

Crossroads



Art and literature by the students at
Hudson County Community College

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Art and literature by students at Hudson
County Community College

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Call of the Wild

Æesc Lēah

Feeding urgencies
Reflecting consequences
On facing fears
On staying still
Deserving of space
Deserving to showcase
Because what's inside
Will never die
So it's the call of the wild
Sacral fire ignites
Fresh set of eyes
A brand new life

Touch

Abigail Rooney

“ALAN, WHAT TIME IS IT?” Melanie’s words sync to the sound of her front door shutting behind her as she enters her home from a long day’s work. The click of the lock soon follows while she makes her way to the kitchen, the fridge opening automatically. Swiftly, she reaches inside where she pulls out a bottle of water. She screws off the cap, and the male voice she has become so familiar with echoes through the house.

“The time is-...six thirty-seven pm.”

The automated line of dialogue forces a huff out of the now visibly annoyed woman. “A bit later than I would’ve wanted to be home-” she murmurs, taking a swig from her water, beginning to screw the cap back on, speaking now aloud: “-and what is the rest of the day looking like, Alan?”

There is a moment of silence before, once again, words fill the studio apartment. “Your package from Aupgrades is set to arrive at seven forty p.m. You also have your date at eight p.m.”

Melanie looks up towards the corner of her kitchen ceiling, her gaze falling upon the speaker there. A sigh departs from her, a slight smile following “Thank you, Alan.”

“You’re welcome, Melanie.”

Placing her bottle on the table, Melanie goes back to the fridge, listing a variety of ingredients to herself: asparagus, butter, chicken cutlet, etc. While she does so, the fridge opens on its own once more. She begins to gather what is needed, filling her arms with a variety of different goods. For a moment she seems at an impasse, beginning to sift through the contents of her fridge with a progressively confused expression, eventually, she questions, “Alan, where did I put the mushrooms?”

“The mushrooms can be located in the bottom left drawer, Melanie.”

For a second she hesitates, she swears she just looked there but low and behold, upon a second glance, there they are. She must have not seen them past the head of lettuce. Laughing, she pulls them out. “Thank you, Alan, sorry for bothering you.”

“You are welcome, Melanie.”

Finished with her scavenging, she makes her way to the stove, the tablet screen activating as she sets her ingredients down on the counter. It already opened to the recipe she was looking at this morning when deciding what to cook for her date. How helpful. However, upon it turning on, she cannot help but catch a glimpse of her reflection against the black screen moments before it transitions to the bright website the meal was on. As the image settles, she hones in on her eyes; they were just so hideous. Whether it be the dark circles beneath them or the constant red tint due to the constant irritation they endure from work, they truly were something to feel self-conscious about. Though, it is not like she expected anything less. It is simply the price she pays; wearing that damnable headgear all day was bound to ruin her eyes. It is also probably the reason for her ceaseless migraines. Sometimes, she wishes she never entered the field of augmented reality; on the other hand, it pays off when it comes to the green in her pockets. Honestly, if she did not have this job, her date tonight would not be happening.

Finally, she shakes off the spiral of thoughts invading her mind and refocuses on preparing her ever-so fancy meal. After all, time is ticking. She cooks, and her eyes stay glued to the screen before her. It has become almost second nature to do physical work while having her eyes fixated to a device. Twenty plus years of online education plus another seven in the AR workforce will do that to you.

The smell of a rich marsala sauce fills the air, followed by another scent of roasted asparagus from the oven: the meal is prepared to the point she can now be a tad more hands-off. With that, she steps away, finally exiting the kitchen all while giving the stove instructions to set a timer for twenty minutes, Melanie goes to her couch. Sitting and letting herself sink into the cushions, she taps the side of her glasses as the sight of her emails takes hold of her lens.

“Scroll, scroll, scroll-” she repeats to herself, and the spectacles obey, going further down her list of emails. After about five of these commands, she is greeted finally by what she wanted. “Stop.”

The order confirmation from Aupgrades, once more at the tap of her glasses, the email opens, revealing the tracking log. Alan was right, as he always is: the drone would be dropping off her delivery any moment. She would have preferred it to arrive around half an hour before her date, but she could deal with the ten-minute delay. Ideally, it will not be too difficult to set up. The amount of money and preparation she dumped into tonight

being perfect was enough of a reason to be upset if anything went wrong. She even upgraded to a far more expensive Cloud plan; she never really needed that much storage before. Now that she is taking this step in her life, she wanted to be able to document as much of it as possible. The idea of finally being able to come home and for someone else to be there. To see someone speak to her, real lips moving as words come out. To touch, to be able to touch again without always having to have the underlying knowledge that it is not real, or rather, an augmented image tricking her mind through the optics of a headset is a relief she longed for. It feels all too exciting. No longer does she have to fear being sick, if she left her pod at the same time as someone else at work, for that fear has become so deeply subconscious that she does not even notice the mask on her face, tucked beneath her chin.

“Melanie, your package from Aupgrades has arrived. It is in front of the door as requested in your drop-off notes.” Alan echoes through the apartment.

Immediately, she jumps up from the comfort of her seat. She quickly makes her way to the front door and it opens as she approaches. The large, six-foot-tall box is not hard to miss. Its looming size does not stop her from beginning to lug it inside with an eagerness she has not felt in years. Once it is finally brought far enough indoors, she checks the time: seven forty-three. Seventeen minutes. She needs the download to be quick.

She opens the box, the cardboard undoing itself as it falls onto her rug. She steps back, taking in the sight in front of her. The body was perfect. A brunette, the hair was short but neatly styled, and those gorgeous blue eyes just as she requested. The clothes were mundane, a white dress shirt with complementary black dress pants. Anything more and financial recovery would have been borderline impossible.

She quickly digs through her pocket, pulling out a small device similar to a USB drive as she moves behind the body. She takes a moment to feel the synthetic skin on the back of its neck, and it felt so real that it nearly brings her to tears. Finally, she finds the plug-in. She does not hesitate to insert the drive. A small chime goes off from the body, indicating the download has begun. With that, she giggles, the excitement practically bubbling out of her as she returns to the kitchen. Plating the food and setting the table. That is until another chime becomes audible from the living room.

She rushes, putting the last finishing touches on the table decor before heading back to the male form in front of the couch.

No longer does it stand idly as its eyes roam its surroundings before landing on her. The eye contact is strange and real. Melanie inhales sharply, gathering herself, and then finally speaks: "Alan, what time is it?"

The man in her living room stares at her for a moment before responding, mouth moving with each syllable. "The time is...eight-thirty."

Her eyes water as a melancholic smile forms on her lips. "Thank you, Alan. Now why don't you come sit down for dinner? I made us my favorite."



Untitled
Hamza Siyam



Untitled

Melissa Vasquez

Dreams to Follow

Marlenne E. Andalia

Taking a step forward
Explore new horizons
Take a breath
Just stay calm
Do not forget your inner child
And the dreams that you had
Be yourself and follow your dream
Take another step
And you are almost there
Just follow your dream
Create a better you and be happy.

Seventh Circle of Hell

Sebastian Garcia

“SHIT,” YOU YELL WHEN you get up, realizing that you must have snoozed your phone’s alarm a few more times than you should have, and it happened to be on this very important morning with a very important meeting with very important people. No worries, you think, you can still make it on time.

No time to shower, maybe some time to brush your teeth, definitely enough time to put clothes on. You throw on the first pair of jeans you find on the floor of your room, but it’s okay since it has no offensive odor. You find a clean black t-shirt from your dresser (because grabbing one from the floor would be disgusting) and you grab your company sweater you hung up on the top corner of the door the day before. Yes, it’s an important day and normal people might expect you to dress a bit more formal, but you work at Streamify, a revolutionizing cutting-edge cloud-based product that streamlines and synergizes small business operations, which means absolutely nothing to you or anyone you tell about it. There no one cares about dress code except salespeople who have to wine and dine other people in person.

Your chest feels a bit tight and a light glisten of sweat forms on your forehead as you frantically get ready, looking for your laptop, your bag, your water bottle, your wallet, keys, and phone. You don’t like presenting much; you can do it if you had to yet prefer to avoid it, and you feel your stomach churning. You planned to wake up earlier to prepare for this meeting that wasn’t worth thinking about yesterday, but fuck it, you can practice on the subway.

You look at your phone. There is exactly 37 minutes to get to the office, which should be enough, but sometimes the MTA loves to screw you over by changing local routes to express routes and vice versa, or changing lines completely, especially during construction and repair which has been happening frequently. You’re not sure how the Subway Gods will act today. Typically, 37

minutes should be more than enough to get to the office, get a quick coffee, and be on time for the meeting. Whoever decided to schedule 9am meetings on a Friday deserves a special place in the seventh circle of Hell, you think.

If we look at the customer lifetime value... you start going over in your head as you exit your fourth-floor walkup. You almost trip on your doormat on the way out so you restart the thought.

If we look at the customer lifetime value between our basic plan customers and our premium plan customers, there's a clear difference, but it's not right to say it's because the premium product; there's no proof to say it's causal... Okay good, you think to yourself, hoping to convince the C-suite that they're burning cash by offering promotions for customers to upgrade to the premium product (aptly named Premium Plus) from the basic product (named Advantage Plus for some reason. You continue practicing in your head as you make it to the street and start your 7-minute walk to the subway station.

*We earn on average 60% more for premium customers during their lifetime and...*Shit, you approach the turnstile and notice that the train is already at the platform. You frantically pull your Metrocard from your wallet and swipe, but the small prompt begs you to swipe again. So you do.

Please swipe again.

Please swipe again.

You wipe your card on your sweater, hoping it would help.

Please swipe again.

You search your wallet again for any other forgotten Metrocards that might show some sign of life. You find one behind some old receipts and old business cards from unimportant people, and you pray and swipe.

Click.

The turnstile opens and your right thigh thrusts through it with great force.

You approach the train as its closing bell rings and throw your arm between the doors as they close, so now your arm is stuck between those doors. Most passengers are annoyed, but one tries to pry the doors open for you. You've fought this battle many times and know you can't win, so you just stare at the conductor, who's

shaking her head. You shrug. The closing bell dings again, the doors open just enough to allow you to retrieve your arm, and they close shut. The train rolls away. You stare at the prompt above you. It flashes that the next train is 6 minutes away, then immediately flashes that it is delayed. You open your phone in a panic, tap the Gmail icon and start composing an email.

Hey y'all

I'm going to be a bit late to the meeting. Probably 5-10 minutes. Can we start at 9:15 to be safe?

You hit send, catastrophizing the outcome in your head. Your career is over, you'll be fired immediately, and there won't be any other place that will hire you. You're not supposed to be at meetings with these people, you say to yourself. You just want to be a lowly analyst doing analyst things, staring at the computer most of the time, not having to bullshit with other people in meetings. Unfortunately, your shitty boss decided to throw this one at you without any warning, and you have to do it, and no one will call him out on anything because he's best friends with some of the C-suite, so you have to suck it up. You think it must be nice to be a Vice President, do no tangible work and bark orders, and get paid stupid amounts of money. Who knows, maybe that will become your motivation.

You get back to practicing for the meeting while waiting for the next train: If we look at the customer- Goddammit, your stomach grumbles, and you suddenly realize the incredible hunger in you. You're also frustrated, which makes the hunger worse. Typically, you'd have a bagel or oatmeal or at least some sugary cereal that's terrible for your health, but not today. You needed to catch the train that had just left you.

You stare at the prompt above showing the time of the next train. You swear it's been 5 minutes at least, and the prompt still shows that the train is delayed. You fixate on the prompt, hoping to somehow manifest powers to control the subway network.

You start to feel the coolness of the sweat patches on your shirt. Calling in sick might've worked if you hadn't sent that first email. Mental health days are important to the company after all, or at least that's what they tell you. You sort of just stand there and exist, powerless. If only you didn't snooze your alarms, or if only a

fire broke out in your apartment to wake you up.

You look back up at the prompt, and after what seems like hours it flashes that the next train arrives in 3 minutes. You sense the frustration from the crowd starting to release around you. You merely wait, going over your presentation in your head.

When the train finally arrives, you graciously allow the riders to exit first before you rush in. You wish you could take a seat but it's rush hour so fuck you, you're going to stand up for most of the ride and hold on to the poles that hundreds of people have touched today. You hope they thoroughly cleaned this train.

If we look at the customer lifetime value... The train stops suddenly, nearly sending you smacking into the pole in front of you.

Ladies and gentlemen, we are being held here by the train dispatcher. We will be moving shortly. Thank you for your patience.

You curse the Subway Gods on this day for forsaking you. You say screw it, you're not going to practice anymore since you keep getting interrupted, so you'll get there when you get there and you'll wing it. You're convinced no one else at the meeting had the time to prepare anyway, let alone care about what you have to say.

The train rolls into your stop at 9:10 and you sprint once the doors open, your hair damp and bouncing, some strands sticking to your forehead, and your shirt splotchy with sweat. You really need to get in better shape, you think to yourself, and you promise you'll start doing more cardio this coming Monday.

You reach the building at 9:16. You hop on the elevator and take a deep breath. This is the most relaxed you've felt so far. You check your phone while in the elevator and see a reply to the email you sent. You must have missed the notification while running for your life.

let's push to next week. dan and jason can't make it
carlos can you do a writeup and share with us? we'll
go over it next week. thanks

You stare at your phone, unsure what to feel. You see the calendar invite for the meeting next week, and a message notification from your shitty boss that says to start working on the writeup.

The elevator dings and stops on your floor. The doors open, you take a deep breath, and you press the lobby button because you decide to grab some breakfast.



Untitled

Melissa Vasquez



Untitled

Michael Maravillas

Wilma
Natalie Akel

The Diaz women never shook
Even when their strength was tested
For they knew how to grow.

Singular flowers interwoven
Into the most magnificent bouquet

With mango-scented petals,
They wrapped each other in the most delicate of blankets.
The breeze could not shake the sisters.

Even in the darkest night,
When the stems don't know
Who is behind them
They feel the presence
Of their other selves
Alongside them.

Even in the darkest night,
They still smell the mango
Of the petal embracing them
In all their dreams of you.

(out of) Control

Rebecca Burghardt

JANIS NOTICED THINGS were getting bad again. Each time she entered a room she was persuaded to knock on the hard wood of the doorframe thrice. This was something that was of normalcy during her freshman year of high school, but now, as a sophomore in college, intrusive thoughts followed by compulsions became quite foreign to her, only slightly resurfacing during particularly stressful times. Nothing had changed drastically in her life other than the color of her bedroom walls: once a flat, dull beige, now a soft slate color. With no scapegoat, Janis was left frustrated with her mind's recidivism and cherry red knuckles.

The intrusive thoughts that drive her compulsions exist on a continuum. Janis is either in control of whether she misses the subway or not, or if her cat dies. They tell her that if she fails to be subservient, that something bad will happen. Typically, they relate to whatever it is that she may be doing at the time. In high school, staying complicit meant passing. She did pass all her exams, and though she studied for hours on end, Janis never failed to ignore the unwritten rule drilled into her head.

Zoe, a friend of Janis' from high school, was visiting the city for a week during the summer Janis' thoughts returned. The old friend reached out via text message asking for a reunion. Initially, Janis was hesitant to respond, embarrassed by her mental state. Nonetheless, she replied and made concrete plans with the old friend. The friendly dinner date that had been arranged was set for Tuesday night, which was an odd placement for a night out, although it was the only day that worked for them. On top of that, Zoe was set to head home Wednesday morning, leaving no room for negotiation.

Zoe and Janis hadn't had a dinner date in what seemed like forever. They exchanged a few text messages every so often, and only called when one of them had a burning desire to complain about someone the person on the other line had never even met.

They had attended grade school together, yet hadn't formed an alliance until junior year of high school. The pair met at the town's public library and exchanged cell-phone numbers upon realizing that the books they were borrowing were for the same class project. From that day on, the two of them became nearly inseparable and lamented the time they could've spent together had they buddied up earlier.

Perhaps the reasoning as to why it took so long to build a friendship was due to differences in vanity. Zoe was always seemingly put together. When they stood next to each other, Zoe left her counterpart looking like a bum or a child she was babysitting (it depended on the day.) Her hair and makeup were always done, leaving her face free of pores and perfectly framed by her kinky dark brown hair. Her slim nailbeds were painted a light hue of pink, complementing her melanin-filled skin. She wore a different version of the same polished outfit nearly every day, switching the order in which she paired her cotton skirts and silk blouses as a means of tricking the public eye into thinking she had an infinite wardrobe.

Janis and Zoe spent the summer of their junior year talking about their aspirations. Zoe wanted to be a chemical engineer and Janis wanted to major in art history, though she was unsure of what career she'd like to pursue. They spent what seemed to be an endless amount of hours googling colleges they had overheard the popular kids talk about. Schools like Bates University, Birch Academy, and Brassford College only made a dent in their computer's search history.

They applied to a handful of schools, helping each other navigate the College Board's maze of a website along the way. A few six-packs of Pabst Blue Ribbon also aided in the process, but they didn't tell their parents that. The weeks that they spent molding and submitting applications were some of the best times they spent together.

Janis ended up settling on Spektor Academy in Manhattan, and Zoe on the Jefferson School of Science and Technology in Rhode Island. which happens to be a 45-minute drive from her parents' house.

They made plans to meet at a bar that had recently opened

downtown at around 6 p.m. It was a few blocks away from the place Janis was renting on Corbin Ave and about the same distance from the hotel Zoe was staying at. Janis would be cutting it close being that she gets out of her 9-5 quite a bit after 5, although she figured she'd be able to manage- she always did.

She left her job at around 5:15 that Tuesday evening, which was a record. She hadn't left that early since Christmas Eve of 2014.

Janis works at an art gallery uptown as a curator's assistant. Her boss, the curator, is feeble and mild. He's a first-generation immigrant from Poland, said he came to the states because his father had told him it was the way to make it big. Apparently being the curator for a small art gallery that smelled of moth balls and frankincense was his idea of "making it big." Regardless, he was understanding, and wasn't annoyed with her newfound grand entrances and exits. She even loved the smell of Frankincense, though she worried that the carcinogens that exist within the incense sticks would cause headaches.

Her day at work was a quiet one, they usually are. The gallery is small and filled to the brim with pieces old and new. It looked more like an oddities exhibition or a flea market, but the curator was happy and who was she to complain? Much of the time spent there was filled with the curator's telling of stories from his childhood, he never asked much about his assistant's personal life, though she liked that.

After listening to him babble on about his mother, he bid her a good rest of her evening. Janis grabbed her chartreuse cotton tote-bag left resting in the corner of a back room and wished the curator a goodnight. When she reached the foyer of the gallery, Janis paid her respects to the doorframe, turning to see if the curator was peeking out from anywhere watching- he wasn't. On this particular occasion her three knocks promised her that she'd make it to the bar on time.

She walked home from work with headphones in. Sometimes she enjoyed people-watching, other times she preferred to listen to music and dissolve into the gum-stained sidewalks. She made it home from work at around 5:30 accompanied by Amy Winehouse. Left with half an hour to get ready, there was no time

to shower. Her clothes were wrinkled and moist with sweat caused by the dank environment of the gallery. She stripped from her sticky black turtleneck cringing when she saw the white deodorant stains that decorated the armpits. Shrugging, she tossed it in the corner along with her floral midi skirt.

Selecting an outfit for the night felt like some grandiose activity. Janis hadn't seen Zoe in years, so naturally she wanted to wear something to show her friend that her taste had since evolved from her high school days, yet she also wanted to remain herself. Zoe was used to seeing her in sweats and various band t-shirts taken from her father's closet. Now, she wore jeans and various band t-shirts. Quite the upgrade. The sweats have since retired and have made a home intermingled with her pajamas. She settled on a pair of light-wash Levi's with holes in the knees and a Rage Against the Machine t-shirt layered with a cream-colored cable knit cardigan. Casual, but she figured the cardigan would shroud her with an essence of sophistication. Taking a quick glance in the mirror, the outfit had received the golden seal of approval.

Her hair was flat and looked greasy in the light. She plucked a black rubber band from her wrist and threw her pasta-like auburn hair into a lazy topknot.

The night before, she set an alarm on her phone for 5:45, warning her that she had a mere five minutes to make it out the door if she wanted to get to the bar in a timely manner. As soon as she started to walk out of her bedroom, the alarm rang in harmony with her knocking on the doorframe. Janis scrambled to her purse in order to get to her phone so she could shut the annoying thing up.

With the alarm no longer blaring and her body fully clothed, she decided to check her phone for any messages from Zoe. She had a multitude of Facebook notifications, and three texts from Zoe and they read as follows:

hey!

leaving in 10 minutes

leaving now!

She replied to the texts and ignored the Facebook notifications.

'Why the fuck do I even have Facebook?' Janis thought.

‘I hate Mark Zuckerberg.’

Replying late to text messages and forgetting to delete apps that she didn’t use were her special skills. The volume on her phone was always kept low, so it was easy for texts and calls to go unanswered for hours. Janis apologized for the late response and promised Zoe she’d be at the bar at exactly 6, though it was nearing 5:50 already.

Her rituals throughout the day harshly whispered that she’d make it to the bar on time so long as she followed through, so why was she still worried?

With a little more than 10 minutes on her side, Janis frantically went to use the bathroom. Her bladder wasn’t even close to full, but she’d rather abuse this doorframe than the one at the bar. She thought of moments like these as precautionary pees.

At that point, much of her thoughts revolved around meeting Zoe on time or how successful their reminiscing would be. Her fear of losing control despite the power that she convinced herself to have was a paradox she’d never be able to wrap her mind around.

After a brief intermission in the bathroom, she put a pair of black sneakers on. They made her outfit go from acceptably casual to drab. There was no time left to play dress-up, so instead she put on a pair of thick gold hoop earrings left resting on a side table next to the entrance to her apartment in hopes they’d offset the sneakers.

“Things like that cancel out”, she reminded herself.

“It’s PEMDAS.”

Janis was as put together as she was going to get, and at risk of finding something about her presentation that needed fixing she told herself not to look at her reflection in any mirrors or windows until she was out of the building and on the way to the bar.

As she bent down to pick up her purse, her phone started to ring. She presumed it was Zoe, so she didn’t pay much attention to the buzzing because she would call her back as soon as she headed out the door. With the purse in her left hand and her keys in the right, Janis thought she could finally get going.

She thought wrong.

Her phone began to sound again as she was half-way out the door and midway through with her knocking. She had hit snooze instead of turning her alarm off, causing it to go off twice. This startled her a bit, as she was hyper fixated on the task of knocking on the doorframe. Because she was startled, her rhythm had completely disappeared, and she was now outside of her apartment door convinced the dinner with Zoe was screwed.

Janis was absolutely crushed.

In her rational mind, she knew the fate of tonight didn't lie in whether she knocked on each and every doorframe she came in contact with, but in her emotional mind she believed the opposite.

Blood started rushing towards her head, sweat pouring out of her palms, and her throat began to constrict. This of course wasn't the first time that this happened to her, although each time felt like it.

Her neighbor opened his apartment door running to the front door to grab his Uber Eats delivery, snapping her out of a panic.

"Shit, it's five minutes to 6:00," she audibly sighed.

Surely if Zoe didn't hate her because of her failure to knock, she'd hate her for ignoring her calls and for running late. Throwing the phone into her bag, Janis left her apartment and headed to the bar. Frustrated by the turn of events and with herself, she nearly fell down the stairs.

She'd made it so far in becoming the warden of her mind but was so weak when compared to its inmates.

The hot air that hit her face when she left the building grounded her. She was distracted by the oppressive humidity more so than her oppressive thoughts. The loudness of the city and the crowds that engulfed her with each step were comforting.

Once Janis was about a block away from the bar, panic began to set in again. She quickened her pace in hopes that maybe her strides could be faster than her thoughts. They weren't. She came to a stop when she reached the entrance to collect herself. The deep breaths that she took were stale and hot, the opposite of her cold, sweaty palms. When she reached for her phone to check the time, it slipped from her hand and back into the depths of her purse.

Janis walked inside ripping her fear away like a Band-Aid. A

Band-Aid that you needed to tap on three times before taking off.

When Janis walked in, she saw Zoe sitting at a two-person table alone. As she looked up from the menu, her curls bounced like happy little springs; the old friend shot a toothy smile in her direction.

The bar smelled like fried food coated with perfume, and its lights were on their dimmest setting.

Janis smiled back, and as she made her way to the tiny square table, Zoe began to stand up, an open invitation for a hug.

“Fancy seeing you here,” Janis joked.

They sat down and began to talk as though they still lived a few blocks away from each other. Zoe and Janis came to the consensus that “small talk” was for reserved job interviews and first dates a few years back.

“So, how was the walk over from the hotel?” asked Janis.

“It was delightful, I only almost got hit by a car three times, which is a record.”

Janis clapped, congratulating her friend, and they both laughed.

“How about you, Janis? How was the walk over from your place? You got here like ten minutes late and that’s not exactly the impression you’d want to leave on someone you’re seeing for the first time in years, especially on someone as important as me.”

Janis knew Zoe was joking, however the question still caught her by surprise. Of course, she knew why she was late, but she told herself that she didn’t want to talk to Zoe about anything that had to do with the chemistry of her brain.

Nervous, Janis replied with her age-old excuse, “My cat threw up on the rug and I didn’t want to leave the vomit there, otherwise it would’ve gotten all soaked into the carpet’s fibers. It was also the kind with chunks, so I couldn’t just leave it.”

‘Why did I tell her the throw up had chunks in it?’ Janis thought.

Before Zoe could show any form of a reaction, the waiter approached the table and asked if they were ready to order. Zoe said yes, being that she had some time to look at the menu before Janis arrived, not taking into account the fact that her friend hadn’t even looked at the menu yet.

“I’ll have a cheeseburger, and a glass of water is fine, thanks.”

When the waiter asked Janis what she wanted, she told him that she’d take the same thing as Zoe. Janis hated red meat and she wanted a Sprite, but she didn’t want to waste anymore of Zoe’s time.

“Look at you, I can see you’ve expanded your palate,” Zoe remarked. “I expected you to order either chicken nuggets or mac and cheese.”

Relieved that Zoe didn’t bring up the thing about her cat, Janis didn’t even care about the cheeseburger anymore.

“I had chicken nuggets and mac and cheese for lunch, so I figured I should try a different meat, cheese, and carb combo for dinner.”

Waiting for their food to come out they talked about school, work, and boys. Their topics of discussion were not so different from the ones in high school, only now they were just a little more complicated in nature, and so were their lives.



Untitled

Michael Maravillas



Untitled

Marlene E. Andalia

The Unexpected Surprise

Marlenne E. Andalia

YEARS AGO, I traveled to South Carolina on a job. As a photographer I was asked to take pictures of any tourist's spots in the state. I was just about to enter a town called Summer when my car broke down on the side of the road. A couple with two children in a gold trail blazer SUV slowed down and the husband Jim asked if I needed assistance. I replied, yes I did. They drove me to the nearest and only mechanic shop in the area, but the car wouldn't be ready until the very next late afternoon or the following day. The wife, Alice, said there was no reason to wait around and immediately invited me over for dinner. They seemed so pleasant and had such great hospitality manners that I decided to hitch a ride back with them. I thought for a moment I did not have any type of transportation, and it was going to be long to wait around and find another ride back into town. Though I was struck with such delight as to how this family was so genuinely kind towards a total stranger. This family I had just met called themselves the Garden & Crockett. When we arrived in town, I noticed their houses were painted orange and yellow, very uniform. They were labeled Crockett's Cousin home's and numbered #1, #2, #3, etc. But the last family that I noticed in the community had no names on their door, though it did have a number on the door.

Mr. & Mrs. Garden and Crockett's home was painted blue and white and had a number 6 on the outside of the door. I sat down for dinner and Jim's wife, Alice, took my raincoat and hung it up on one of the hooks by the door. Working with so many people in my life, I can't say I ever met such a pleasant, understanding, and well-mannered family. I had booked a reservation at a motel near the mechanic shop and the husband, Jim, gave me a ride back to the motel. I also got invited to their home the next day for a late family breakfast. But before I was dropped off at the motel, the husband Jim said he wanted to get a lottery ticket for Friday.

Today was Wednesday and he sounded so excited that he was going to purchase a lottery ticket for Friday. We entered a small shop that was painted blue and white, and it had so many bottles of soda of the Coca-Cola brand stacked up in the middle of the store.

Mr. Garden was scared, he mentioned, that he was going to lose his wife because she was not feeling well. But he did not want to talk about it. He dropped me off at the motel, and he even bought me a lottery ticket, for which I thanked him. When I woke up the following day, it was a bit chilly, cloudy, and a little bit of drizzle coming down. It took me longer to get out of bed that morning. I was finally up at 9 a.m. and expected to receive a phone call from the mechanic shop, so I decided to go down to the dining hall of the motel to have some breakfast. The dining room was very quiet that morning, and I noticed the walls were painted orange and red. The plates were painted white and orange and were in the middle of the room with all the utensils. I grabbed one plate and took some eggs, bacon, fries and toast and even a cup of coffee. It was a delicious breakfast, and I took my time having another cup of coffee as I reviewed my emails on my phone. When I left the dining hall, I approached the customer service desk, to check in on messages. There were two messages from the mechanic shop. I requested a taxi at the front desk to take me to the mechanic shop. In the matter of 6 minutes there was a cab waiting outside the lobby. I arrived at the mechanic shop shortly after and received good news of what was wrong with my car. While I was waiting for the estimate on parts and labor, I noticed that the outside of the mechanic shop was a wide opened space which was filled with cars waiting to be repaired. But it was also a gas station with a small convenience store (with the walls painted blue and yellow with the American Flag) on the side of the mechanic shop. The owner of the shop, Nate greeted me and said, "Your car needs a new water pump, which is part of the cooling system and that is why it broke down on you." "But," he said, "the rest of the car is fine, and it will be running very soon." He then gave me a verbal estimate for the parts and labor which totaled \$300.00. But then he said it would be \$225.00 with a special family discount. The family discount came from the Garden and

Crockett Family. The car would be ready by Friday, and that gave me time to work on my assignment for the magazine. At first, I was very disappointed, but then I thought to myself that the Garden & Crockett Family were very pleasant and helpful. I did not mind staying for a few more days in Summer, South Carolina.

So I decided to go back to the motel but had to call another cab. When the cab arrived at the motel, Mr. Garden was waiting for me outside the lobby. We had planned a family breakfast, which I had forgotten all about it. Instead, we decided on a late lunch with the entire Garden and Crockett Family. We jumped right into the conversation about me staying till Friday. Mr. Garden suggested that I stay till Saturday and maybe he or I would win the lottery. We both laughed very loudly. It was a great moment that we had together and a memory that I will always treasure.

Momentarily, we headed out to Mr. Garden's house for lunch with his family. The wife, Alice, opened the door and welcomed me with such warmth, and then lunch was served. The Garden & Crockett shared some nice stories about their heritage and family's history. This family came from a line of pioneers of Davy Crockett on the wife's side. I had a fabulous time listening to these stories which I would never forget. I decided to stay until Saturday and see what the future held in store for me on that lottery ticket. That night I started thinking about my assignment here, and googled places where I would visit for this assignment and be completed with, in the next two days. I had another great idea that I would write something about my trip and add it as part of my photographs. The next morning, I began my day going out to the local parks and gardens taking some pictures. I took so many pictures of exotic birds flying over the light blue sky as the fresh of breath air filled in my lungs. The birds had subtle colors like blue, yellow, purple and green.

Friday came around and it was time to watch the news and wait for the lottery time slot. I was eager and awaited for lottery numbers at 9 p.m. Also, at the house of the Garden & Crockett Family, the husband, Jim, turned on the television.

All I can recall at that time was that this family had a special bond. But Mr. Garden had told me in confidence about his wife

Alice being sick. Alice did not tell him, he found out when he read a test result he found on the kitchen table. Mr. Garden had been sad for a while because he knew that his wife Alice was not going to live too long. Mr. Garden was so tired that he dozed off with the lottery ticket in his hand. This family was in need of money to place their children in a better school system. The husband Jim and wife Alice always worked together and their unity among them was admirable. Mr. Garden had a long week and after sitting down on the comfy brown couch, he fell asleep. Luckily, Mrs. Garden Crockett entered the living room, saw the ticket in Mr. Garden's hand and started to write on a piece of paper the numbers from the television screen. She quickly took the ticket from her husband's hand and compared them to numbers she had written down. She screamed and screamed so loud that Mr. Garden got up all startled and asked, "What is going on with you is everything ok?"

"You will not believe it; we just won the lottery!" said the wife, Alice.

Mr. & Mrs. Garden were so ecstatic about the great news they received that night. Now they could buy anything they ever wanted for their children. They lived in a very small house and only had 3 bedrooms, and only one bathroom. They had 4 children, two boys ages 7 and 8, and two girls at 5 and 6 years old. They always wanted to give the best to their children.

Thereafter, the wife Alice sat in front of a large window after they received the good news about winning the lottery for \$2,000,000.00. It had been a chilly night and all she did was dream that night about how rich and wealthy they were now.

But that night something terrible happened: Mrs. Garden Crockett passed away from a silent heart attack. Many days ago, Mrs. Garden Crockett had gone to the doctor's because she was having chest pain. She had set up a lot of doctor's appointments for the following week. It was a silent night, and all the children and her husband Jim were sound asleep. When the husband got up that morning, ready to get some bread from the store, he saw his wife sleeping on the kitchen table. He then rushed over to the kitchen table, and he touched his wife's Alice cheeks that were always rosy. This time she was pale, she felt cold and had no pulse.

She had passed away during the night. He broke down and started crying and sat on the kitchen floor.

I was notified and I got to the Garden & Crockett Family home as fast as I could. Mr. Garden was devastated, so I stayed for another week for the funeral arrangements. So many things had happened in that house, and it was so sad. I had not checked out the lottery ticket and had not realized that I had also won the lottery. When I found out that I had won the lottery, all I wanted to do was help people in need, so I decided to start with the Garden and Crockett family. I used the money to set up a trust fund for the Garden & Crockett children. Also, I helped with the funeral arrangements as much as I could.

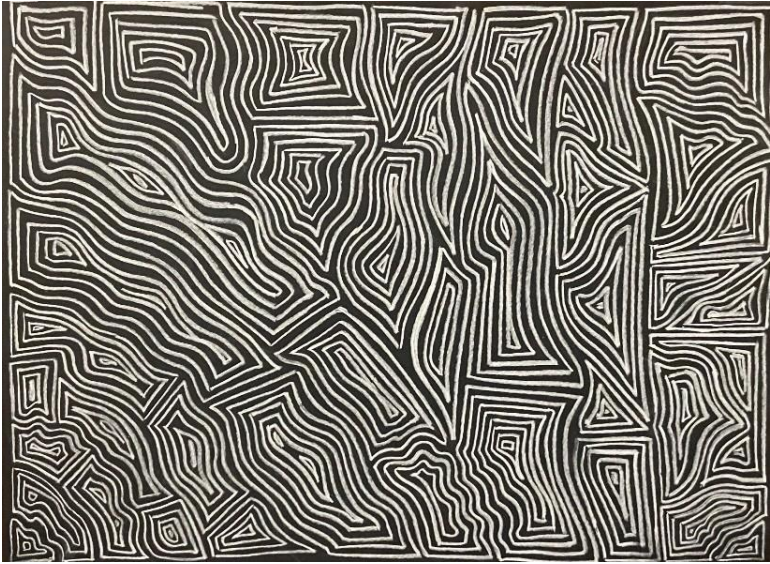
Mr. Garden was not the same and his attitude changed around his children. Days after the funeral, he went out and bought himself a motorcycle with the money from the lottery. He started traveling from State to State. He wrote to me by sending out postcards where he traveled. He left his children with family in Summer, South Carolina.

Mr. Garden left for about 6 months and his children were not happy with their father. The children felt sad, depressed, confused and scared and their feelings changed against their father after the death of the mother. Their lives had changed, and Mr. Garden finally realized that he needed to work things out with his children. I was able to witness it and it was the best thing I could be a part of. Upon the return of Mr. Garden, he had changed towards his children. It was something beautiful to see how his children's faces lit up, and how they felt full of life again. Luckily, Mr. Garden's relatives, Jill and Bill, were there to experience the change in Mr. Garden and how life can change a person so much. Jill and Bill did great things for Mr. Garden's children while he was away.

The town of Summer, South Carolina was never the same; it missed Alice Garden-Crockett and her great intentions. The Garden & Crockett Family was torn apart due to the loss of their mother who was an extraordinary person and missed all the good that she did for her friends, family and anyone that crossed her path.

At the end of this story, the weather was perfect, cool, and

windy. The trees were Maple trees and all you saw were squirrels running up and down the trees. They lived next the woods, and it felt like a little bit of magic had come over the town once the family was reunited again.



Shape in illusion

Vianel Bonilla



Untitled

Michael Maravillas

The Body, A Well

Natalie Akel

It was like
trying to squeeze
water
From a stone.

You know all
it's preciousness is needed for.

The morning coffee,
crayola soaked paint brushes
so little hands can
turn your kitchen
Into The Louvre.
And, of course, the evening bath,
for diluting salty tantrum tears.

Yet,
you find a way to make
something from nothing.

it was intimacy in the quiet
city buildings
drifting still
in the breeze
the sound of windows closing
like sparrows through the leaves
bringing worms,
those early birds,
quiet their young's hungry song
through the pebbles,
they searched,
all morning long, but that's not something

the chicks know

Motherhood in the pandemic

Squeezing water from a stone
all the doorways open to you so there's
No difference between your body and their home

It was first-time parents
birthing alone
masked up, scared.
And
Loneliness like
'it can't be just me who feels like this'

All the missed moments of
reassuring smiles
from others passing you on the street with
loving nods that says,
I've been there. you've got this.
It will be okay.

So, through the rain,

Strangers with strollers
figured out how to pray with their eyes
it was a time of no hellos so no goodbyes
but you felt their sigh of relief in the wind
With each passing wave

It was telling your kids it will be okay
when you had no idea yourself.

Looking in the mirror
thinking 1, 2, 3
Yet you still forgot to breathe

It was George Floyd calling for his mother that damned day in
May

And the youngest, knocking on the bathroom door,
Asking what's for dinner?
You have half a moment of peace before sighing,
Saying, "Let me see what we have"
a master of your craft.

It's the mom whose children I watch
apologizing to me whenever she turns on the tv
and me, beside her, saying Let Bluey and Bingo run wild.
go rest.

She never does.

It was FaceTimes, maybe red wine,
and lullabies whispered like a plea for help.

Accepting there is no water here,
But what crafts can we make with this rock?

and how long until we get to the river?

Walk with me, I say
So we go together.
celebrating the things we're taught not to.

When you said, whatever, ice-cream for dinner
or broke sleep training and held your baby close.
Celebrate the times they cried it out
and the times you got a moment to yourself.

For those who danced when dropping their kids
back off at daycare after months
of hair pull-out-able mornings

and celebrate mothering
that occurred in spaces
hard for us to see.
the schools, shelters, drag houses, even in the streets.

I read somewhere, the other day,
that to mother is a verb.
I believe
in that motion, the motion of mothering,
we find love that leaves us blooming
in the sun, resilient towards this changing earth.

So take this smoothed stone in your pleated palm
Skip it along the pond
the water came from you
And it came from you all along

I hope you collected enough drops
for yourself
to have a stream at your side
wherever you walk
so you can listen to the
Drip,
Drip,
Drop
Sit on the rocks
And know how precious you are.

Only Ecstasy

Sebastian Garcia

THE CORNER OF 46TH STREET was sacred to Alex. This was a routine evening for the most part. He would take the bus to the nearby bus station, grab a pizza at the dollar pizza place across the street on 46th, walk to the venue and enter through the gray metal double doors sprayed with graffiti. If it weren't for colorful promotional posters plastered on the doors, it would look like an abandoned entrance.

He walked briskly in the sticky night of the bustling city, the humidity clinging onto his olive skin. His tight dark blue jeans were uncomfortable in the heat, his form-fitting black tee shirt left little to the imagination, and his wavy black hair flowed in the breeze that tunneled down the busy street where the car horns, traffic, and rush of people exiting the nearby Broadway shows breathed life into the night.

He opened those gray doors, some dry paint chipped on his hand, and the hot odor of sweat, liquor, and stickiness poured into his nostrils. He walked down the dimly lit staircase to the basement, where he greeted the security guard Tony, a burly man who would always wear a black quilted jacket.

“Hey brother, how’s it going?” asked Tony.

“Good good, same old same” replied Alex while rushing past.

The venue was dark, hot despite the air conditioning, and loud. Salsa blasted from the speakers, the infectious rhythms and melodies seducing the people there, beckoning them to dance. Turns, spins, intricate arm work, and close embraces characterized the space. Flashing colored lights would illuminate the sweaty faces of the dancers, revealing bright smiles and laughter.

Alex walked towards the back corner of the club, his path interrupted by acquaintances greeting him with hugs, handshakes, and kisses on the cheek. He sat on the black pleather sofa in the corner and changed into his dance shoes, their soles nearly entirely worn out. He greeted and flirted briefly

with the woman to his left, her hand making its way to his shoulder and his onto her thigh. After some time, he then greeted the woman to his right.

At the center of the floor was somebody he didn't recognize. She was dancing with another man. Alex watched her spin and turn and step to the music, her loose, short, dark brown hair flowing with her movements, her graceful and soft figure mesmerizing him. The song ended and Alex approached her as the other man left.

"Hey, do you want to dance?" he asked, extending his left arm towards her and opening his hand, a greeting that was entirely automatic.

She smiled and nodded, placing her hand in his. Alex led her away from the center of the floor, where it was too crowded, back to the corner by the sofa. He turned towards her and held both of her hands with his.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Jenny, and you?"

They bantered a little before the next song started and cut off their conversation. Alex moved closer to her, switching from holding both of her hands to a closed position, in which he supported her back with his right hand. He turned her, he spun himself, held her close, and ended up with both hands on her shoulder blades, and her arms on his shoulders. Her eyes met his and darted away, only to again meet his eyes throughout the song. The infectious rhythms flew through him in waves, sweat starting to drip from his head, Jenny's face glistening from the heat. For these moments, they would transcend into some other dimension where only ecstasy existed.

They continued. He spun her and pressed close against her, their hips aligned and pelvises gyrating in sync with each other. For him, this was routine, and part of the allure of the place. A smile crept onto her face, and she bit her lower lip.

There was a move he would do to gauge the level of interest from a woman he was dancing with. In the middle of a dance, he would softly guide her arms downwards and push them firmly upwards into the air, releasing them, ultimately disconnecting from his partner and giving her the freedom to do what she

pleased. She could then choose what she wanted to do with her arms; she could comb her own hair and place them back into her partner's hands, or she could bring the arms back down onto his shoulders, both of which would indicate either no interest at all or a neutral disposition. But if she lowered her arms around his neck and brought his face closer to hers, that was a good sign for him.

Alex performed that same move. Her arms rose above, she struck a pose for a second, accentuating her curvaceous figure, and brought her arms down and wrapped them around his neck. She brought his face closer to hers, touching his forehead with her forehead, feeling the heat of his breath on her lips.

Alex leaned in and kissed her, and she kissed back.

The song faded into the next one and they continued dancing. They would get closer, their eyes would meet more often, and they would kiss again. At one point, looking behind his dance partner, Alex's eyes were drawn to a woman at the opposite corner of the floor. Amidst the sea of people, he caught glimpses of her dancing, her body moving to the music, and her tight-fitting white dress nearly unable to contain her figure. He brought his eyes back to Jenny.

"Another dance later?" he asked.

"Absolutely."

He danced with this other woman, whose name was Gaby, for a few songs. He repeated his routine and kissed her as well. Before the end of the event, she would give him her phone number. Alex would dance, drink, and repeat, the validation and closeness and affection from others filling him up for those brief moments. It was his drug.

Jenny watched him with a puzzling look on her face.

"It's what he does," said Jenny's friend, who danced at the event regularly. "It's kind of disgusting. But some women are into it." She shrugged. "To each their own".

Jenny was disappointed, but not so disappointed. She continued to enjoy her night, meeting other people, and after so many other dances forgot Alex existed.

It was nearly dawn, and Alex's sweat reached the middle of his now second black tee shirt. Jenny was long gone, as was Gaby. Alex looked around and saw only few people left in the venue, and no women that piqued his interest. The night was done for him, so he went to the bathroom to change one last time. He put on a fresh shirt, splashed his face with water, and caught himself in the mirror. Wisps of white layered in his hair now, wrinkles starting to creep onto his forehead and eyes. He gave himself a half-hearted smile and a sigh. He was exhausted.

Alex headed towards the exit, giving his farewell and quick embrace to Tony, who never seemed to move from that exact spot. He kept his first and second tee shirts drenched in sweat in his knapsack, along with his dance shoes in their separate bag. He ascended the dimly lit stairs, exited through the double doors, and looked to his right and left. There was nothing but empty streets, a few distant car horns, and the smell of a summer morning to come.

It had been nearly eight hours since he last ate. Alex stopped by the same dollar pizza spot from earlier and walked to the station to wait for the morning bus, as was his routine. He scrolled through his phone while waiting, looking at the names he had accumulated from that place over the years. There were names that were long forgotten, countless conversations that ended too soon, and many unanswered requests and greetings from both sides. He held on tightly to the memories of all the kisses from that place, most of them now blurring together, and all the women he would usually take home at night, but those were fading as well.

The bus came, and Alex boarded by himself.



Untitled

Mitesh Kalathiya



2022