its natural vegetation, the fields.

In this country, tobacco and coffee are fundamental products. They are harvested in the Cuban fields. These products are consumed by many people on the island and are also exported to countries such as Spain, Mexico, Brazil and China.

The favorite food in the region is brown rice, yucca, fried pork and salad. This food can be found in any restaurant as well as in any Cuban kitchen in the island. On holidays such as July 26 and December 31, this meal is always present on the dining table.

Education and medical care are free for all the people. In schools and hospitals, there is no distinction between a rich person and a poor person.

Cuba is a wonderful country. Its people and its places make it a natural paradise. I feel happy when I visit Cuba and was born in this country.

## Where Is My Friend Hidalgo?

Eladio Medina

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

AS WE CLOSED THE METAL GATE, I felt the long brick corridor get longer. I walked past my boyfriend with an intent on making this visit short. Black garbage bags lay near the end of the path where my mother lived. My boyfriend's disapproval of low-income housing proved to be right as this ghetto was a disaster. I was walking into the biggest disaster of them all. My mother. Her place was a single room pad, with Prussian colored walls and one single window. Living with her was what remained of my grandfather, and the absolute horror of desensitization.

The room smelled like rotten piss and herbal medicine. I saw my grandpa lying on his old bed with the tattered mattress stained dark yellow. My mom was sitting on the couch, her oversized legs protruding dark blue veins. Behind me, my boyfriend was making a face of disgust. He didn't want to be there. I didn't blame him.

My boyfriend walked past me and yelled, "¡Suegra!" He gave my mom a hug. She didn't get up from her chair, but her smile was genuine. My grandpa looked at me and said, "Mi niña... ven acá." I walked over and the stench of rotten piss intensified. Grandpa stretched his hand as if to hug me and I leaned down to meet his embrace. I held him tight and felt his frail bones. His overused pajamas crashed my Nike white t-shirt and the smell of death circled around both of us. He didn't smell it, but I did. As we locked eyes and I held onto his hands, I wondered where was the proud man that was once shoveling snow not so long ago? The man who took care of me when I was so young? I thought of my grandma and her tragic death. I thought of the trips we took as a family together. I thought of the proud man I once knew. Tears came to my eyes. And for a brief second, I wished that my grandpa did not have dementia.

My boyfriend walked over and said, "Abuelo, ¿cómo estás?" in a friendly tone. My grandpa let go of me and scanned this brown-colored man. Grandpa looked at him and then at my mom and then back at me but didn't say anything. There was an eerie



silence, one that I couldn't tolerate for long, so I said, "Grandpa, let's get you changed." My grandpa turned his head towards the window next to his bed and all he saw was a brick wall. He stared at it attentively. I got up and walked over to my mom. I gave her a hug and a peck on the cheek. She, too, smelled rotten. My lips tasted sour, and when we locked eyes for those milliseconds, I could see my reflection in her eyes: a clean, light-skinned woman, who has made the best of what she has been given. For a brief moment, I wondered what my mom saw in her reflection. Maybe a life wasted by elder care? Discontent over children who had long left the nest? Unhappy personal sacrifice? I thought of my mom when she was young and vibrant. Tears didn't come into my eyes. For a brief second, I wished she wasn't a failure.

I helped my mom get up and we walked towards my grandpa. My boyfriend looked at us and walked to the tiny kitchen. I grabbed my grandpa by his soft hands, gently, and pulled him up. My mom stood next to me, watching me do the physical work. As if on cue, my grandpa raised his arms and knew I was going to take his pajamas off. "What is Hidalgo doing now?" he said. I looked at him and at my mom. He stared into the kitchen where my boyfriend was standing. I told grandpa that it was not Hidalgo.

Grandpa kept on, "Did I tell you what Hidalgo did for me?" I'd heard this story before. "Él me salvó la vida..." I managed to unbutton his shirt. "I was in a bad situation. No quería vivir. But he saved me."

My mom repeated what I had said. "That is not Hidalgo."

My grandpa didn't pay her any mind and continued on. "It was a rainy day, and I was under the influence of a heavy drug. En ese tiempo... I think it was crack." He continued, "I got home very late one night and my mom wouldn't open the door. Y el aguacero comenzó."

I got up to get his clothes from the drawer. "There was a river in the street," he carried on. "And I didn't think much of it to throw myself in. It would be a relief to everyone, the black sheep finally gone." His voice cracked a little as he continued. "I jumped in and was swiftly taken by the stream... I was scared and I remember my legs brushing hard against the street's pavement." I came back with new pajamas. "And like a miracle when I was halfway down

the block... the strong pull of the water stopped!” Grandpa moved his hands and pressed them against an invisible wall. “I could stand up in the middle of that river! And there he was... Hidalgo on the sidewalk telling me to get out and come to him.” Grandpa always got a little emotional when he told his stories. “I walked to the sidewalk and my whole backside was burning but the water couldn’t move me anymore... Hidalgo held out his hand, I grabbed on, and he pulled me to the sidewalk.”

I had an idea of where this story went next. “Griselda, do you know the first words Hidalgo professed to me?” The answer was no, but Grandpa continued rambling on. “He said ‘you were reborn today; I saw when the water was dragging you away and I started to pray for you... God is powerful my son.’”

I had taken Grandpa’s pajama pants off and tried to put new ones on for him. Like a baby, he lay sideways across the bed. My mom looked at the window and mumbled, “Stay still and let your granddaughter change you.”

Grandpa, looking at the ceiling, said, “I start to think back on those times and see the reality that God does exist...” Grandpa stayed silent. I stayed silent, too, and half agreed with him. God is real, but I need to change you now. Something God won’t do right now.

The washed navy-blue pajamas matched his light freckled skin well. I was content I was able to change him. And then my grandpa looked better. I sat him up on the edge of the bed. My mom walked back to her chair, murmuring something about my nursing training coming into fruition. She turned on the television. I sat next to Grandpa. He murmured something I had gotten used to. “Griselda.” Grandpa didn’t look at me. He said it a little louder and my mom shouted that it was not my name.

Grandpa looked at my mother and then at me. My boyfriend walked from the kitchen towards us. He placed his hands on my back and gently squeezed. Right then and there, my grandpa murmurs a question that bothered me. “Griselda... where is Hidalgo now?” he said while looking at the empty space in front of him. My mom turned the television louder and I could hear a bunch of people clapping. I didn’t feel my boyfriend’s hand touching me anymore and I looked at him. His eyes glanced at the

window, the sole window in this room, in this whole apartment. For a brief second, I wondered what he was thinking. Is he dating the correct woman? Does he want to get married into this family? Can I keep him happy? For a brief second I wished we were alone.

My boyfriend walked towards my mother. He looked at the television and mentioned how the financially rich have it easy. My mother smirked a little.

“What is Hidalgo doing now?” my grandpa murmured again. I merely repeated the name and my grandpa continued on. “Sí Hidalgo... él me salvó la vida.” I patted my grandpa on the back. I wondered who this Hidalgo man was. In the disappearing memory of my grandpa, how had this man Hidalgo remained intact? Did Hidalgo also suffer from dementia? My mom raised the volume on the television a little louder. From the depths of my imagination, I could hear a low sobbing. I roused my wondering mind and realized my grandpa was weeping. My mom shouted at him, “Stop crying over a dead cousin.”

Grandpa lowly muttered one more time, “Griselda... ¿dónde está Hidalgo?” while looking at my direction. I looked away bravely.

There was a small stand where I placed my focus. On it, I focused on one of the pictures where we were all together as a family. I saw everyone, my brother, grandma, grandpa, sister, mom, and a bunch of cousins and uncles. We were all one. Even if it was so long ago, I could remember the beautiful time we shared together. It seemed time was the ultimate winner in everything. Time got to enjoy all our favorite and best moments. All our bad times, too.

“Griselda, me voy,” my boyfriend told my mom while looking at the television.

“¿Ya? ¿Tan rápido?” My mom fired back.

“Hay que matar el pollo y cocinarlo para más tarde,” he said with a smirk.

My mom gave a hearty laugh. Her front teeth shone light yellow, and for once inside this apartment, I smiled with her. My boyfriend gave her a hug, but she didn't get up from her chair. Her dark blue veins still clung to her legs.

I followed my boyfriend's actions and hugged my grandpa goodbye. He hugged me back, but I could see he was still wondering about Hidalgo. Somewhere in his head, that man is still alive. I walked over to hug my mom. We embraced quickly and let go just as quickly.

"Abuelo, me voy," my boyfriend said. My grandpa just stared at him. Looking at this brown-skinned man and maybe wondering if that was Hidalgo.

My boyfriend opened the apartment door and headed out. The stink of the garbage bags outside hit me like a sucker punch. I walked out with my back towards the entrance, facing my family. It seems the garbage odor did not bother my mom or grandpa at all. I got a quick glance of my mom just glaring at the television. My grandpa was looking straight ahead to the wall and didn't make eye contact with me.

As me and my boyfriend walked towards the metal gate, he said something that I never expected.

"I have an idea who this Hidalgo is... and where he is," he said with certainty.

I gave him an inquisitive look.

"I do," he said again while looking at the gate.

I grabbed his right hand and held it tight. Part of me was curious to know, part of me wanted to feel his gentle hold.

"He is somewhere far. And at that faraway place, he doesn't have to deal with all the shit your mom and grandpa have to deal with."

I squeezed my boyfriend's hand a little tighter. He opened the metal gate and I stepped outside into the Union City streets. He closed the gate behind me, and it made a loud clanging sound. I didn't look back and neither did he.



**Don't Worry, Be Happy**  
Abou Traore

**Untitled; 2016**

Diana Saleh

As the sun disappeared from sight  
And the clouds hid the moonlight  
As the darkness quickly drew upon  
I wondered where the time had gone.

When the tears escaped my eyes, you told me to fight,  
and within the darkness, your smile was my light.  
When monsters threatened, your words quenched the fear.  
I felt secure when you were near.  
For every time I was wronged and fled,  
Your big wrinkled hands protectively spread.

Now that you are no longer here,  
I stay counting year after year  
Wishing I'd gotten more time with you  
But knowing that wish cannot come true.



## **Surrealism**

Stephany Reyes

**Dear Dad**  
Warren Rigby

ONE OF MY FIRST MEMORIES OF YOU was when you would bounce me on your lap. I could have done that for hours, but you had to go to work. You worked as a foreman at a PVC pipe plant. I can still smell the chemical as if it were yesterday. I frequently visited you at work in the beginning. This was when you and mom were still an Item. We were poor, but you offered everything up to us and went out of your way to take care of us. Little did I know that this was all about to change.

The summer breeze was light. You came home from work earlier than usual. I was 9. I greeted you at the door as always, but you pushed me away and said, "Go to your room." I obliged and listened. I was a good boy then and would have done anything that you asked. The screaming could be heard down the block if you listened carefully, doors slammed, emotions high. I didn't understand what was happening, and you never came back.

The first night my dreams were full of nightmares and screams similar to the ones I had heard earlier that day. My mom would run in and try to console me and blindly tell me "Everything is going to be ok" but I never believed her. This continued until you came to visit me. The next time I saw you I was 12, confused and angry. I was just happy that you were standing before me. You got down on one knee and said the happy news: I was going to spend the summer with you. I remember telling all my friends at P.S 304. I acted as if summer was tomorrow but really it was another two months away.

Every day for two months, I marked the day with a red marker. I wanted to visualize the days dwindling down. The day finally arrived; you were picking me up after school. I hadn't seen your new place, yet I was so excited I could barely stand still. When the last bell rang, I rushed out of the school and to the 4 train. I ran down the stairs and under the turnstile to the train platform. My bags had been packed for three weeks, but you weren't there when I arrived. This was the first time I felt disappointment. I had heard about it from my mother--"I'm disappointed in you"--but never actually understood the meaning of the words until now. I cried



myself to sleep after you called. Something came up, you said. That summer sucked because I didn't understand why I couldn't see you. Instead of spending time with you, I was shipped off to grandma and grandpa.

Do you remember when I was thirteen? I ran away and slept on my first park bench until my friend's parents said I could crash there. The police came frequently; I spent Easter in a closet hiding from the police so they wouldn't take me back to my mom's. I constantly fought with my stepdad; I ran away because he thought he had the authority to discipline me, but that wasn't happening. Finally, we sat together as a family--well, sort of, because you weren't actually there; you were at work and on the phone.

I refused to live with my mom anymore, and you said I could come live with you. I didn't know what to expect. How do you create a relationship with someone who you barely know? I tried my hardest. I did all the chores you assigned me, mainly because you bribed me with a hundred-dollar bill. The arrangement lasted until my sixteenth birthday. We, too, had our very first major blowout, but I was at a crossroads: go back with my mother or suck it up with you. I lasted two more weeks. Before I knew it, I was standing at my best friend David's with all my belongings stuffed into two garbage bags.

The moment I went to live with David and his family, I finally understood what a loving family looked like. I hadn't experienced a sense of family since that time you and mom were still together. While we were still a family on paper, the emotional connection had been shattered into small pieces. David was the first boy that I had the courage to tell I was attracted to him. I remember it well; we were at the bowling alley. "David, I need to tell you something. I like boys and I like you." The game ended abruptly once the "I like you" part left my lips.

I moved out after being accepted to Keystone College. The whole family was there on move-in day except you. I tried to call often, but you complained the only time I called was when I needed money. But isn't that the role of a father, to help you when you needed it? Honestly this was the only relationship I understood when it came to you. Remember when I moved back in after getting suspended from school because all I did was party?

That, too, was short-lived, but you claimed you loved me no matter my sexual orientation.

Down and out, I was talking to my friend Joe on the phone. He suggested that we get fake ids and use them to sneak into a place called Avalon. This place was the old Limelight that closed several times throughout the 90's. Bet you didn't know that, did you? As we strolled in I felt larger than life; I had just snuck into the hottest club in NYC. I was sitting backwards on a barstool double fisting some jolly rancher drink when I leaned too far back and fell. Joe rushed over to help me up, the DJ announced BOGO, and I rushed to the back bar to get a refill.

That was the night that I met Brandon. God, he was hot. Joe and I spent the night at his Brooklyn apartment. Brandon and I dated off and on for six months and your calls got even more sporadic. You always claimed you didn't have it; I was like a junkie when I called you needing my monetary fix. Then there was a period of engagement; he and I we dated for 2 years. He got me a Tiffany ring. I sold it once I found out he was cheating.

Then I met Andrew and we moved to Chicago. I called you occasionally but that generally ended in you not returning my calls. Three years went by; I'm not exactly sure how many times we spoke. and I couldn't count the amount of times we spoke. I had come to terms with our relationship, if you could even call it one. As my relationship with Andrew ended, I saw this cute boy on Facebook, and I commented on his picture. We started talking. I would fly back and forth to see him. At first we found it challenging to agree on a place to meet, but finally we chose a neutral location, the Time Warner Center building. It's been a little over 6 years and I'm the happiest I have ever been.

When I think of the relationship that we could have had, I get angry! We haven't spoken in nine years; too stubborn to swallow my pride, I will likely never pick up the phone. There was that one time when mom thought it would be funny to ambush me. Well, we both know that didn't end well; I didn't speak to her for 4 months. I get that I'm not the image you dreamed of: I am gay, and I have come to terms that I am no longer my father's son. I forgive you!!!!!!!

Sincerely Yours,



**Experimental**  
Mellina Sihombing

## Dear Coronavirus

Iliana Quintanilla

Dear Coronavirus,

I hate you. Don't get me wrong, a lot of people hate you. But between us, you made a bad semester worse. You made a period worse. You made my stamina worse. You ruined my spring break. And you've made me more single, as if that's even a thing.

Back in February, I could barely keep up. Between painful dental work (don't listen to your dentist's optimism, he lies) and a loaded semester, the catch up game became, well, runner's wall. I owe so much work and now I'm stuck home, wondering when's the last time life felt this out of control.

My therapist was out of session for two weeks, claiming strep throat. When she came back, she gave me a hug, in which, I'm guessing she passed you on. Two weeks later, I'm doing laundry and boom, period dropped and you, opportunistic jerk, decided to neuter me with a bad fever. You chose that horrid moment for your just desserts. Dealt a one-week fever of chills, lung pain, dizziness, nausea and the inability to swallow, lack of taste and smell. Cramps and food that tastes like nothing: You've turned female misery into hell.

Had you not come for my lungs, I'd be tanning my pasty brown complexion to its natural golden glory. My lover won't visit me. I've thrown him about a tantrum a day. We were going somewhere good and exciting, dreams of our beach vacation turned into sputtering phlegmy cough. Months of emotional risk and work, down the drain. I almost claimed cuffing, I followed the guidelines, you made me inadvertently a prude, how dare!

But you've shown us just how selfish we can be, and that cellphones really are that kind of gross. We're spending, spending all the time, not saving any money. Or washing our hands, I mean, really! Tsk tsk tsk. You've shown us that it's all up for grabs. That

we rely on an invisible class of service, men and women that care for our bodies and minds, divvying up between those who have and have not. And just how much we take for granted; lives full of abundance, almost obscene.

I don't mind social distancing, I don't mind the quiet, I often dreamt of days of collective reflection like these. I'm happy the waters of the Hudson seem cleaner (trust me, that's almost a joke) and in my green la-la land, I'm hoping the lack of carbon emissions cleans the air. So that we can shame the air-sneezer for failing to dab, demand easier-to-open doors, free sanitizer and no more mask-shame. As an allergy sufferer, I thank you for that.

I still hate you. For my own selfish reasons. Mostly because I'm afraid we'll forget this and strangers will still try to touch other strangers and spread weird bodily fluids. You've reminded me just how lucky I am. I survived you without needing a hospital, using a lot of willpower to stave off the panic. The comment section is nicer, the politicians are collaborating, no sex scandals, communal, virtual love. Thank you for making us a little bit more elastic. I'm only sad it took such a scare. But really, just get lost, we've lost too many lives because of you. And don't come back. Stay with the bats.

In the absence of love and with a pound of salt,

Ily.



**The Hauntings**  
Paige Bishop

## **The Antidote**

Gustavo de Oliveira

THE OLD LADY'S VISIT WAS VERY SHORT. As Emily quenched her endless thirst on a new novel brought to her by one of the servants, she heard someone knocking on the front door, which hadn't occurred in over two years. Curious, Emily sent one of the servants to the door.

The old lady at the door introduced herself as Madame Natas and insisted that she had something for "the young damsel of this household" and that she was long expected by the lady of the house. Emily allowed the old lady to come in, offering her some timeworn oolong tea and biscuits, as it was close to four thirty in the afternoon.

Madame Natas told her that she was traveling from a far-off town, and that she had come all that way to fulfill a promise that was made to the Need family years ago. She confessed that the journey there was not very easy—"an old lady should know her limits." Moved by indisputable curiosity, Emily asked her the meaning of the visit and such an important promise. Natas then seized a tiny red box from one of her bag's many pockets, which contained a small bottle filled with an unknown liquid. The old traveler explained that the drink was nothing more than a remedy purchased by the girl's parents several years prior to their death, around the time Emily was just a child. She affirmed that they sought her in a moment of pure despair and that the reason why she did not come earlier was that it took a long time for her to get her hands on the antidote. Now that she had finally obtained it, she rushed as fast as possible to the Needs residency in order to honor her precious word.

See, Emily Need had an extremely rare condition which forced her into seclusion at a very young age. No one really knew how it happened or why. One night, at the age of eight, young Emily woke up her entire house with a torturous scream. As her parents entered the girl's bedroom, they found their little pearl on the floor, yelling relentlessly and begging heaven and hell for mercy. She squirmed in agony, feeling such unimaginable discomfort that she could not even put the feeling into words, her body twitching

and convulsing in a most demonic manner. The poor child would later tell Doctor Percival, the town's most trusted professional, that she felt like her skin was on fire—as if her body was being bathed in a volcano, or if thousands and thousands of ants were penetrating her epidermis (Emily's anatomy professor, Mr. J., had taught the class about the wonders of the human skin a few weeks prior to the incident).

Even though the doctor at first believed the occurrence and its symptoms were only temporary—especially due to the fact that the child's skin looked as ordinary as anyone else's—as the days went by, the girl's skin became more and more delicate, eventually turning into the source of a frequent, excruciating pain that never ceased to afflict her soul. It was only after months of constant inspection and endless visits to a myriad of different doctors that the Needs understood that their daughter's case was an untreatable one, that they were the victims of a very peculiar catastrophe, and that their daughter's fate would not ever meet the expectations they had of her.

However, the Needs were a family known for their generous and mysterious wealth. In life, Mr. and Mrs. Need did all they could to achieve the most comfort for their daughter. Using their opulent affluence, they hired a series of specialists in satin and French terry so that their daughter could have her wardrobe remodeled, also spending a small fortune on foreign products that helped the girl's skin to not blister so terribly whenever she happened to step out in the sun—which happened rarely and only when absolutely necessary. The doctors agreed that the girl should be kept indoors as much as possible— with such a delicate and sensible complexion, even the weakest rays of sun would tragically hurt the girl. Not even the Needs' glorious prosperity could protect the girl from the touch of Helios, nor the touch of strangers in the street— therefore, little Emily was to be kept inside.

Living a very different life from that of the other kids, little Emily was rigidly educated at home by several tutors, and in her free time, she explored her mother's luxuriant book collection in order to distract her mind from her dreadful circumstances. The taste of loneliness was always pungent in her mouth, as she was mostly left by herself, and her only company was that of the few



servants that lived in the family's house and her parents, who were constantly fighting over the smallest and most unimportant subjects.

In the year of Emily's gloomy fourteenth birthday, she stepped into the sun for the first time after the beginning of her misfortune—under a black umbrella, protected by a dark satin funereal gown—for God had decided to be reunited with the girl's mother. Upon his wife's death, Emily's father was no longer to be found walking about, running errands as he usually did. He befriended the many bottles of wine of the house and preferred staying secluded in his tiny office, watching the days go by. Shortly, he joined Mrs. Need in the town's graveyards—leaving little Emily the house and enough money to get by until the end of her days—and also a miserable, constant feeling of solitude.

However, little Emily was not to be little Emily forever. As time went by, the girl became a young woman, and as she unhurriedly bloomed, newer and dangerous desires began to flourish in her heart. Prior to her parents passing, Emily's seclusion was made bearable by their presence, but now, surrounded only by the even fewer servants that spent most of the day taking care of the house and running errands, she now felt more than ever loneliness embracing her soul in its unsympathetic hug. A prisoner of her condition, Emily usually spent her days distracting her mind with romantic literature. As she devoured the sweet poems and preyed on the pages of dreamy love stories, Emily embarked on heartwarming adventures, exploring the world from which she had been kept isolated from such a young age. She would dream of handsome princes and brave knights, only to be quickly reminded that she would never be able to participate in such lovable affairs. She would never be treasured as a princess, never feel the soft and tender caress of a lover, never lose her breath over the charms of a knight. Lonely and isolated in her own little fantasy world, Emily cried, craving not only human interaction, touch or just a mundane life, but longing for tangible love. She spent endless nights wishing to be worshiped, wishing to wake to the touch of a lover, crying to be one of the accompanied young ladies watched walking down the street during the sunset

every day. That was Emily's torturous routine until the day her wishes were suddenly answered.

Even though Emily was still quite confused by the old lady's visit, partly because she hadn't talked to an outsider in years, Madame Natas insisted that she had to go back to the road. She thanked the poor girl for her sweet courtesy and simply got up, told her specifically to drink the remedy at sunset that afternoon, wished her good luck and, rushing like the winds of the south, ran towards the front door and disappeared. Emily was left speechless in the living room's purple chair, holding the peculiar flask in her tiny hands. Could it be true? Could the persistence of the girl's deceased parents finally have paid off?

A little hesitant, but still very curious, Emily did just as the old lady told her. She waited for the sunset and drank the antidote as a plant anxiously waiting for rain in a desert. In the first hours she did not feel anything; however, upon getting ready to go to bed, Emily felt the rush of a myriad of frigid fingers running up and down her long, delicate body. Static and scared, it took the girl a few moments to go back to moving; however, when she did, she felt stronger somehow. *Fresher. Rougher.*

As if moved by insanity, Emily removed her satin yellow nightgown and rapidly touched the wood that covered the corner of her bedroom mirror. No pain. Ecstatic, the girl went to the bathroom and turned on the hot water, and as she submerged her hand into the scorching water of the sink, she not only felt the heat of the liquid, but was able to stand and bear it for as much as she desired. In a rush of joy, Emily once again woke her household. She enthusiastically asked them to touch her, disregarding her nakedness, closing her bright, astonished eyes and feeling their soft fingers exploring her body, feeling the magic of touch. She felt the universe opening up to her and saying, "Come on in, it is time to leave your cell." Emily could not believe that after years of an aloof routine, she would finally be able to break out of her chains. She was finally free from herself. The world was hers and she craved it immensely.

It took only a few months of exploring for Emily to meet Pierre. The girl enjoyed the taste of liberty and spent hours and hours walking around town, taking in all of what she had been

missing out on for so long. She visited bakeries and bookstores, took long walks in the park and loudly chatted at the neighbors' houses ceaselessly. But after a few weeks, that no longer satisfied her. There was yet something missing, or rather, someone.

It was one of these sudden encounters in which looks are exchanged at first, and then, in a matter of minutes, kisses are being dispersed. They met at the town square; Emily lost herself within the seductive blue of Pierre's eyes and his enigmatic, rebellious complexion. She knew that she could no longer experience life without experiencing love. She approached him and they began to talk, and he did not wait too long before asking her out on a date, "Would a magnificent lady, such as yourself, give a poor man the chance of taking her on an unforgettable date, let's say, upon sunset?" which happened on that same night.

They agreed to take things slowly; however, as Emily was new to the cool and unreliable waters of love, she at once gave herself completely to the stranger. Pierre took the girl on innumerable dates around town, helping her fulfil her thirst for the things she had desired to see for so long. He would read to her and engage her in discussions of poetry, music and love. He would take her to balls and present her with beautiful, colorful bouquets of flowers. Pierre's eyes glowed in the sun and were so enchanting that Emily would often stop listening to him in order to focus on interpreting such heavens. He would come over to Emily's house, which was no longer shy and empty, but stood graciously inviting, opened to the magnetism of her desires.

Pierre was the perfect fit for Emily. The girl relentlessly longed for his company, and he always opened his arms and took her in. Their love grew plump as the peaches of summer. They would cook together, laugh together, sleep together, and even though she meant to take things slowly at first, he quickly became part of her routine. Emily, who was once chased by loneliness, could no longer remember a time in which she did not have somebody to share her days with. It was as if Pierre was there with her, even when he was away.

The nights were no longer filled with sorrow and pain, but the two lovers spent the absence of the sun dancing and exploring each and every inch of their partners' body and soul. Pierre tried

to understand how a girl so sweet as Emily made through such horrendous times. He pitied her and tried his best to comfort her, distributing endless hugs and kisses as he believed he should, compensating her for all she missed throughout her sheltered life. He owed it to her.

But Pierre was also a man with his own issues. In time, Pierre started to feel jaded about what his life had come to. Even though he understood Emily's unending clinginess, he no longer felt as good when hugging the girl, no longer felt as powerful when penetrating her, no longer found her eyes funny and ethereal. Love had now become duty. It was no longer fun and sweet. Walking down the avenue, he could sense that he no longer felt proud walking by her side. Many questions recklessly began to torment him. Was he the only man Emily had set eyes on? How could someone who for so long desired to explore the outside world suddenly decide to settle down with someone as mundane as him? By forcing this encounter to be prolonged, was he keeping the girl from the discoveries that she for so long desired to unravel? How many more hugs or kisses did he owe her? How much longer could he pretend to laugh at her jokes and enjoy the same overcooked Sunday pasta? Was he becoming Emily's prisoner as she was once a prisoner of herself? In the morning, Pierre would wake up and stare at the girl's skinny and fragile complexion. He would admire her unconsciousness, appreciating the moments in which the responsibility of being the cornerstone of her life was no longer his, craving a way out. Would he ever have a life of his own again? And as the questions began to rise, the burning passion inside his heart became extinguished—Pierre, as the waves of the sea who come and go so quickly, soon departed from Emily's life.

Describing what was left of Emily was beyond description. Her new colorful world was now back to black and white. And there were no number of walks in the sun that warmed her soul. No bottles of Italian wine that made her forget him. No books or poems that got her distracted from the fact that she had been abandoned, left behind, ignored. There were no bright dresses, colorful flowers, expensive shoes or stranger tongues that reversed the fact that she had opened the doors of her heart to

someone and that this someone had decided to make a mess inside of it and leave her.

Her nights were longer, her days, shallow. Emily went back to her reserved routine, spending all her time dwelling on the golden memories of her short love story. Everything reminded her soul of him. Walking around the house, his scent would follow her, and as the girl unsuccessfully tried to overcome what she now realized to be an agonizing addiction, she would hear his calming voice echoing across the blue hallways of the property. She finally understood the tragic beauty of the poems she once devoured and whole-heartedly wished that such tormenting aching would be gone every time she crawled into bed, cursing the day she opened the doors of her house to receive the old lady's unsanctified visit. At night, Emily sat on her bed looking at her gloomy reflection in the mirror, reflecting on how beautifully painful love was. She realized that the worst pain was not the one felt by her skin prior to her mysterious cure, but the one that happens on the inside--the one which no doctor or antidote is able to heal.



**Going Nuts**  
Shaun Crafton

## **Refugee: A Journey**

Aarsh Chauhan

“ATTENTION! EACH MEMBER OF THE VILLAGE is hereby warned to swear their allegiance to the Party at the coronation of the Great Supreme Leader next week, or else face the wrath of being a defector to the Republic....”

These words haunt me till this frail age in my sleep, even though I now reside in a haven that provides me a little comfort to forget the horrors of my past. My story, like many other kinsmen of mine, still remains unheard to millions of ears, including those who called themselves keepers of peace after the Universal War ended. This short experience of mine from an event long past may sound strange but has reminded me to preserve a treasure so unique that it has enabled my spirit to encounter any conflicts of an unexplained might. So let me stop the clock of this blinded time and unveil the flow of burning wounds that scattered a tribe of innocents forever while the rest of the world was suffering from a long-lasting spell of rest.

During our final days in the motherland of Bod, propagandist posters were stuck at faces of each and every wall of our village. These colorful papers, unlike other elements of nature, however, had an objective of burning pride in those human families worshipped ideas of peace and gained prosperity in the valley of barren and cold mountains. I assume this rift of peace which disallowed ambitious beasts like that of our land-hungry northern neighbor of the Huan Republic to conquer, led to the series of circumstances resulting in the displacement of thousands of families from their ancestral patches of soils. That day, of all the days of my life, is the one when our motherland was to be separated from its faithful beings.

The war was at the climax. As our leaders expected, the unstoppable tide of conflict soon turned against the Bodean people. The two-year-old armed resistance, which was mild by its nature, still shook the seats of the Huan regime. Our leaders, hoping to receive the gift of assistance in return for their peaceful behavior with the superpowers of the world, knew little about the upcoming horrors that we were about to face. By the winter of

1959, the Huan dark armies of the Republic had impregnated the borders of our holy land and weremassacring every spirit that chanted the old songs of Bodean values. This left us no choice but to evacuate the ancestral soil on one cold day in March.

### **Morning of March 21st, 1959**

“CHOGYA, CHOGYA, HAVE YOU PACKED your bags yet? If not, then hurry up or else we will miss the last bus to the airport.” My mother called to me as the villagers were preparing ourselves to evacuate the area.. Unlike some of the cowardly leaders, our community had no choice but to leave the village of Tangri La as the unbroken peoples of ours intended to resist the Republic’s atrocities until they were tired from their brutal efforts. “SWORDS OF MOUNTAINS”, as my martyr father and his companions regarded the Bodeans during those hard times of brutal warfare. Little did they realize that these swordsmen were to be stabbed in the back by defenders of liberalism, who once despised the tyrannical ideology of the Republic.

After packing my bags, I went downstairs. As I descended, it came to my overly sentimental mind that this was the last time I would be climbing these wooden stairs crafted by our ancestors, who stood on these same wooden floors under harsher conditions caused by traffic of monstrous winds. Apart from clothes, I only took one item from my room before closing it for eternity...a bracelet whose beads were nourished by centuries-old sandalwood. My father, before departing for his final effort to protect the inherited pride of being a Bodean, handed me this gift. According to him, I deserved it for being a faithful son and a good brother. “Chogya, keep it safe at any cost, and do not trade it for anything, or my soul residing in these beads will get upset” were the last words of my father. What attracted me the most about this beaded arrangement was the centermost bead. Unlike the other brownish beads, this one perfectly round circle was blue in color and had what Bodean culture referred to as a “devil’s eye” in the middle. At first sight, it looked like a simple piece of art, but would later on prove its significance.



## Afternoon

THE TASK OF PACKING WAS ONGOING. Mother had instructed me and my two sisters to pack light. “Why are we just packing clothes? Won’t we need blankets and pillows, furniture, and those vessels to conduct our daily prayers?”, asked my youngest sister Dashi. “We won’t need them dear,” replied mother. “But why?. Sleeping on a rough floor will make your back problem worse.” My mother smiled but it vanished in a moment. She made her tone serious and said: “Our new house is smaller than this and that’s why we need to pack only a few things”. My middle sister Dalha, who seemed to be enjoying this episode like a curious and ambitious disciple, asked quickly: “And what will happen to the things we are leaving behind? Are we donating them to the monastery?”. A sudden silence flourished on my mother’s mouth. After a few minutes, she murmured while looking outdoors, “If there will be any...” This soft answer was followed by a thin stream of tears.

I took her aside and asked, “What’s the reason for crying, Ma?” to which she answered in my ears. Those words struck my ears with the force of a thousand rocks thrusting down towards a mountain valley. Even those whispers had nostalgic roots, the outcoming leaf appeared as of foreign nature.

I went out and sat on the stone steps for a while. I’m still not sure why I went there instead of comforting my mother who, with her pale face, was packing my sister’s luggage. My sight went toward our neighbor’s hut to the left, which was infested with utter silence. I began to wonder about the randomness of the sight. It was my friend Tsewang’s house. Remembering him, I felt like the most useless person in the village. After all, Tsewang was one of those mountain swords who attained martyrdom at a tender age. Sometimes I wish I’d been adamant about sacrificing my youthful energy in our struggle for liberation rather than getting slow death by hearing those bitter words of my mother.

## Evening

BY THIS TIME, WE WERE AT THE BUS STOP on the outskirts of the village. When my mother had locked the iron doors of our house, a rush of coldness ran through my veins. My final moments inside that place were more hurtful than punching its doors outside. All the way to the bus stop, I remained deaf and dumb, refusing to speak or hear the bickering of surrounding people.

A few moments passed, and then our bus to survival arrived. The bus stop was crowded, and we barely managed to get two seats which my mother gave to my sisters while she and I stood holding handles in one hand and luggage bags in another. The passengers remained seated while the ferocious Republican guards stood at every sideroad, eagerly waiting to pull anyone from the bus to put false accusations. The reason behind this heresy was, however, clear as the crystal waters of Mapang lake. Us being silent wasn't a blissful peace we had achieved through the normalcy of regular lives before dark times. This was the fearsome compromise we were forced to accept due to the courtesy of the Republic's poisonous rule.

It was almost sunset when our bus entered the gates of the former capital Lahas. From my sister's window, I saw that the mighty orange ball of fire was going indoors through the two open mountain gates. It seemed joyous, because the sun sitting on the chair of mountains served as a reminder of our region's past. The implicit irony about this image, nevertheless, symbolized the sunset on our existence as a nation.

## Night

AT LAST, WE REACHED THE AIRPORT IN LAHAS. The scenario was much more intense than I expected. Chaos loomed inside as thousands of survivors like us were striving to protect the future of their culture. The presence of military officials and their mechanical beasts spread fear among those who were destined to be refugees in other parts of the world. Our destination was Shergarh, capital city of Tenjiku, our neighbors to the south who

had been engulfed in diversity since the dawn of their history. This gave us a ray of our culture's survival.

After showing our tickets to the airport guards, we entered the terminal and our luggage went for a brief security check followed by a bombardment of questions by Huan customs officers.

"Reason for leaving the country?", asked the officer.

To this, my mother gruffly replied: "We are emigrating on a permanent basis."

After laughing in an offensive manner, the Huan officer asked, "How will you support yourself and your family?"

Mother took no moment to answer. "I have applied for a refugee program their government is providing." She handed some documents to him and, after inspecting the documents for a while, the officer stamped our passports. We were sitting in the waiting area when three armed officers came to the lobby. I thought they were just on a regular checkup of passengers before they board the flight.

Two bags were pulled aside from our luggage. They belonged to Dashi and Dalha. I called my mother and pointed her to the officers. Shocked, she stood up and went to one of the officers. Before she could say anything, the officer, with a heavy voice, said: "Ms. Dolma, we found forbidden items. On the charge of breaking the imperial code of possessing anti-nationalist items, they cannot board this flight until the trial. Would you please tell them to come with us?" The earth shook beneath my mother's feet and soon enough she cried out, "Those do not belong to them, they are mine.....please let them go."

Dashi and Dalha had hidden two hand-crafted flags of Bod. One thing was certain: Despite their childish nature, my sisters were as strong as my father, who had the pride of being themselves even in critical hardships. But the officer stood adamant and was trying to push my mother as she sat down, holding her daughters with a tight grip of hands. I was set to intervene when I heard, "Don't get yourself into this. If you do, I won't be able to reunite with your father in the land of nirvana." Her pleading stopped me from interfering.

The announcement for boarding was made. Our plane was at the gate. Passengers who were witnessing the scene started lining

up with their boarding passes as I stood there in a state of helplessness.

“GO, SON! LIVE YOUR LIFE!”, shouted my mother.

“I CAN’T LEAVE MY SISTERS ALONE!”, my tears spoke with bagginess.

“I AM HERE TO PROTECT THEM. GO! LEAVE THIS HELLISH REPUBLIC. YOU ARE A TOUGH SWORD OF MOUNTAIN!” She started slapping the officer, who in retaliation arrested her and seized the three bags with name tags of my mother, Dashi, and Dalha. My sisters started crying endlessly after realizing the situation’s cruel nature, whereas I took my bag and entered the jet bridge that connected the terminal with the airplane.

I boarded the plane, settled my luggage, and took my seat. I still wanted to leave the plane and unite with the family I had left behind, which only included Dashi and Dalha. The reason I excluded my mother was those obnoxious words that spoke the only language of treachery. Let me reveal the poisonous whisper that my mother delivered while answering my sweet sister’s question that afternoon, which still haunts me in my sleep disguised as the words in those damned Republic’s posters. The blunder exposed by my mother revealed that she had leaked the location of my father’s battalion to a Huan spy who threatened to assassinate me and my sisters.

Still lost in this confusion, I did not realize that the plane had landed at the destination of Shergarh. After finishing regular arrival procedures of customs and security checks, I boarded a bus to Camp 81, which according to my refugee application, was my final destination for an uncertain time.

The route from Shergarh airport to my new home was long as it took an entire day to finish my travel. It was midnight when I arrived at Camp 81. The camp was, surprisingly, a condominium complex built for newly arrived migrants from Bod. The height of this humongous building was larger than the ancient palace of Lahas; however, it appeared as an infant’s finger compared to the motherland’s mountains I’d left behind. As I arrived at the reception, the desk clerk demanded a Tenjikunian picture ID, which I had not. “Then how do I believe that you are a refugee and

not a migrant?" he asked. Still tired in mind and heart, I ended up showing the mystical bead bracelet, which my father had gifted, and told the story of its possession. This, like the magical wisdom of a holy priest, somehow convinced the receptionist to let me in, and hence, my life as a refugee commenced.



## **The Bridge to Paradise**

Shaun Crafton

**I Have a Dream**

angUnique

I have a dream  
To wake up  
Read the paper  
And not see another  
Black person's life taken  
By another homicide

To walk around outside  
With no fear in my heart  
Thoughts racing in my head  
Wondering would I make it home safe  
Or would I be lying on the corner dead

Well I guess it's bad to be  
A black person's friend  
But what can I say  
This is regular  
It will never end

Young girls starting off  
With smoking marijuana  
Switch it up to shooting in the arm  
Close your eyes  
Then you open them  
Now your clothes are off

Shouting  
Oh my gosh  
Is this real  
Should I run  
Should I stay

Better think fast  
Before you be the next  
Black slave

This is just a phase  
Trying to escape the maze

Am I just a joke to you  
You really like playing these games  
That's why they say we are all the same  
Doesn't give us a chance

You should be ashamed

Now my body is going into a rage  
And my body is boiling up with heat  
Feeling my hands shake  
Pass out on the bed  
Looking at me  
As I'm the color of my bowls  
Comparing me to crap  
I see how you feel now

The King put an end to it  
That's why they put an end to him  
All he wanted was a change  
All he had was a dream  
Bow down to Martin Luther King

The man that stood at the podium  
Speaking how he felt  
Didn't care about nothing else  
Wishing and hoping  
To be just like you

Can we all come together  
Make peace  
Hold hands  
Spread love  
It's not hard



It's not a challenge  
To get along with each other  
And stop all the madness  
But that's up to you  
Not me

All I can do is my part  
And you fill in the missing piece  
This is not a fairytale  
This is reality  
I have a dream



**In Union, There Is Strength**

Abou Traore

## Twelve Oranges

Angie Chiroque

THE ORANGE WAS NOT SATISFYING. Perhaps it was because Suzie had not brushed her teeth that morning, or perhaps because the pleasantries of life had all simply become dull.

Suzie could not recall smiling this morning. It's possible that she may have smiled at her cat, when he showered her with love and feral licks to the feet. Or she may have forgotten, or rather had no reason to smile this morning. The orange was still not satisfying. Maybe because of the breath that lingered in her mouth from last night's onions, or because of the ants she greeted on the kitchen table that morning. Not one ant or two, not three or four, not even five, six, or seven, but many. The ants were having a celebration, and it seemed they had lots of friends and family. The image crawled through her mind, and that morning she became itchy. Everything that she saw through her peripheral view became a vicious insect, obviously trying to attack her giantess.

This morning, twice, she had hidden from her brother for no other reason but to avoid interaction at such hours. First, she ran out of the bathroom and into her room, when she heard his heavy footsteps coming down the steps of the attic. The second time she hid in her living room as he walked down the main stairs. She stayed silent, even though her cat's tenderness had by now turned into a playful, yet sharp battle with Suzie's legs. It would not be until later that she noticed blood dripping from the small tear in her skin below her right knee.

The early hours dragged by, and soon Suzie was making her way to work. The morning had been clouded by rain. It was nonetheless a warm summer day and yet her heart felt the same cold it always did. The drops of rain were felt by the exterior of her clear umbrella while she remained safely dry inside. The rain fell endlessly as Suzie continued to watch it from outside the large window she sat next to at Rhonda's Real Estate Agency. It was a quiet day, as were most. Suzie was one of three employees who sat at their desks waiting for the phone to ring. It rang only once that day, but it was some guy who had dialed the wrong number. It was

a colorless job, much like what Suzie felt her life to be. It was never exciting, it never changed, just like her.

That afternoon, once work had ended, Suzie had planned to head to the market. On her walk there, Suzie saw the most peculiar thing. A girl wearing a red polka dot dress, about her age, was dancing and laughing in the rain. "Could it be drugs?" Suzie wondered. Why else would a person be dancing and laughing in the rain for? It was madness, thought Suzie, as she continued her way to the market.

The aisles of fruits and vegetables were abundant; however, Suzie had come for one thing only. She headed straight to the oranges. "Maybe these will taste better than the ones I had this morning," she thought to herself. As she extended her arm to grab the fruit, she found herself instead taking the hand of a stranger who had reached for the same exact orange.

"Oh, sorry, you can have it," said the sweet voice that belonged to the stranger as she handed the fruit to Suzie.

Suzie looked up to find the person smiling at her. The brunette stranger was the girl Suzie had seen dancing in the rain earlier on her way to the market. Her hair and dress were wet, but she did not look bothered by it. Puzzled by Suzie's lack of a response, the stranger introduced herself.

"Hi, I'm Hitomi. I tend to get a little excited over oranges. They're my favorite fruit! Here, have this one, I'm sure it's good."

"Oh, thank you," responded Suzie as her eyebrows furrowed together to form a perplexed look on her face.

"Have we met before? You look familiar."

"No, I don't think we have met before, but I saw you dancing in the rain earlier."

"Oh, well, you must think I'm crazy," Hitomi laughed, "It is kind of strange but feeling the rain fall down on you is such a magical thing to experience. Rainy days tend to make you feel sad. So, I dance in the rain to feel happy"

Suzie had never met a more open person. It was both odd and fascinating. They continued their conversation as Suzie packed the rest of her oranges in her netted produce bag and paid for them. She bought more oranges than she intended to. She listened to Hitomi speak about random things and decided she could listen

to Hitomi speak forever. Hitomi discussed the color of words and how to her the word blue itself felt yellow. And how her favorite time to look at the sun was when she was underwater. “The water distorts the sun and the sky and everything around you is quiet and distant even if just for a few seconds...” She said she was sure that moments like that are a temporary glimpse of a paradisaal afterlife. Hitomi even expressed her irrational fear of fish, but strange adoration for “kind, misunderstood creatures” such as cockroaches and rats.

Suzie could not remember any other time when she had felt like this. Sure, she must have at one point. Maybe when she was a child, though her memories from that time were very foggy. If not then, surely some other time, right? She simply could not remember, and in that moment it did not matter. It felt as if she had been showered in light. Coincidentally, the sun had come out from hiding. Suzie too wanted to run and sing and dance and love. She couldn't help wondering if this is what it felt to truly be alive. “Goodbye! It was so lovely to meet you,” said Hitomi when the time came to part.

“It was lovely to meet you too,” replied Suzie, and she meant it. Maybe it came from Hitomi's smile, maybe it came from her heart, or her kind essence. Maybe it was just her existence which was unlike anything Suzie had seen before. Hitomi radiated sunshine, and a sense of self that felt rare. Suzie wanted to feel that way, and for the short time she was with her, she did.

She walked home with her oranges as the sun began to set. There was a spring in her step, and she felt as if all was right in the world. But just as quickly as the state had come, it went away. Suzie entered her house and placed the net of oranges on the kitchen table, sat on the floor and began to cry. The oranges fell one by one beside her, and at the drop of each, Suzie cried harder. Now there was this void, this hole in her heart that she had never noticed before. She screamed for help, she had been robbed, something had been stolen. Worse, it had been ripped away from her insides. But no one was home. Not her mother, not her father, not her brother. Not even her curious feline friend could comfort her. So, Suzie simply asked the ceiling why this terrible thing had happened to her.

This was her truth. In this giant world, such good emotions could be felt. Such light could radiate. Such warmth could surround a person's heart. The feelings once believed to be mythical by Suzie were real! She had felt them. Hitomi had spread the light and love within her own character to Suzie. For a girl like Suzie, however, it could only be felt temporarily. If only she could go back to not knowing that happiness was a real thing. Life was better before she knew the truth. Now, she had had a taste of something she could never have again, and that was cruel.

If she knew meeting Hitomi would have led to such a painful and miserable epiphany, she may have never stopped to talk to her. Instead there she lay, on her kitchen floor with twelve oranges rolling around her, with no way of going back to her blissful ignorance.

The next day, soft rain once again played in the background of Suzie's morning. She stared at it as she peeled the sour orange she would be consuming for breakfast. The orange was still not satisfying.



**Lesbean**

Mellina Sihombing

## Borderless

Alexandra Velasquez

I TIED MY THICK, BROWN HAIR into a messy ponytail and threw together an outfit that consisted of a baby blue t-shirt, cargo shorts, and my most treasured hiking boots. I looked through my jewelry box and fished out the only piece of jewelry that meant anything to me. It was a silver bracelet that was part of a matching set, one I shared with my boyfriend, Cami. I rummaged through the rest of my room and stuffed my backpack with essentials including some snacks I had left atop my small corner desk, one cell phone charger, a handful of tampons, and a few changes of clothes. My phone began to vibrate and my gut indicated that I was running out of time. The screen displayed a text message from Cami that confirmed my previous thought. It detailed a list of instructions I had to follow in order to get to Cami and make it out of the city safely, and I had to do so quickly.

I had unconsciously tightened my grip on the farewell note I wrote for my parents. I pressed the note on top of my pillow and did my best to smooth out the crinkles in the paper. I had my doubts about whether my note would effectively convey the reason for my departure, how much I'd miss fresh-brewed tea during breakfast with them in the mornings, how scared I was of the future and just how much I loved them. I could not stay in a place that was bursting at the seams with corruption, blood, and violence. I wanted to find solace beyond the barricaded stone walls of this city. I craved a life without limitation, I wanted to uncover the mysteries of it all.

Cami had connections outside these city walls, thus we meticulously planned our escape for weeks. His friends were nameless and mysterious to me, yet if Cami trusted them, then so did I. I had put all of my faith in this boy whom I had known since our childhood. My mother had always said he was trouble, nevertheless trouble had a way of shaking up the old and the stagnant. I peered through the crack of my bedroom door and caught a glimpse of my father asleep in front of the living room television. The news played in the background and recounted the story of a young man who was beaten to death by a group of



policemen intending to stop his escape from the city. I immediately wondered if that would be our fate. The police had become a gang that continuously jeopardized the lives of citizens by conducting themselves violently upon the weak but determined rebels, who in turn shouted “death to the police!” while spitting on the surfaces of their riot gear as they attempted to claw their way up the city walls and onto freedom. The city was being ripped in two and my biggest fear was being swallowed up by the giant rift in between, a nobody with no future, never to be seen again.

I crept through my bedroom entrance with care and stealth, letting my body be absorbed by the shadows in our dimly lit home. I was sneaking my way past the living room and towards the front entrance when my cell phone began to vibrate violently in my pocket. I quickly ducked behind a large plant in the front entrance hallway and crouched myself into a ball, stuffing the cellphone deep into my chest in a lousy attempt to diffuse its noise. My father continued to snore, giving me the cue to proceed with my mission. I had slowly opened the front door, leaving it ajar, which was enough for my slim figure to have slithered through.

It felt like a complete mission in itself to escape the confines of my home, both physically and emotionally. I took a peek at my cell phone; the screen indicated I had missed two calls from Cami. My stomach folded into an array of twists and turns as I continuously called him back only to be met with his voicemail. I looked back at the only home I’d known, my eyes fixed on my parent’s bedroom window. I stood there for a minute and found a longing within myself to be a small girl again. I wished to be three feet tall and to have another opportunity to sneak into my mother’s side of the bed at night, just as I used to after a nightmare. This time the nightmare was a tangible, present moment in time, not a subconscious delusion that my mom could chase away with kisses and coddling.

I shook my head in a failed attempt to chase away the doubts that had broken into my mind like a thief in the night, both sudden and unwanted. Up above me, the sky had been set ablaze by fire from nearby protests. The air was thick with smoke, my lungs heaving as the panic slowly made a home inside my chest. What if Cami had been taken by the police? What if I never saw him again?

I couldn't turn back, I had an appointment with a new life. I focused on the sound of my heavy hiking boots hitting the pavement over and over again. I knew that each step brought me closer to my fantasy of him, us, a new dream, a new place. I ran past hooded citizens looting a convenience store, a teenage boy throwing a petrol bomb into the sky, and several masked men on the street. Some of them attempted to grab hold of me as I sprinted away. The masked strangers were protestors attempting to hide their identity from the police, the government, and the multiple lenses throughout the city that became the upper society's watchful eye.

Just when I felt I could no longer take another step, I toppled over a large object in my path. The cursed object sent me flying a few feet and my body skidded against the rocky terrain. Blood flowed freely from my knees, my elbows, my chin. The sudden obstruction in my path had been a singular men's hiking boot, blood splattered on the toe. Frightened but determined to stay calm, I shakily got back up and picked at the small rocks embedded in my knee while the blood trickled down to my boot. I looked around me, determined to figure out where exactly I was. There was a warehouse ahead and ruins surrounding it, yet up above when I craned my neck, I witnessed an unimaginable sight. The coordinates had not been leading me to the warehouse, but to the large wall behind it that had been unceremoniously erect for years with the intention of keeping us city dwellers in, and everyone else out. I proceeded to step in the direction of the warehouse with a sliver of hope that I would find Cami there. That's when I saw it on the ground among the rocks and rubble. The shiny silver fragment caught the setting sun's rays at the perfect moment and nearly blinded me. I could no longer tell if it was the glimmering light of the silver bracelet or the tears that had kept me from seeing straight. I didn't have to hold it up against my own to recognize that it was Cami's silver bracelet.

My emotions were a cocktail of grief, exhaustion, and uncertainty that poured over my body. It was as if the weight of a large waterfall had collapsed onto me, the bubbling of the water disintegrating my dreams in that hopeless moment. My knees had given in, leaving me on the ground, deserted and sobbing

uncontrollably. Not knowing whether Cami was dead or alive, I gritted my teeth in an attempt to avoid screaming in despair. I had begun to feel control slipping from my fingers, I felt ready to self-destruct, until the vibration of my cell phone created a sudden alertness in me. My fingers stumbled as I attempted to pull the device out of my pocket.

Illuminated by the notification on my screen, the bright light of the phone sobered me up from my drunken stupor of sadness. This time it was a different number, one I did not recognize, with a text message that offered a new set of coordinates. It was easy to see that the coordinates would eventually lead me closer to the base of the enormous wall that towered behind the warehouse. I realized that nothing could ever be the same even if I turned back around. With a head full of questions and a soul desperate for answers, I stuffed Cami's bracelet in my left pocket. Hope bubbled in the pit of my stomach as I picked up my pace and dashed towards the new coordinate location.

The sound of my hiking boots hitting the pavement became a solid drum beat, one that created a powerful echo. My teary eyes continued to distort my vision as thoughts of Cami's disappearance ravaged my brain. A mirage of his entity seemed to stand in the distance against the colossal wall, until the sound of his voice yelling my name made me realize that instead it was a miraculous reality. The tears immediately dried up from my eyes, granted me a clearer vision, and a joyful grin emerged. How Cami was alive and well boggled my mind. I had always known that boy had a will stronger than steel. Behind him stood two other boys, youths I did not recognize due to their masked faces. One of the boys had fiery red hair and the other had blue eyes that shone brilliantly amidst the dense atmosphere of smoke. The three boys were all equipped with backpacks that contained various tools and weapons including axes, petrol bombs, guns, and flares for our trip. Behind them I could see our ticket to freedom- a small fissure in the wall that was big enough for a slender bodied person to escape through.

Cami screamed my name and desperately waved his hands, motioning me to run faster. I thought he was simply excited to see me safe and well until I glanced behind me. A group of policemen

in bulky riot gear sprinted towards us, waving their clubs and hollering for us to stop or face the wrath of their violence. My eyes darted from Cami, to the boys, to the small break in the wall that guaranteed a surefire escape from this hellish, barricaded city. I could see that this weakness in the base of the wall shot up from the open and jagged fissure to the middle of the monstrous wall in the shape of a faint line as thin as a strand of hair. With the police still a distance behind me yet gaining quickly on my tail, I made it to the opening of the small fissure. There was no time to second guess myself now. The masked red-headed boy slipped through the fissure and made it to the unknown exterior. The boy with the bright blue eyes was next. He hastily removed his heavy backpack and motioned for us to slip his and the other boy's bag through the fissure after he had made it through to the other side. Cami saw the wild expression that had emerged in my eyes. An idea dawned on me that could save not only my soul, but everyone's in this city.

With haste, I removed an axe from the strange boy's backpack and struck the wall with all my might at its weakest point, the small crack that a second ago was my door to freedom. Small bits of rubble fell from the wall, the crack widening. Cami quickly caught on to my idea without either of us saying a word, motioned me to step back, and prepared to unload a clip full of bullets onto the wall. A small rumble bellowed out from the wall; it had begun to split even further. The boy with the blue eyes lit a flare that soared into the sky and formed a bright signal that cleared the fog of smoke and revealed our location to other rebels. The police were closer than ever, and they too had begun to use their weapons. The boy with the blue eyes had already slipped through the ever-widening crack in the wall, while Cami and I ducked behind the tiny mountain of backpacks that rested by our feet as bullets from the police ricocheted off the wall.

This only made the wall more feeble and shaky as larger rocks began to tumble from its massive presence that loomed over us. In the distance, an enormous number of protestors were emerging on the horizon. Petrol bombs flew over our heads and crashed onto the magnificent and oppressive force that was this century-old wall. The police were vastly outnumbered. Soon, they were devoured by the massive wave of rebels that took control over their

own fate for the first time in this city's history. Blood stained the ground as the police and the public clashed in a fight for freedom. Cami and I remained ducked behind the backpacks until we felt the roaring presence of an earthquake underneath our bodies. The wall was weakened beyond repair, its continuous rumbling warning the people beneath its shadow to scatter quickly or be crushed by its crumbling structure. In waves, both the police and rebels alike made a dash for safety. Cami took hold of my hand and pulled me up from the ground with such force that I felt I had broken my arm. We ran until our leg muscles convulsed with exhaustion. No sooner had we made it a safe distance, the wall loudly collapsed and left nothing more than a thick cloud of dust and a rubble of rocks.

The city, for the first time in our lives, was open and borderless. I looked at Cami's eyes, which were lit ablaze with pure happiness as he scanned the sky and found no wall in sight. The rebels and the police, too, had begun to see a clear sky unobscured by the monumental symbol of oppression that the wall once represented. Tears rolled down my cheeks that were caked with dust. I was at a loss for words at the beauty that stretched out before me. The rebel boys that reached the other side of the wall waved to Cami and me from a distance, whistling and hollering in pure delight. I reached into my left pocket and pulled out Cami's bracelet, which had remained in one piece and shone vividly underneath the rays of the sun. Cami held my hand and we cradled the bracelet between our palms. Protestors and rebels in the background cheered and hugged one another, some mourned the loss of fellow comrades, others stood in confusion at the taste of newfound freedom. The city belonged to nobody, yet at the same time it was ours.



**Undisturbed**  
Kelsey Cartagena

**This One Is for You**

Diana Gomes

This is for helping me put myself back together, but for tearing me apart all over again.

This is for giving me hope, but never enough to make me believe it.

This is for making me feel like I was enough, but never enough for you.

This is for teaching me how to smile again, but never knowing if it was real or not.

This is for giving me something to live for but that very reason is a great reason to die.

This is for making me feel beautiful, but never enough to keep your attention.

This is for being my best friend, but never more than that.

This is for always answering my calls, but leaving when I needed you the most.

This is for always keeping me company, but making me feel more alone than I already am.

This is for always warning me but someone should have warned me about you.

This is for you, but like always you already knew that.

**Ruse of the Roost**  
**A Sequel to Gabriel Garcia Marquez's "A Very Old Man**  
**with Enormous Wings"**

Thomas Chong

A WAVE OF HEAT ENGULFED JEREMY as he stepped out from the PATH train staircase into the Jersey City air. He hated his routine three block walk home during the late night because he felt he was constantly being harassed by the homeless for booze money. Though he was able to make it past most of them, there was one elderly man whose gaze he had been drawn to since their first exchange, where he was the one being made an offer. Ever since, a swig from what seemed like the same bottle of wine was offered to Jeremy by the grey-haired balding man, and was denied repeatedly. There were no words ever spoken, just the motion of hands, and nods of acknowledgement. Though Jeremy would often ignore other panhandlers and beggars, he would never miss a chance to take part in this exchange. Tonight, Jeremy was filled with a curiosity that pushed him past the sentry of other panhandlers to the miser of the strip. Jeremy approached his balding senior where he sat covered in a down blanket. As Jeremy grew closer, a hand clutching a bottle of wine protruded from the blanket in offering. This time instead of denying it, Jeremy merely gazed at the elderly man.

"Hey. What's going on man?" Jeremy said. Feathers flew every about as the elderly man shook beneath his blanket, hand still outstretched.

"What's your name?" Jeremy asked in a more elevated tone.

"What are you bothering my angel for?" a Spanish lady said as she walked over to them, detangling the chained cross she wore from the mouth of the bag she carried over her shoulders.

"Oh, his name's Angel? Your name's Angel?" Jeremy said to the two of them. The woman took a gulp from the bottle the elderly man was holding, and gave it back to the man.

"No," said the lady. "I don't know his name. I'm just saying that he is my angel."

Jeremy screwed up his face. The lady noticed and said, "You don't see his wings? They're right there."



“Uh,” Jeremy said, raising an eyebrow and gazing between the lady and the old man. “I just see an old man in a blanket, but if you see wings, then that’s cool, too.”

“It’s probably the wine,” the lady said in contemplation.

“Yeah. You may have had a little bit too much to drink,” Jeremy said.

“No, I’m saying that you should have some wine,” the lady said. Jeremy gazed back at the old man who was holding out the bottle towards him, sitting on his mound of feathers.

*Feathers.* Jeremy looked closer at the blanket that covered the man. It was bulky and lumpy in ways that made no sense, since the old man’s face was too sallow to indicate that he was big.

Jeremy was so enthralled with the examination of the elderly man that he did not realize he was reaching his hand out for the bottle. When he noticed, he thought to pull his hand back, but instead grabbed the bottle. It felt light in his hand, yet Jeremy could sense that it was nowhere near empty. Jeremy sniffed the bottle before wiping the rim of the bottle with his shirt and taking a swig. He paused in wait for the burn, but there was none, just warmth.

As the warmth coursed through him, light seemed to build from where the old man was sitting.

Jeremy stepped back and watched as the blanket of the old man rustled. This time he saw that it was just the blanket that moved and not the old man, and he was able to see that the blanket was no blanket at all.

“Holy shit!” Jeremy cried. “They really are wings. I can see them. What is in this bottle?” He looked to the old lady, but she had gone. Jeremy looked back towards the old man with wings, but he had also vanished. Jeremy stood there stunned for a minute before looking down at the bottle that felt empty in his hands suddenly. He turned it upside down but no liquid came out. He held it up to examine it within the light of the moon and confirmed that the bottle was empty, but also had a diamond-like shine to it.

**A New Kind of Love**

Sadra Munir

There are no birds chirping.  
There are no dates being attended.  
There are no anniversary dinners.  
Yet, I feel at home.

There are no paragraphs of adoration being written.  
There are no friends making comments on how we reached our  
“goals”,  
There are no amiable roles we play.  
Yet, I feel at peace.

There's not a day that passes by where we don't argue.  
There's not a day that passes by where we don't call each other  
names.

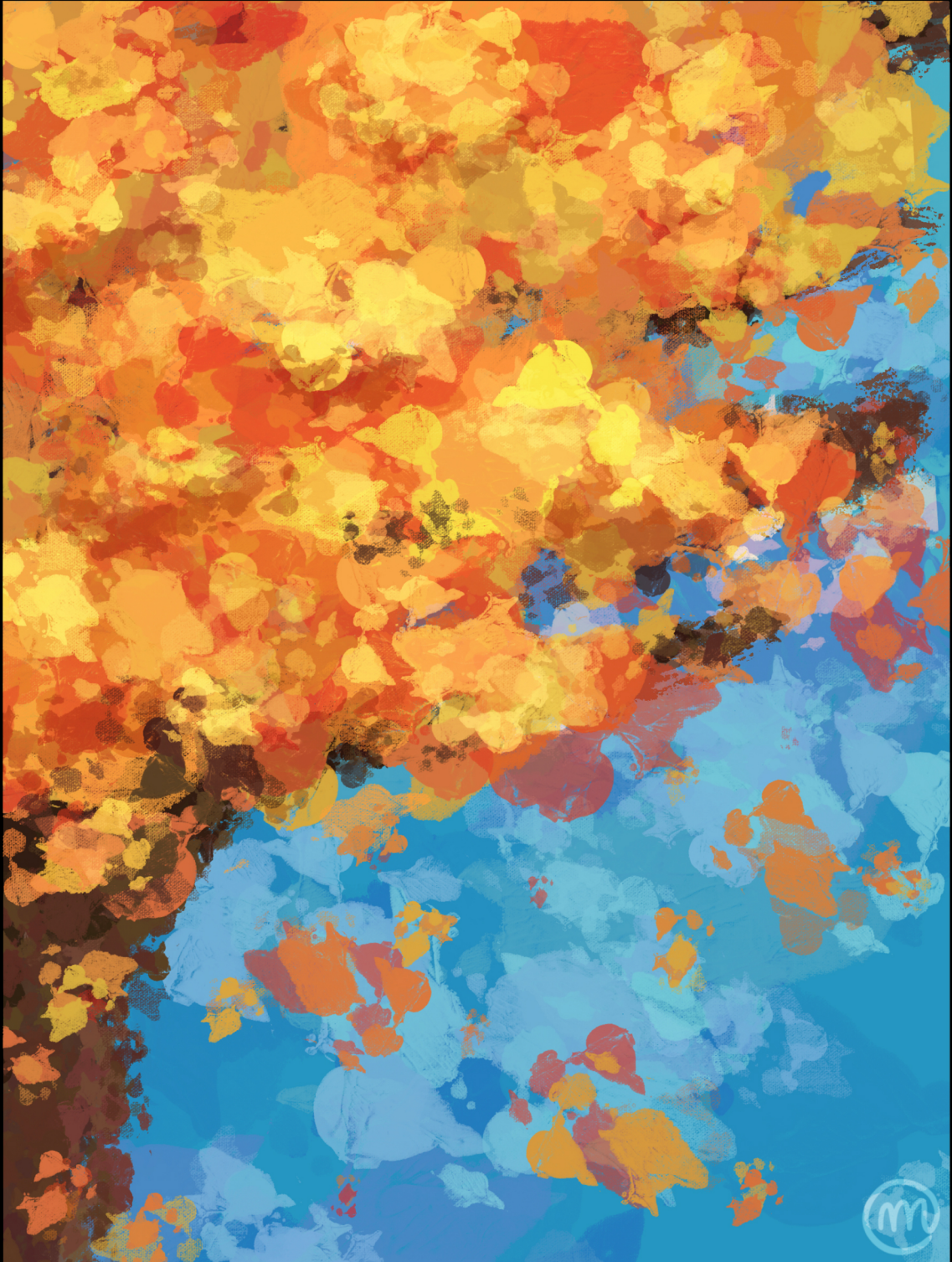
At times you are my dark place,  
Other times you are my blissful one.

You've seen it all.  
You've seen my 3 a.m. breakdowns,  
You've seen my 5 p.m. food devours,  
You've seen me happy,  
You've seen me sad.

As toxic as you may be,  
You are me.  
As I step in front of the mirror,  
I'm still learning to love your imperfections.

There is no “couples' therapy” that can fix us,  
Only love can.

So, I've decided to pack my bags and move into another town.  
A town so far from where we live.  
A town that promotes nothing but positivity and love—  
Self-Love.  
A New Kind of Love.



2020