

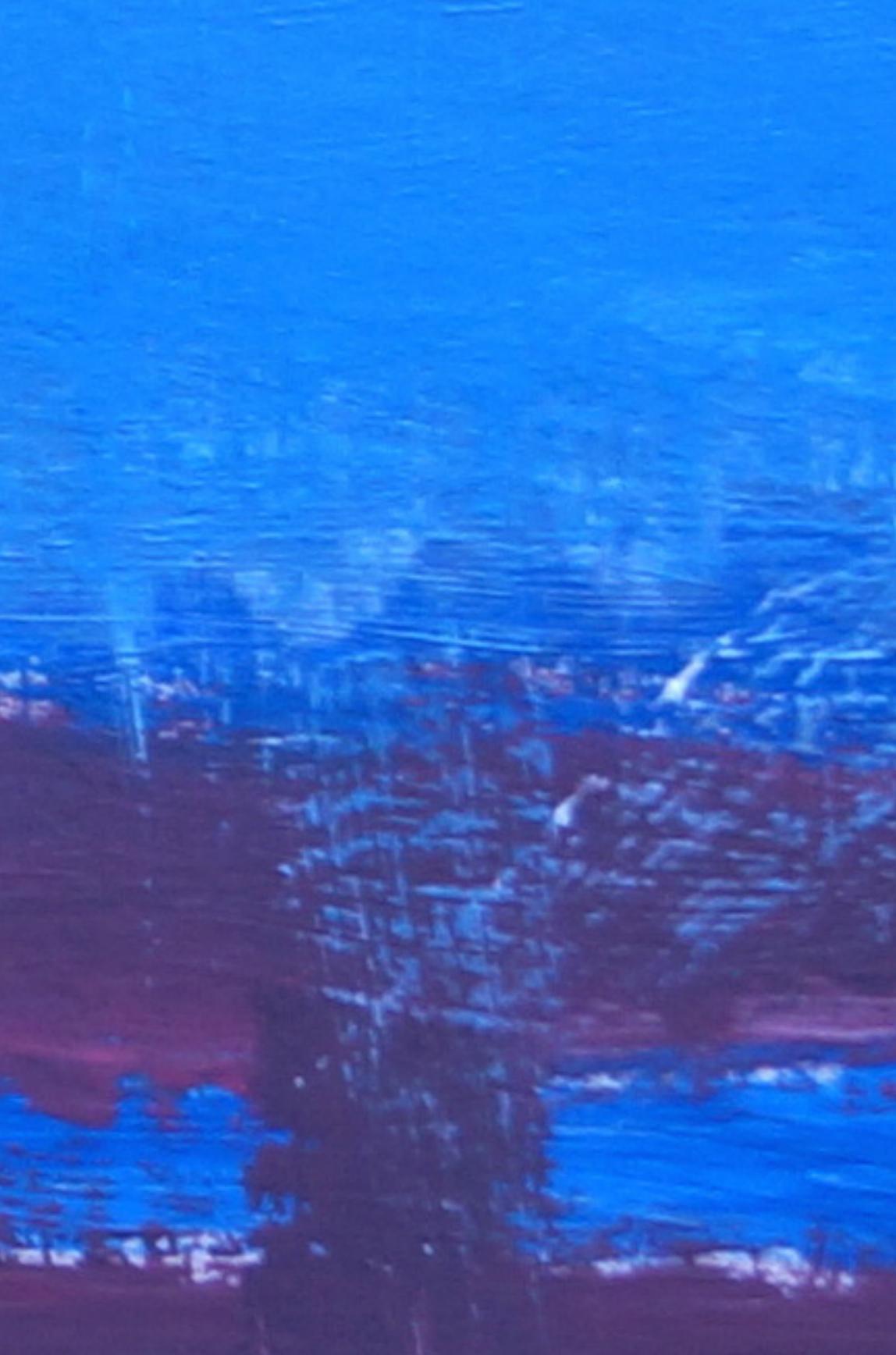
THE BAYOU REVIEW

SPRING 2015

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UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON-DOWNTOWN



THE BAYOU REVIEW
VOLUME 28.2 SPRING 2015

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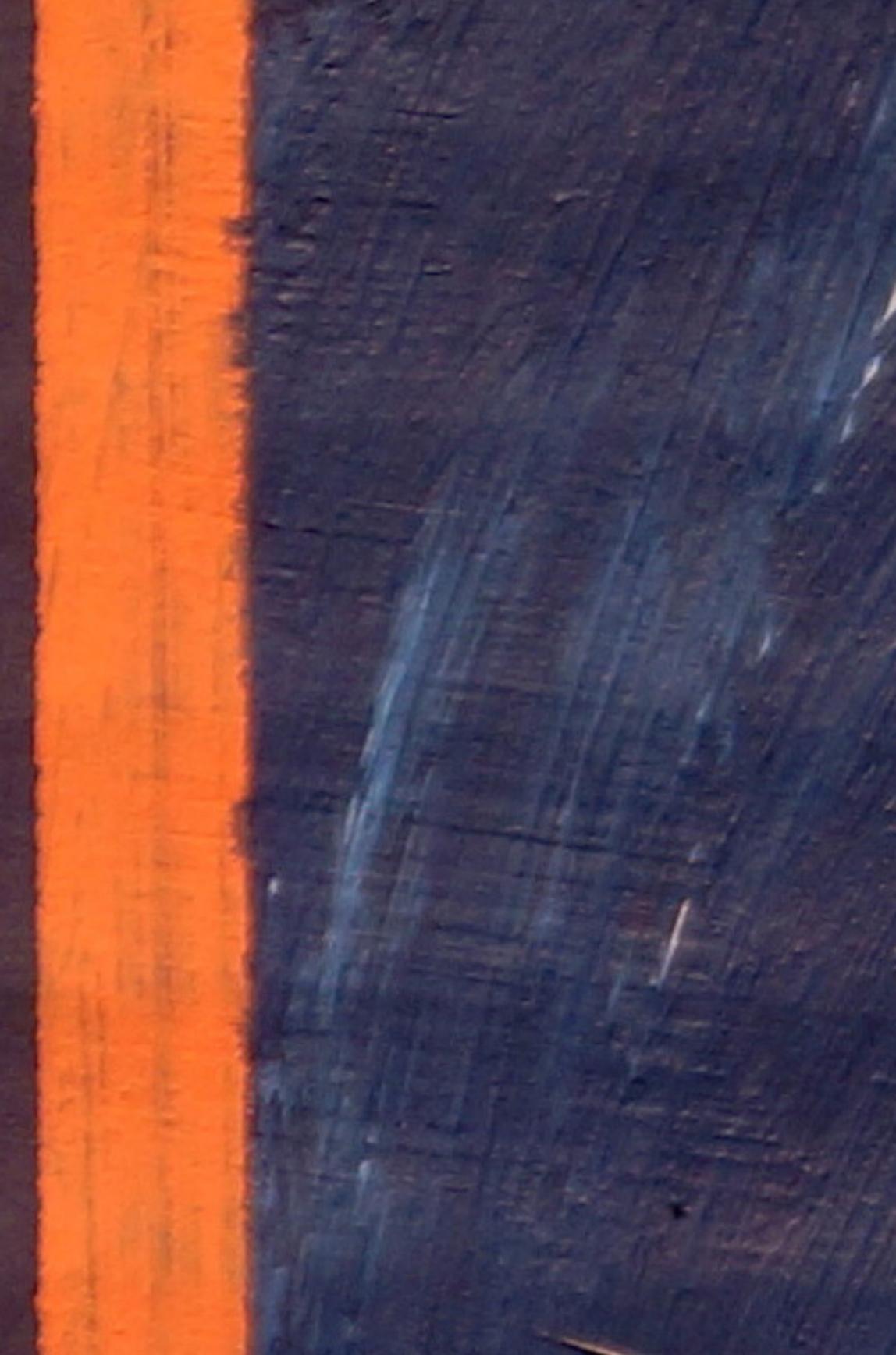
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UNTITLED

STEPHANIE ALBA

created by bees and taken by hands
hands that plucked a flower and pulled its petals
petals that scattered to badlands
badlands that held secrets
secrets waiting to be plucked by hands
hands sticky with honey

**CARDAMOM KISSES SAFFRON AND THE
WORLD WATCHED IN DISMAY!**
ILYAS BROWN

I am paralyzed
 Prone
 The proverbial immovable object
 Posing
 Positioned
 For your admiration
 I am my own childlike lust personified
 And somehow instantly I've become a man of your making
 A spectacle of hidden electronics
 A shadowy representation of your most terrifying desires
 A miracle, a marvel
 The man who exists to mystify

What are you then?
 A dust bunny monster
 Some under the bed fantasy demon
 Waiting to clip my Achilles
 And slip your history under my chin
 Your intelligence around my neck
 Ready to fetter my dreams
 With cuffs of sleeplessness,
 Chains of your image,
 And a cage of words
 A drafty cage, without a lock
 Barred simply by self-doubt
 And emotional training
 Books about a sad girl
 With a lonely perspective

And fantasies of saffron kisses,
 Oh the cardamom!
 By God! the cardamom!
 Perhaps you're none of these things
 But you are certainly what I'm thinking about as sleep evades me



The clock's hour nears its end
 Every passing motion becomes a reminder
 Of arms pining for surrender

Open palms carved with heart-shaped scars
 That neither cool nor warm
 But instead find solace in your embrace

Singularity nears
 The ticking tome grows louder and more impatient
 Echoing through the arrangements

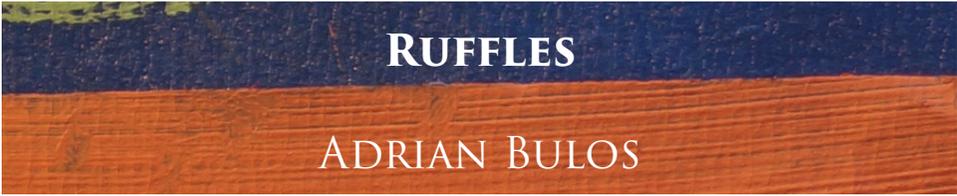
Somewhere in the moving arms sits a confession
 Hidden by design,
 Cradled in midnight, a burden too heavy to bear;

Loving you is inevitable
 It's the consequence of connecting dots
 It's the moment when a river becomes an ocean.



WE ARE ÈÈWỌ

Yannina Taboada
 Acrylic



RUFFLES

ADRIAN BULOS

“Hey there he is. Todos! Ruffles is back!” The sweaty man with alcohol coming out of his pores from his face yells out to everyone inside the house. Still dressed in my BDU, and rug sack in hand I let people walk in front of me inside the house. I can’t stand for people to walk behind me. This house has always been full of people but this time they seem to smother me. Hands on my shoulders make me feel unsteady. I feel as if I were being sucked into the abyss. It’s hard to move forward plus, there’s a knot in my throat. It’s tough to swallow my spit. There’s people on the porch and I can’t seem to recognize anybody. I walk through the door and old things become familiar but strange. There’s an old antique coffee table we bought in a garage sale sitting on top of a Persian rug stained with dog piss. Funny thing is, I only remember kicking the hell out of that dog for doing so.

There are old photos everywhere. They’re on the walls and furniture, plus old ceramic figurines that my mother likes to collect. Passing the dark brown three legged half-moon table, I catch a glimpse of old family photos and I can feel a bit of warmth in the images. There is the smell of fresh tortillas and coffee blended together and it is very pleasant. Straight ahead there are some folks in the kitchen eager to speak to me and I comply with their intent to perceive me.

“Que honda mijo!”

“What’s up Tio? How are y’all?”

“Bien. Como andas? How are you doing?” He speaks in a more solemn tone.

“Good. I just need to shower.”

“Okay. Orale. Pass on through, mijo.”

I wave at the people sitting on the kitchen table and head in through the hallway that leads to my old bedroom door. I ask myself, how can I even talk with these folks? No I don’t hate these people. I just find them insufferable and repulsive. They are not the same as me. I am who I am because I chose to defend my country. I can’t fit in with them and I hardly doubt they’ll understand. There’s no way I can fit in their artificial reality. Descartes had it right; “I think therefore I am”, he said. This dude couldn’t get a grip on his own reality either. Our perception of reality is different for each and every one of us. That’s why Descartes thought what he thought. Think of it as if you were trapped in a daydream; your conscious is still at play. Some folks believe you still live when you die because while awake they cannot fathom the idea that their brain stops working when they’re dead. I’m guessing he didn’t think he was going to die. Also, our existence is questionable. Was I meant to see all this horrible shit? There is no reason for living and at times I wish I didn’t exist. That’s why I wave and leave. I just don’t want to speak to anyone.

By now weeks have passed since I got back from war. I haven’t been able to sleep. I think I’ve been more comfortable under fire than anything else. Sometimes I wake up in strange places. I can’t help it. I love it when it rains. The thunder sets me off. My father caught me standing in front of the grand window of the living room. When he asked what I was doing there, I said I couldn’t remember. And in fact I couldn’t. He’d put me to bed all the time. He’s such a nice guy. That’s why I feel bad for what happened.

For the most part, I've been asleep while awake. My father leads me by the hand. At least he thinks he does. I mean everyone wants to help. They all want to help. My dad sets me off to work with him on a side project, but on this one particular day I was in a perpetual state of delirium. It started the night before. I was staring outside my living room window. I'm standing naked sweating from my forehead, armpits, and hands. It seems like a tempestuous night but it's not, it's only rain and thunder. The rain is pouring sideways, making the trees rattle almost as if they're trembling. The rain raises my excitement. I feel my chest pumping air into my body. I'm in a stiff posture, my arms hanging to my side, my legs are spread, and I can't seem to blink. I'm struck by the immense ferocity of the wind and water. Thunder erupts outside my window. In a frantic state, I scream at the top of my lungs, and run to my bedroom. Desperate to find my weapon, I flip the mattress and tear away the drawers from my dresser. My father walks in, "Que tienes, mijo? What's wrong?" He finds me on the floor in a fetal position rocking myself back and forth, hysterical, and with my face soaked with tears. My dad finds an old serape he gave me when I was a child, and puts it over me. He sits next to me, holds me close, and spends the rest of the night with me on the floor.

Exhausted, the very next day we left to do some work, we were asked to fix the kitchen of an old couple who were my dad's compadres. We, in a virtual sense of the word, did the work for free. It should have taken us the weekend to do it. I don't know what it is with parents; they'll never lose faith in you. Mi papa, he never lost faith in me. I was sent to cut the wood for some measurements he took. I just got to work without responding to him. The sawdust lands on my boots. Machines in motion, the nail gun, and hammer are the catalysts for something I will regret for the rest of my life. As I'm nailing the sheetrock to skeletal portion of the wall I doze off again. I hammer the same nail for a few minutes.

That's when my dad notices I'm not being myself. He calls to me, "Mijo! Hey Ruffles what's wrong? Put the hammer down for a second." He gets close and grabs my shoulder from behind. In an instinct I react to the jester and strike him on the face with the hammer. Due to the weight of the blow, I break his jaw. My dad falls to the floor blood rushing out of his mouth. I stand there in my manic state and deep amazement in what I've done. I'm in shock, I'd never thought I'd hit my own father but there he lay. I'm glad he didn't choke on his blood. I mean, what else is left after you've hit your parents. My entire honor is lost. As I watched him lying unconscious, I feel a deep warm sensation in my head. My eyes roll back, all I saw was black and red with a sharp light flashing before I lay half dead on the floor covered in blood and yellow saw dust. It's the best sleep I've ever had.

I wake to a stream of lights rushing down in front of my face. I'm lying on a bed, unable to move my head, and my hands are cuffed to the rails of a gurney. It's so cold. I'm so high that I can't even think. And it seems to me, at least, that I've been this way for a very long time. Since I got home, I have been in a very lonely place. I want to cry till my lungs explode or when my throat gives up. I want to yell at the top of my lungs into everyone's face but I know that no one's there to listen. At least, I wouldn't want them to listen. The Greek goddess of war forbids me to die. She's my angel of death. She kept me intact and now I'm forever ungrateful. I have seven scratches on my hind arm. The biggest one is on her face. So when the grey man with his stupid white jacket asked me why I cut myself, I told him to fuck off. I stay at his house for about ninety days and night. It's hard to make friends in strange places. I had to beat the hell out of this one man who was also staying there. I guess he thought I was angry and that I was invading his personal space. He leered. Oh man was he a creepy bastard. I guess he knew what I was thinking. He was so willing. I think he enjoyed the beating I gave him at least. When he stared

at me, it was as if he were looking into my soul. He figured me out. Even as I was beating the hell out of him, I could tell he was studying me. That's why it didn't surprise me when he tried to slice my throat. I won however, and he laid on the floor with a smile on his ominous face. I guess he needed someone to help him sleep. I never felt any pity for him. A great man said that "pity is the epitome of hate", therefore, I didn't feel any empathy for this man when he met the grave. If anything, I just helped him out a little.

Nevertheless, his story is a whole other matter. After the episode, I was acquitted because the cameras proved that I was just defending myself but I knew it was coming. Hence, I planned on it. I hoped that he would attack me one day so that it was easier for me to get him. I knew he enjoyed it though. He enjoyed more than I did, I think. His face is what haunts me, but still I find a bit of pleasure in its memory. I can still feel the animosity and the intensity of the entire situation. It set a very revealing smile to his face. He was indeed a wild card and I flushed him out. Regardless, this is not what I want to talk about.

I spent most of my time wondering and wandering if I can ever get away from my mistake. I spent all the time I could with the locals underneath the highway bridge close to my house. By now my father didn't want me to work and in fact didn't want me living at home. My mother was persistent and would bring me food whenever she could. What I like about these locals is that they always had booze. For them to be poor, they were always very generous. I became addicted to booze. It helped me sleep at least. I didn't mind sleeping outside. I found it pleasant. "All I need in this life is my rucksack"; I used to tell myself after I got out of camp. Plus, I still have my pride. I don't need someone else's charity. "A real man builds his own life. No one builds it for him." My dad used to say this when he was drunk. Every Mexican gets philosophical when they're drunk.

However, it took me forever to realize that I was wrong. I felt very lonesome for some time and I had to get myself under control. All the pride I had was gone. I grew a shaggy beard and began to smell worse than the sewer. Beg. I never begged in my life. The only thing I begged for was a job and I couldn't find one as easy as I thought I could. However, I made amends with my family in a very systematic way. I kept my promise to show up at a certain time and pay back money I owed to different people on time or beforehand. I asked my dad for forgiveness, we hugged, and we cried together for the first time in years. I apologized to my family about me being angry and spiteful. Every time they spoke to me I was out of hand. I thought they were all against me. I just realized that they were only looking out for me but I refused to listen to anything they had to say. My manic episodes were mild and started to decrease. My father would even stay the night with me if I started to cry during the middle of the night. It was tough. Even after I started to shape up, it was still hard to sleep. My paranoia was beginning to fade. I am still to this day suspicious of cars parked along the side of the road. It's a crazy thought what people will do to win a war, but I try not to think of that crap anymore. Happy thoughts I tell myself all the time. Think only happy thoughts and you'll be fine. That's why I only think of my favorite times as a child when I used to play in my grandfather's home in Mexico. The world was different then. No one had any thoughts of death and at night the scary stories were very amusing. So I try to stay in that place. The only thing left are the three seconds I have before I fill the back of my head with iron and smoke. So, I only think of happy thoughts.

ADOBE'S MYSTICAL JOURNEY: A SECOND CHANCE AT DEATH

JOSEPH S. PETERS

Abode woke suddenly from his amnesia-induced slumber. His first sight upon revival landed on his body, which stretched across the desert's scorching sand. The weight of his body had collapsed the sand beneath, causing his right leg to submerge underneath the yellow sea. In a moment that can only be described as miraculous, Abode sprang to life, lifting his deadweight body upright. Thus erect, but ultimately proving fruitless as he found nothing in sight but dunes that seemed to span an eternity. He looked in all cardinal directions yet nothing. There was nothing out there. And soon Abode began to realize that he was nothing more than another grain collected with the countless others.

Abode arched his hands and pressed them tightly against his forehead, trying desperately to remember any clues that could shine a light on his current whereabouts. He closed his eyes only to recall blackness as timeless as the sands. But then a shock, followed by a loud bang occurring mentally, which started churning the faded memories back to accountability.

Abode remembered a crash. Yes, there was an accident in his flight on a commercial airliner from Egypt to Niger. *Where were the other passengers and the plane?* He pondered. Oh, but the harsh desert would not divulge such a secret to Abode in his search for repentance. For the sweat dripping from his face became the hourglass, which counted the last moments of the human body's fight for survival.

Abode, guided by his rapine nature, made the decision to move westward in hopes of finding some form of aid. The exigency for each new footstep brought Abode a stronger sense of

oppression as the old footsteps that encapsulated his knowledge soon disappeared from existence. He kept turning his head back to see what he could, but the image remained the same in every direction no matter which angle. Madness!

Abode looked up to the barren sky for mercy, but the sun would not deliver anything more than a parched mouth. He did not know where he was going or for that matter why he was even trying. He searched a little more until he appeared before an impression made in the sand that resembled his outline. It became perfectly clear to Abode that since his descent he had managed to travel only the distance of a circumference. Perhaps his whole life was but one repetition caught in a circle's current. Dilapidated, Abode fell to the same bed of sand where he had previously awoken. He wanted to know why he became conscious. Was it just to carry out the last preparations in his wake? There was nothing he could have done. There was no reasoning in his second chance at life. Yes, it was cruel to bring the man back just for him to witness death digging his shady tomb.

Abode's eyes began drifting back to darkness. But before his eyes would shut for that last time, an unknown object's glare distracted death long enough to make Abode cognitive once more. What was this daring object that reflected the sun's rays? Willing to find out, Abode mustered the strength to pick himself up and stagger to the hypnotic object. Making the journey as far as the event horizon, Abode's legs gave out causing him to crawl and scratch the remainder of the distance. With his right leg once again submerged underneath the sadistic sand and his chin permanently dyed red, he made it to the object.

Abode's mouth dropped in disbelief. Appearing before him rested a perfectly preserved bottle of wine with the date:1884. The bottle remained uncorked, and most importantly to Abode, the liquescent refreshment inside seemed unspoiled. *How did the bottle of wine survive such hardships for so long?* Once again, the desert denied Abode's request, leaving the bottle's memories at

bay from his in his infant-like state.

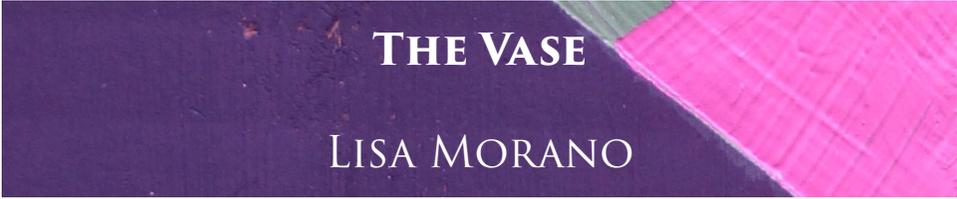
Abode, in disregard to reason, latched onto the bottle, biting off the cork with his grinded teeth much the way the scorpion bites into the toad's back. Abode brought the bottle to his mouth and swallowed the substance that lived within. A virescent mist, in the place of wine, slid down his throat. His auto-reflex system tried to induce vomit in removing the toxin. However, the mist had already made it to the stomach.

Abode's stomach began to swell like an inflating balloon. He convulsed in pain, turning from side to side while grabbing his abdomen to aid the dweller out. From the stomach, the mist moved to his intestines and then to his bowels. The whole lower region of Abode's body expanded twice the size of normalcy. The contaminant within began to clump together into some solid mass. He could not take the excruciating pain any longer. Something had to give. Something had to come out.

Abode, in a moment of bliss, felt every sin wash away. He closed his eyes and offered his body to the desert, ignoring the rhythmic beats that pounded internally with purpose. He heard a scream echo from within followed by the plea "Let me out!" before the fatal pin drop-pop. Now, Abode lay dying in the middle of the Sahara Desert, shitting out a jinni who has three wishes to fulfill.



DO NOT PLAY ON THE GRASS
Yannina Taboada
Acrylic



THE VASE

LISA MORANO

Crystal vase, a golden age
 My uncle was special effects in Hollywood
 Cleopatra and Marilyn projects
 Money flowed like honey
 Building up and sticking to everything
 No roof, no limit, no darkness
 His carpet was white, the furniture gilded Italian
 The golf course so bright it hurt my eyes
 Too expensive to clean off peanut butter
 Too delicious for polyester
 Sinatra sang from a magical circle
 in every room
 My brother and I played with intercoms, waterfalls
 and toilet handles
 Desert is spelled with one 's', dessert is with 2
 I vowed to have more of both

The vase holds wildflowers
 And a few lost ants
 In a mountain cabin
 Woodpeckers, granite dust, sap
 Dog hair and wild blackberries
 No performances revered by masses
 Stardom goes to the guest with the most
 speckled chicken eggs
 No validation, no idolization, no luxury
 Starlight nourishes the soul
 Like homemade bread
 Too real for expensive heels
 Too late for wrinkle cream
 If the vase goes to a garage sale
 It may or may not be recognized
 As a symbol of a time

BRONX

ALANA COSTELLO

Joshua picks me up
at 167th and concourse

introduces me
to his cat/his mother
/his abuelita/
his brother
slams through the door

with bottles
of Culitos Merlot
and Coconut Moscato

I had a dream
where Joshua
kissed my fingers
tenderly.

“I’m strapped with 10 guns
—test me!”
cries a man on the street

cops pass laughing—what joke?

move and move
and the street—it moves
and a woman is yelling.

and us—
“where is Angel with the weed?”

and us—
sitting in the park
with poems running over our heads

the 4 train—interrupting—

zombie men push by
—pushers—move slow—

and I had a dream
that Joshua
kissed the white
of my arm, tenderly

in the yard the feral cat hunts

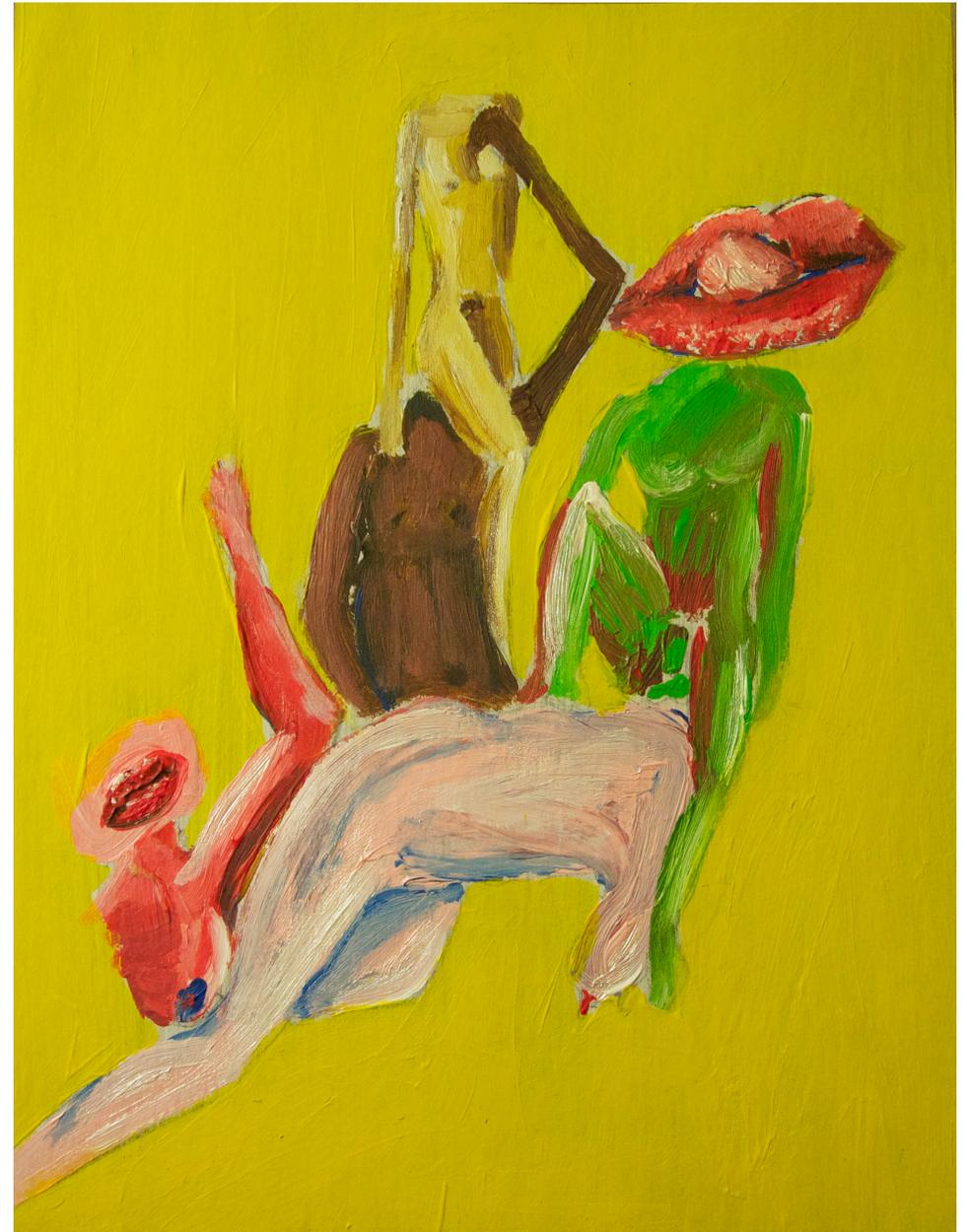
someone is watching
from the fourth story window

curtains move/people move

Joshua and I
Free speak dangerously

4 train—interrupts—

crashes toward
Crown Heights/Utica
steals/fractures my skull



LOVERS NO.1
Alana Costello
Acrylic
6'x5'



LOVERS NO.2
Alana Costello
Acrylic
6'x5'

HOT PEPPERS
A STRIP CLUB IN PRAGUE
DOMENIC JAMES SCOPA

After several beers my vision vaguely scans the bar mirror, attentive and beaming like a lighthouse. High heels click. On my thigh—manicured fingernails trace figure eights. My posture stiffens tight as her corset. Strobes ignite her platinum wig. “I bet you’d like to have your way with me, American.” Fresh out of a relationship, I switch the subject—brag that I toured a Nazi work camp earlier that day for a college course. “College?” she asks—“then surely you learned that story about the Jewish son and father who were forced to fight to the death in the commandant’s swimming pool, university boy?” Her English broken and sharp. I rise to leave—“surely you didn’t miss your chance to photograph the gas chambers?”—my stool keels over—I stumble toward a set of double doors. A bouncer cracks the granite profile of his face to wink—“she’s a feisty one, American”—his pupils constricted, his mustache clogged with pilsner.



MESSAGE SENT

JONATHAN OTERO

Sometimes

I have to scream a little louder

For my voice to be heard

Sometimes

I have to reach a little further

For my voice to be heard

Sometimes

I have to climb a little higher

For my voice to be heard

Sometimes

I have to stand a little taller

For my voice to be heard

Because sometimes

My voice is never heard

And Sometimes

Is the name of a book

Called history

Written in Sanskrit ellipses



ME, SELF
 Yannina Taboada
 Acrylic

NUDE
 CHRISTOPHER MULROONEY

the figure is umbrageous
 that is to say an inkling
 almost a silhouette
 against the silver foil
 of an elegant lace doily

LAUNCH PAD
 CHRISTOPHER MULROONEY

the sticklers of a news organization
 gather in the crony fold
 as the countdown proceeds again
 after a technical fault ends
 in the present moment

PELVIC POLITICS

STACEY FIKE

I simply love that I have the right to choose my own form of birth control. I assure you 98% of the female population has used some form of birth control, including Catholic women. Enlighten me as to how a god-fearing-die-hard-catholic wife on the PTA has only one child when I see her tipsy and doting over her Ken-doll-Sperry-wearing husband at Cyclones for happy hour every Friday? The meeting is clearly their weekly mating ceremony. And a mating ceremony that happens weekly over fish tacos and frozen margaritas requires a scheduled form of birth control; likely the pill. That PTA, orthodox, mommy of mono silently supports my humanistic ideals despite us not sharing a customary “peace-be-with-you” in mass every Sunday. My voice gave her that choice. You’re welcome. Her thanks is in her sanity of not having a house full of children and her freedom to enjoy her weekly happy hour with her husband followed by conservative copulation that poses no risk of breeding. It’s not just her choice, it’s every female’s choice. It’s my choice. I choose to be rational, but indulgent in expressing my sexual desires without the ramifications, prejudices, or worries of bringing another person into this world. Go ahead and be a bigot and call me loose, but I work hard and I deserve the same freedoms of any reasonable man. I demand that my government support my choices and be tolerant of the silent choices of all females. The Obama administration requiring all insurance companies to make birth control available to all women with no co-payment is just the beginning of our government’s high-minded support of females choice. If you ask me, all women of child bearing age should be afforded birth control if they so choose. No. Questions. Asked. Yes. We. Can. And when I talk to

my daughter about the topic of sex and birth control, you can bet I will be broad-minded and afford her unbiased choices.

I simply love sharing stories about my daughter. She is accomplished and beautiful. My husband and I have been able to afford her a prestigious private education. Our daughter is a constant face at formal events hosted by the Junior League. She is captain of the cheerleading squad, the Secretary of her school’s student government, and is a member of the National Honor Society. We have been fortunate in that my husband is a successful provider and allows me to manage our traditional home and our daughter’s steady schedule of extracurriculars. Family is important and we make it a point to reserve one night a week devoted to some sort of family activity; which usually is a unanimous vote to hit a bucket of balls at the driving range. Our daughter really is a blessing. She’s as all American as white-bread. My husband and I tried religiously for years to get pregnant. The experience was sobering. It got to the point that doctors and friends started suggesting we try alternative means of conceiving, but we knew there was a higher power in control of our family’s future. I had read an article in the National Federation of Republic Women that when a new puppy was brought into the home of families struggling with conception, within a year they would get pregnant...and wouldn’t you know, that’s exactly what happened to us!

I simply love puppies. Animals are the closest species to man. Do you know how animals decide their mate? Through scent which is controlled by hormones; specifically pheromones. Humans also have pheromones, but we put more emphasis on appearance and/or success. I don’t think a lion looks at a lioness and thinks “Wow, her matted hair, fleas, and shit stains are so HOT. Plus, that lioness

killed a zebra today”! A lion is simply attracted to a lioness because of pheromones. Hormones control scent in both species; man and animals alike. I find it ironic that in the 1950’s, when women first got a whiff of birth control, the stench of divorce was found in a rising 30% of American homes. From a social aspect, the introduction of the birth control pill liberated women. Women now had a bouquet of options and a spice for life! Yet, from a physiological or scientific perspective, when the pill was introduced, it caused women’s scent to change, therefore causing relationships to stink-physiologically speaking-and divorce was imminent. The introduction of the pill and the correlation of divorce rates in the 1950’s had less to do with women’s liberation, but more about women’s perspiration. The same theory can be tracked to modern day divorce rates. Most girls start taking birth control in their late teens, early 20’s. Upon hitting the dating scene, a female’s scent is already altered. She goes to college. She meets Mr. Right. He smells good. She smells good. They get married. She stops taking birth control. Hormones go crazy. She gets pregnant. Hormones still crazy. Baby is born. She doesn’t feel she needs to go back on birth control, because her and her hubby might try for another baby soon. Her hormones start to level out. She has been married for 2-4yrs and she doesn’t look at her husband the same anymore; nor does he look at her the same anymore. The essence of eternity barely lingers between the couple. It takes approximately 3-4 years for a healthy female’s hormones to regulate, for her pheromones to get back on track, and her natural womanly perfume to settle. By this time she has been married for 5-7 years. Statistics show over 55% of marriages end at 7 years. Is it because the girl in her 20’s with the redolence of birth control simply doesn’t have the same aura of the girl *au naturel* in her 30’s?

Left wing?

Right wing?

Birth control changes everything.

**THE QUARTER-SMOKED CIGARETTE
(A PHOTO)
CHARLIE SMITH**

They reach. Communication is funneled down into only this. They reach out, shaped as a pair of scissors. The quarter-smoked cigarette maintains its toupee of grey ash in the pass. It doesn't dare singe a hair, scar a freckle. It's careful. Behind it, the bathroom tiles shimmer ocean blue. Like magnets, the hands pass the quarter-smoked cigarette, and like a magnet, the nicotine sticks to them. Seeps through pores. Wiggles its way into blood. Courses. The quarter-smoked cigarette will die, the orange filter abandoned on the bathroom floor, the smoke dissolved on the threads of the powder blue oxford. But perpetually frozen between one scissor and the next, cancer lives, ember lives, held by the filter, upward smoking. The quarter-smoked cigarette, could it smuggle a bit of one hand to the other? Like the nicotine through the pores, could something come back through the pores, into the filter?

**THE TYPEWRITER
CHARLIE SMITH**

Do you know that I sometimes type prayers into the keys? I'm not an especially religious person, but I am a spiritual person. So here's the typewriter: broken, colored a deep grey—not concrete grey, darker. I let my fireplace mantel hold it and a stack of books I read over the summer because it's empty without these things. Dust keeps most of the keys warm like blankets, but some are left to freeze. Specifically, P, L, E, A, S, T. Those are the only keys you need if you want to start a prayer. Please let. Please let this happen. Please let that happen. It's as if all your god or whoever has to do is stand aside to let good things happen. Excuse me, could you just, you know, take a few steps that way? My absolution is trying to get through, my actualization. The typewriter proudly boasts: Royal Quiet De Luxe. This thing was made for prayers, and since it's so old that it doesn't have an "enter" key, I end each prayer with a strike of the key I feel is most fitting. It reads: SHIFT/FREEDOM. It too is dust free.

THE CACTUS JAR

CHARLIE SMITH

My grandmother loves her cactus jar. In it, three proud cacti stretch out their needles. The jar rests upon the kitchen window sill, right between a ceramic rooster and a wooden cow. Her kitchen is a menagerie of farm animals. Plastic ducks, glass roosters, frogs aligned in different poses, and cows, cows everywhere. But the only plant life in her kitchen are these three cacti kept behind the glass of an over-sized mason jar. I've never asked where she got the jar or her love for cacti. The only thing she ever tells me is that it's a jar for treasures. Indeed it is. An old photograph of a stranger I've never met. He wears a straw hat, and his skin is darker than her cherry wood cabinets. A seashell, upturned so that the rising sun catches the rainbows found within. A purple stone I found one day. A small chain of ornate beads, clasped together, never unhinged. What goes in the cactus jar never comes out. The needles would prick you if you ever tried. Genius design.

NEW YORK, NY /SUNNY 91°/HUMIDITY°

ALANA COSTELLO

the musician and I
 wake in the sun-rotted afternoon
 with empty wallets—

 with runny onion omelettes
 in the kitchen—
 a side of Chick Corea and Cachao.

 does this feel good?

 he smells like coconut oil
 and bloody knees
 and it is summer on the Concourse,

 a coup d'état,
 he flattens himself to me,
 back sweating—we break past the turnstile.

does this feel good?

all the time in the dark when I touch him,
in the subway tunnel,
waiting for the J train

it smells like pee—
and when he puts his fingers
to my neck— to where the words come out.

I ask,
does this feel good?

in Chinatown we are shutout,
no piano to play backwards—
a score by Herbie Hancock

back uptown to Spanish Harlem
we pick up his arms and hands
where he left them outside Taíno towers

(a logic equation

if he spends all his time
and all his dignity
then who's to say
nothing will happen)

other than a spine breaking
from a Steinway falling
from a Bronx 4th story window

our bond is the oscillating fan
that hums in the night—
the dogs bark bad omens

he sleeps with his back turned
the TV mutters a De Blasio budget report
—another man gets shot—

Jazz rises in the morning
from the Harlem river
like a voodoo zombie—

feels its way home.

MY SHALLOW LOVE GONE DEEP

ILYAS BROWN

I've always thought of myself as a parasite,
 small and vicious
 with sharp teeth
 suckling messily at the tit of an open wound,
 offering zero symbiosis
 no return on my victim's investment,
 I only listen when I talk
 so you might hear me saying quite often
 I don't remember that

I've always thought of my mother as wire
 with a high tensile strength
 always on the verge of snapping
 and sending some sad sack window washer
 flailing and screaming to his death
 she never makes you feel safe,
 but I'll be damned if she isn't holding you up
 and getting stronger and more clever in her motherly work
 by the second

I've always thought of my father as a stone
 sometimes carved into a mask with a laughing face
 and sometimes just as a stone
 you can only see the shiny bits of him
 if you hold him up to the sun
 and stare lovingly at his impossible hardness
 I've often used him to bludgeon myself
 it's never his fault

and it's always against his will

Ive always thought of you as bitter fruit
 weighing down a tree branch
 trying to find your sugar and finally,
 finally becoming sweet
 you want to be eaten so badly
 want to be enjoyed
 want to be peeled
 and sucked and licked from lips
 and fingers
 shoveled into mouths by the handful

I hope this answers your question
 settles your curiosity into understanding
 stops you from begging me to
 tell you what I'm thinking
 cause I would LOVE to get
 back to the true shallow nature of our relationship

PAPER PUMPKINS

SARA SUMLER

On the day my grandmother died, I felt like a coward. The family had gathered at Hospice to say their goodbyes - my mother, my uncles, my aunt. Even my sister had flown from the other side of the world to be by my grandmother's side. When I walked into her hospice room, she was barely responsive. She opened her eyes and looked at us as if we were strangers. She didn't look like the grandmother I would visit every weekend, the grandmother I had loved for 28 years. As my family gathered around her bed, I fled the room.

Downstairs there was a designated "family room" where grieving family could eat dinner, watch TV, or just sit and stare in shock. When I walked inside I saw two rows of fold out tables. They had been decorated for Halloween. The plastic tablecloths had an orange and brown foliage print, and there were paper pumpkins as centerpieces. There was a platter of cookies, and a hand-lettered sign that read, "Please help yourself!" There was a self-serve tea dispenser, and an ice machine that spit out crushed chunks into Styrofoam cups. I filled my cup and took a seat. The Texans were playing on the flat screen, and the room was filled with television voices. I sat alone in my chair and stared. I remember how stark the colors were on the TV - the glowing red, blue, and the grass that looked almost neon. I couldn't hear the sports commentator as if I had cotton stuffed in my ears. I didn't know what was happening in the game, if the Texans were winning or losing. I didn't know what was happening upstairs in my grandmother's room.

A little family walked in and sat at the table behind me. There was a young mother, a grandmother, and a little girl. They sit and

the grandmother starts to serve their dinner on paper plates. The little girl asked if she could have a cookie, and her mother nods her head yes. The adults are silent. The child asks her mother, "When can Aunt Joan come home?" Her mother looked like she didn't know what to say. "She can't come home." Her voice was full of pain and there were tears in her eyes. "Aunt Joan is very sick. She is going to Heaven." Silence fills the room as the little girl tries to understand this new information. For so long I had pushed my grief away. I had refused to cry. While I was hiding away from the reality of my grandmother's death, this little family was drowning in it. A moment passed and then a small voice said, "I'm sorry."

I'm sorry. I'm sorry you feel that way. I'm sorry you're upset. I'm sorry I'm doing this. It's not that big of a deal, I'm sorry okay? I'm sorry for your loss. Sorry.

I had held that flippant phrase in contempt for a long time. I thought it was a trite placcation. It's what a boyfriend says when he breaks up with you: "I'm sorry let's just be friends." It's what your co-worker says when they steal your labeled lunch out of the communal refrigerator: "Oh my god! I didn't know that was yours! I'm so sorry." It's what your boss tells you when you realize you're getting fired: "I'm sorry it's just not working out." It's a Band-Aid, an awkward expression of appeasement. It's what people say when they want an uncomfortable situation to end quickly.

I'm sorry. That innocent child had said, "I'm sorry." Her words seemed to echo all the way down the silent white halls. In the face of death, in the face of her mother's pain, she reached out with her sweet words and told her mother, "I'm sorry." It wasn't a Band-Aid. It wasn't meant to placate. It was an honest expression of empathy passed from one human being to another. I sat and drank my tea.

Forty-five minutes passed as I sat in that chair. The Texans

lost their game. I heard disgruntled mutters in the hallways: “Man they had that game! Why do we even bother watching?” The little family was gone. I wondered if they had gone upstairs to Aunt Joan’s room. I slowly pushed my chair behind me as I stood up. I threw my cup away and walked toward the elevator. I remember feeling uncomfortably warm as I stepped inside and pressed the button for level 2. I walked past rooms filled with quiet families, and empty rooms still bearing nametags. I reached the door that read, “Virginia Austin.”

She was asleep, as she so often was during those final days. Her glasses were on the bedside table, although she hadn’t needed them in weeks. This was my grandmother, the woman I had loved so fiercely for 28 years. I took her hand in my own and I said, “Hi Granny. I’m so sorry I’m late.”



NEW BUNNY
Gloria Reyes
cante crayon
24"x18"

**ON BENDED KNEES
(HOMAGE TO MY LOVE)
ANGENA THOMAS**

I have knelt before an idolized god
 Once a man I worshipped him
 Counted every breath
 Ignored the blood upon my feet
 For my faith kept me in place
 In his misguided temple of grace
 Solitude of silence confined me
 I am left to ponder
 Is my statue really the last wonder
 Is it really I that can awaken him from slumber
 Or have I been bamboozled
 He has not moved
 Nor granted me with a hint
 No miracle
 Or crucifix of sacrifice
 Was bestowed upon me
 Nightmarish dreams
 Evokes Hades fantasy
 Only darkness is upon me
 Yet I still wait
 Why can't I move away from the altar
 My god has not shown me his power
 Seems only sullen dreams have followed since I followed
 You, my god, into this altar
 Bent my knee and prayed in worship
 I fumble my thumbs in the stance of prayer
 Still, only answered by thin air
 Maybe one day you will bless me with a sign you're there

ESCAPADE

CHRISTOPHER MULROONEY

the ballroom whizzes by maybe
 two or three times a second
 and one might leave the earth
 a blessing not a throwaway
 an endowment by birth

FLOW

SAMANTHA SHARKEY

Two young mountains, driven skyward by the tectonic thrust of earth beneath them slowly merge into something singular over time. They become a double-backed vista, and their mutual compression builds heat. They share inner cracks and caverns filled with hot water boiled deep in their mutual core, and when the pressure climaxes it bursts the peaks and they spill their water until a warm pool is formed in the loins.

The warm little pool stays the first winter, safe and secluded in the loins of the mountain.



I was born underwater, frozen in a happy moment. Scorpios are water signs, and I came during the great wet November blizzard of '81. The entire City of Denver was iced over and still.

I imagine my family in barely shaken snowglobe of memory, nestled warm and cozy in a tiny recovery room, when impassable roads and spotty power kept us confined to the maternity ward. We were sequestered for four extra days in the heart of Fitzsimmons Army Hospital where off-duty officers like Mom and Daddy got special treatment and everyone adored my five year old brother Christopher, and of course, brand new me.

Once the roads were good enough to finally leave, my parents decided that Daddy would take me on home and Mom would drop Christopher off at his kindergarten for the day- back to

normalcy and such. On our way back, Daddy realized he was out of his menthol Kools and decided to stop off at a 7/11. He carried me inside with him, bundled beneath the breast of his Army coat.

Admittedly, Daddy looked disheveled. He was wearing slept-in hospital scrubs and new father exhaustion.

But the skinny Arab clerk never asked him a single question or said a word. Not even when he refused to sell Daddy his Kools or the bottle of Pepsi. Not even when he locked the electric door and cowered behind the security glass from my angry, confused father. Not even when the police came.

The police asked him for proof that I was his baby. Proof. Had he not been wearing a hospital bracelet and carrying his base ID he would have likely been arrested.

“Well sir, it’s unusual, sir, such a pale baby for a man such as yourself. All that blonde hair.”

“My wife is white, sir.”

“She is? Of course she is. And well, also you know – it’s pretty cold out. You’d better get her on home.”

“Yes..., sir.”

Daddy got home an hour too late to my Mom, naturally frantic. He handed me off to her without saying a word, crept down to the basement, smoked his pipe, listened to records and wept.

Back to normalcy and such.



In springtime, rains and running ice swell the pool and she dribbles over her sides. She explores drop by drop, looking for the low side and the easy way. The little pool drips and dribbles until it

wears a fresh track in the ground, sure enough for melting snow and sun showers to follow. She is trickling down, steady now. With a constant feed of warm water from the mountain and her own intention, she narrows to a rolling brook.

Now she babbles down the slope, clumsy over rocks and trees. She lets the gentle angle of the mountains and her natural gravity guide the path when she cannot find her own way. She learns the language of easy movement, flow.



When we moved to Ingrando Park in July of '87 we officially became the most interesting spectacle in our neighborhood. People slowed down and some even made the block a few times the day we unloaded the truck.

The house was still my ailing white Grandpa Harlan's, but the neighborhood had tanned substantially around him over the years. The homes were more pastel and wrought-iron than Mom remembered but the trees were still the same. We would be a family of middle-class mixed people in a sea of middle-class Mexicans.

Now that Mom and Daddy were both emergency room nurses working opposite swing shifts in the medical center, the daily rituals for the management of their two children became purely schedule strategic. Mom would take me to swim team and

Christopher to baseball practice in the mornings and go on to work, then Daddy would take over afterward, make us lunch and simply turn us out for the afternoon.

You couldn't be inside making noise all day because someone was always trying to sleep, especially Grandpa Harlan.

Summers were free. Christopher made all the friends at first

but willingly shared. He was the freckled pied-piper of Japonica Street. We rode for miles on each other's bike pegs, tiptoed across the bayou, and tripped each other into murky water a hundred times.

We adopted perfect Tex-Mex accents, and we learned to dance cumbia standing in the quinces of our neighborhood's virgins. I had my frizzy mane braided tight by my new across the street Tia Vicki, because Mom didn't have any clue where to start and Daddy's nappy-haired sisters always had kitchen hot comb press outs. (Mom wasn't having any of that torture on her baby's head! "By all means, Vicki, thank you.")

In the fall we went Southmayd Elementary school with the rest of the sun-beat brown kids, only standing out whenever our last name got called for roll...

"Garza?"

"Here."

"Guerrero?"

"Here."

"Gutierrez?"

"Aqui."

"Harv-" (Harvey, interrupted.)

"Here."

"Herrera?"



She creeps around the trunks of fallen trees and pools in the voids of their roots, waits for more flow to give her power and then

pushes on. Soon she can move the trunks, slide them aside with ease instead of stretching around them. A thunderstorm swells her to a stream, and one day she carries an entire oak in her bosom.



I think young biracial children are sometimes an adorable commodity to all but their parents, and the impact of their inherent duality on their psyche, rarely considered. A university came to my junior high and presented a survey to measure the sexuality and drug use of pre-adolescents in the Houston public school system. I was experienced in neither aspect, so the actual contents of the survey were immaterial to me. But it was the first time I'd been asked to check a box, and betray a parent.

Survey or not, the inevitable was coming. Upper school meant more diversity. Cliques and natural alignment with ownkind. White kids with white kids, and black kids with black kids, and Mexicans with Mexicans, and me with nerds – and the swim team. To them my skin mattered less and my skill mattered more. But everyone always asks somehow, eventually.

Or they remind me –

“But you’re so light-skinned. But you got a big booty. But you talk like a white girl. But you talk like a black girl.” *I know, I know, I know.*

Or they assume what they don’t know –

“I thought you were just a Puerto Rican. I didn’t think you could get a sunburn. Can I touch your hair?” *Just?/Oh? Yes. NO.*

And they always ask me to choose, subtly.

“You date white guys or black guys?” *Who’s asking?*

Guys were regularly asking after me. Christopher and I never lacked for dates; we were both good looking, well-mannered, smooth talking, charismatic, fit, etc. – and so, so modest.

Everybody wants to twirl around at least once with something that might raise their parent’s eyebrows. I warmed easily to the idea of having a social calendar full of young men eager to try something extra new.

But I also had to get used to always being someone’s first (not your race here) girlfriend, an otherkind.



The stream still finds the laziest way down the mountain. She finds it easy to flow while she’s still held up so high, rushing downward without purpose or care. She widens herself to become a river, spilling life from her banks and drawing the animals panting for her water. First they sip cautiously, then gulp until their bellies swell. She lets them lap lazily at her bank until they are done and they move on. The animals draw men, and the men build DAMS!



DAMN! He was so fucking good-looking and funny and I loved him right away. Reilly and I worked in a gym together and we had so much cliché shit in common. We bonded over ex-college athlete physical therapy woes, screw tapes, and copius amounts of weed. I am my Daddy’s girl.

He was a well-muscle white guy with a non-intrusive black-cent, just enough to be authentic. He was the best of everything I thought I wanted, with regular sex in the afternoon. I didn’t mind letting him earn the extra razzing from his black college football buddies for having a “yellow-boned gal” or that his mother didn’t like when I wore so much lip gloss on my “soup lips”.

But occasionally, as all women do despite their color or varied thickness – sometimes I gained a little weight. Then I got a subtle warning from Reilly. Then sometimes I gained a bit more. Then we stopped having sex, then stopped talking, then we just weren't. These were never really breakups, just pauses to bear while I lost the weight and he discreetly slept with someone else.

I never felt offended, he was always a gentleman. To be perfectly honest, we (he) never really called Reilly my boyfriend anyhow. And I admittedly I slept with other people, but I always loved him most.

Once, in 2005 I lost twenty-two pounds in less than a month for Reilly.

We were both managers for the same corporate fitness company by now, and even if we happened to be broken up temporarily, we still saw each other regularly at a monthly training. This time, it was after Christmas holidays and I was fatter than a swamp frog. He talked to me that day like I was his best-friend's kid sister and I left disgusted with both of us. The next few weeks I spent all my free time hungry and furious on a Stairmaster. The twenty-something metabolism is a miraculous beast. I showed up for training the following month, but I made sure I was noticeably late and left decidedly early.

I wanted him to get a good look at me, then duck out. Reilly was calling my cell phone before I ever made it out of the parking lot, and we were sneaking around on our lunch breaks again by the end of the week.

It went like this a half-dozen times over so many years, but not ever that extreme again.

I didn't realize it should be over until he was pounding away one day and remarked on the tidal roll of my breasts as he pumped.

“Ok.”

I meant it this time, and zoned out on the ceiling fan until he finished.



Dams are built to channel the river's power, forcing her to serve a purpose. One great dam can reduce a river to stillness, creating a very resourceful (though slightly stagnate) body and then allowing the body to be sectioned off into smaller, functional tributaries. The river still flows after the dam, but the energy slows and dissipates into boredom.



My pre-teen niece and little nephew sometimes come by on the weekends, giving Christopher, now a struggling single father a break to do fun, non-parent things like drinking Corona alone on the couch and watching his *Goonies* DVD uninterrupted.

Marissa is almost ten and she is too shy to let me in the bathroom with her anymore, and I already miss the way she used to let me sit on the toilet and talk to her while she soaked. She only calls me in after she's fully wrapped up in a towel so that I can come comb out her hair. One day soon, I expect her to ask me for a maxi pad.

When she lilt my name, I leave Slade on the couch with his Legos and Netflix. These weekends are probably the closest I'm ever coming to intentional motherhood.

“I think a boy in my class likes me.”

She says with it her eyes closed as I pull a wide-tooth comb down a looser version of my own wild curls. I have only recently come to truly love my hair, and coincidentally it seems the styling product industry has finally decided that non-straight hair deserves

more than the last two sections at the end of the row.

“Of course he does. What’s his name?”

“Andrew.”

I want to ask her what his last name is too, but I want to be better than that. Instead, I sigh.

“Do you like him too?”

“A little, he’s really loud though. Like really loud, and he gets into trouble sometimes.”

“Your Uncle Sean and your Dad got into trouble lots when they were kids, boys can be like that though. Is that why you like him?”

“No. Did you like Uncle Sean because he was a troublemaker?”

“No, I didn’t know him back then and he’s not a troublemaker anymore. If this boy is so smart why does he get into trouble all the time?”

“I don’t know, for attention.”

Good answer. She’s so smart sometimes it scares and reassures me in the same breath. Please God don’t let her sleep with half as many guys as I did to figure it all out, or at least don’t let her regret as many. How did I survive into my thirties STD- and baby-free? Miracles. Let her get lucky and find a man like Sean, or her Daddy, or my Daddy. Or let her get even luckier and never need one.

“Whose attention? Your attention? Well you better not be doing anything for *his* attention.”

She keeps her eyes closed but I can still see them roll under the lids.

“Pssssshhhht, whatever. Quality ladies like us are too good to act all ‘out there’ (air quotes with slightly chubby fingers), right, Aunt Sam?”

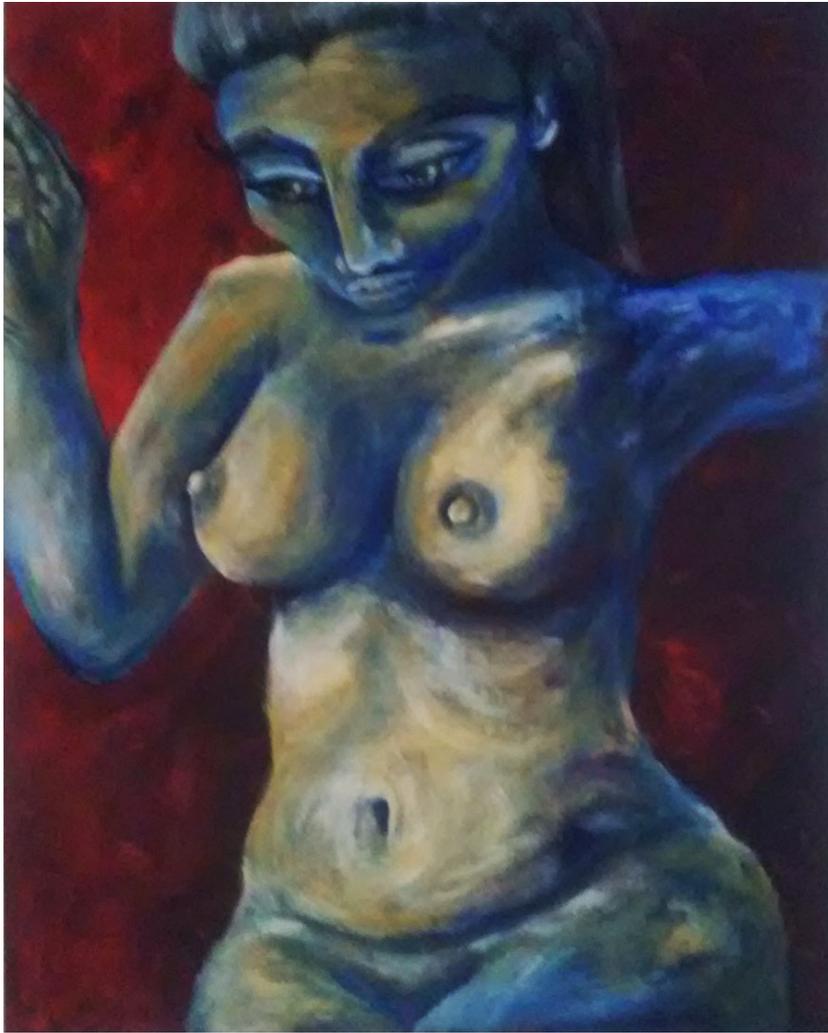
Her flow is already stronger than mine, at nine. She’s gonna be fine.

“Yeah baby girl, you already know.”



But a man’s dam can only keep a river so long. In time, all dams falter and the river is free again, made stronger by an invisible energy pent up in the endless depth of her dark water. She happily destroys man’s poorly planned villages as she churns forward. The tributaries swell again when it rains and the land between the water grows marshy, soft, and low. Soon time, nature, and freedom bring all the segments back together and the river flows, vigorously onward, carving her own vision into the land.

Until she finds her natural place to rest, the serene valley formed for her the tidal God.



PLASTIC
Yannina Taboada
acrylic



